

It's All About Your Audience

Too many presentations focus on the speaker or the slides — focus yours on the audience

THE BEST COMMUNICATION FOCUSES ON your audience. This is especially true when giving presentations. Too often, speakers are tempted to call attention to themselves, thinking—erroneously—that they are the star of the show. Other times (although far less often), the focus is on the slides. While both are important components of presentations, they nonetheless must take a back seat to the needs of your audience.

Bottom line: you must discover what your audience wants and needs, then



deliver it to them on their terms.

Let's look at this from a different perspective. Consider the last time you spoke to a preschooler. Chances are you crouched down on one knee to bring yourself eye to eye with the tyke. You might have gently touched the child's arm to establish a connection. You used the child's lexicon, choosing your words carefully. You spoke slowly and enunciated clearly. All this to ensure that the child—your audience—would readily understand. In other words, you communicated on their level, focusing the conversation on their needs.

Follow this example when presenting. Focus on the needs of your audience.

Making your audience paramount is the most difficult aspect of your presentation. Your audience is not completely under your control, whereas you, the speaker, and your materials are. A little planning together with some hard work,

however, eases the path. Here are some ways to better understand your audience, discover their needs, and connect with them during your presentation.

Do your homework. Invest some time to learn about your audience. Find out where they work and what they do. At the very minimum, find out what they expect to get out of your presentation; in other words, what are they going to do with the information you impart to them. When you know that, you can directly address that during your presentation. Discover what they already know about the topic, and perhaps how you can tap into that knowledge.

Talk to organizers to see what they know about the audience. Better yet, go right to the source and interview prospective audience members. Try to talk to the implicit leaders, people who probably have a better read on the problems your audience faces.

One other major factor: size. How many people do you expect to attend? Will you have a small intimate gathering or a large amorphous group? This number can affect how you engage your audience during your presentation.

Meet your audience. Arrive early before anyone else. As people enter, introduce yourself to them—even introduce them to each other—and get them talking. Ask questions; listen to the answers, and move the conversation along those lines. Breaking down some barriers at this point is easy since there are always early arrivals; the setting, informal and quieter. You can be more personable and less formal. Get to know who they are, why they are attending, and what they expect.

I especially enjoy this part. At the beginning, the room is relatively empty so there is a loose atmosphere in the air. I find that during these more personal exchanges, you become human to your audience. You become, at some level, one of them. I also take this opportunity to meet some people with whom I can establish an immediate rapport, for these

are the people that I will focus on at the beginning of my presentation. This gives me some grounding, a deeper connection that the audience appreciates, and it helps me move quickly into being completely audience-centered while I present.

Connect with your audience. Speak to people individually by looking them in the eye for a few seconds; start with those people you met earlier, then move on to others. Move into the audience if you can; this breaks down barriers. Gesture and use facial expressions to emphasize what you say. Be energetic and enthusiastic. Refer to individuals by name. Speak conversationally. Employ the verbal techniques of projection, pitch, pronunciation, pace, and pausing. Get into it—reveal your personality.

I know when I've reached this point because I feel a flow to my movements and words; I feel intertwined with my audience by establishing this deeper connection that it brings everyone together. It raises the communication to another level to the point where the entire audience is imbedded in that same flow. While this might sound silly, there have been presentations where, together, the audience and I have attained a certain nirvana, where everyone is engaged, and everything flows as one. As a presenter, I find this incredibly gratifying for both myself and, more importantly, for my audience. Knowing that my audience has been engaged and connected, that they have learned and been enlightened, that they can move on in their professional lives with more information, that they are changed in many positive ways and their work has been enhanced, well...

That is your goal. 🍷

—RICH MAGGIANI

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