



Perfect presentations: knowing your audience

It's the night before the big conference – and you're thinking about your important presentation. How much time do you spend worrying about how you might come across whether you'll remember your presentation ... and how much do you spend thinking about your audience? Go on, be honest. Before a presentation most people would spend a significant percentage of their time worrying about how nervous they are... or are likely to be. But if you don't take into account the needs and interests of your audience, you can't expect them to respond appropriately or take action in the way you want. This article will guide you on two aspects of audience management to apply in order to engage your audience more effectively: *memory* and *audience preparation*.

Memory – getting the key ideas across

Have you ever attended a good presentation, but the following day you couldn't remember anything that was said? And when you checked no-one else seemed able to do so?

A key objective of any presentation is usually for your audience to take something away from the session – a key message or an action. The challenge for you as a presenter is how to make sure that this key message or action stands out. And then how to make them memorable to your audience.

This is where physiology comes in as a memory aid. One simple technique is physically involving your audience in your presentation. For example, you might consider directing questions to your audience: "raise your hands if you've ever..." Or you can demonstrate a point through interactive activity such as getting people to stand up as a way of signalling agreement. These techniques help make the presentation more interesting, holds people's attention and can encourage shared ownership of key ideas as well as improving memory of the specific point you're making.

You can also make use of neurology by delivering your key message in a way which engages both sides of the brain. Appealing to both left brain (logical, rational, word focussed) and right brain (emotional, creative, visual) characteristics will ensure you appeal to all your audience. So telling a story with strong visual images, physical action or metaphors helps make sure the message impacts.

For instance, we worked with the prestigious British Film Institute on its fundraising presentation. Much of the BFI's work is about preserving historically interesting films from the 20s-40s. And much of that work is quite prosaic, transferring movies from old unstable nitrate-based stock to new digital media. It's vital work if you want to preserve the cultural heritage, but hard to make engaging. So we worked with the Director of Development to come up with a wonderful metaphor. When she met a donor she would present her rational left brain 'case' for protecting the cinematic heritage.

And then she would ask what the donor's favourite movie was. If it was, say, *Brief Encounter*, the David Lean classic, she would then produce a strip of nitrate film from a tin and rub it between her fingers, allowing it to crumble into a pile of ash-like material on desk or table. She'd pause and then say, "That's what's happening to the original of your favorite film right now. And to many other vital films." The donor would look aghast and then usually commit, looking all the time at the distressing ash pile.

Positioning

You also need to think carefully about where you situate your key points. Audiences are more receptive to things they hear at the beginning and end of a presentation. So don't put key messages in the middle of your presentation. Billy Connolly the Scottish comedian expressed the same sentiment when he reported the secret of his success: "tell you best joke last and your second best joke first. In between things you'll be fine and the audience will rave a bout your performance."

Finally, allow your audience time to absorb your key message. The "reminiscence effect" notes that people remember more if allowed a short rest period before being asked to recall something – a kind of "control & save" mechanic for the brain. This is why pausing after you have stated a key fact or point is important. The brief pause allows the audience to store the key idea away.

Audience preparation

When nerves get the better of you, they can become all consuming. Unfortunately this means that some of the more practical elements of preparing for a presentation get overlooked. This includes proactive consideration of *who* exactly it is that you are presenting to.

For example, we often see people delivering the same 'core presentation' about their charity to both internal and external audiences. Yet the message to a group of 25-40 year old enthusiastic employees is surely going to be different from that delivered to a group of 55-80 year old community supporters, right?

=mc have recently developed a simple audience preparation tool while working with the RNLI on delivering presentations to their diverse volunteers (18-80 years old across the UK!). This has helped RNLI staff focus more carefully on the needs of different volunteer audiences.

The audience preparation tool asks you to consider some key issues. Among these are:

- **Audience perception:** this is not about how *you* see your audience, but about how *they* see themselves. Put yourself in their shoes to try and understand how they think and what they feel about this topic – strongly or indifferent?
- **Background knowledge:** how much does your audience actually know about your organisation (or the topic you are talking about). Rank this on a scale 1-10. And decide how much do they need to know?
- **Bridge building:** what can you do to build a connection between you and your audience early on? Can you build on shared experience, shared values, or just the fact that you've all just come in from the rain?
- **Motivators:** what is it exactly that makes your audience tick? Why are they there at your presentation? For example, if you are a medical charity, are they motivated by prevention or cure? By research or front-line care?
- **Key message or action:** if your audience is to take away just one message from your presentation, what would it be? If you want them to do one thing as a result of your presentation, what would that be?

Being a good presenter means balancing your focus between yourself, your material and your audience. Remember it is what your audience takes away from the presentation that is important – not how much of your chosen specialist subject you managed to tell them about.

Prepare well, consider your audience's needs and then actively involve them in your presentation where possible. You may find you actually enjoy it more! But we can guarantee that your audience will enjoy it more – and therefore your presentation will be more memorable.

Further help

If you want to develop your presentation skills further, you might be interested in our 3-day **Transformational Presentation Skills Programme**. You will gain key techniques to deliver complex ideas simply and effectively, a systematic methodology to deliver outstanding presentations, and receive 121 coaching and video feedback.

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