

Public Speaking 101 - Presenting for Your Audience

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Numerous books [have been written](#) about how to become a better public speaker. You will find all kinds of advice in this impressive library, from “*dress professionally*” to “*don’t put too many bullet points on a Power Point slide.*” Most of the advice is quite useful, but it is also a lot to take in for someone who is [just getting started](#) on the road to becoming a better public speaker.

There is good news: I read a lot of these books and have given a lot of presentations, and I’d like to help. Based on my experience, and the wisdom from those who have taught me, I’ve come to the conclusion that you really only need to keep *one* thing in mind to be a good speaker.

That one thing is your audience.

A technical professional has to understand that public speaking is so titled because the *speaking* part happens in front of other people. Without them, there would be no presentation. So, before you present anything to a group of people, ask yourself:

- Why are these people attending my talk?
- What will my listeners get out of my talk?
- How is the information that I am about to present relevant to them?

Naturally, avoiding the use of filler-phrases such as “*like*” and “*you know*” will make you into a better presenter. Speaking clearly and making eye contact will make you into even a better one. But if you don’t take your audience into consideration, none of these tips will matter.



3 Steps to Becoming a Better Speaker:

When you get down to it, there are really only three things you need to do to get your audience more engaged in your presentations. At the most basic level, you need to figure out what your audience wants to hear about, make sure you’re responding to that need, and be prepared to adjust your presentation if you aren’t. It sounds simple, but it’s a subtle art that frustrates and eludes many people.

Step 1: Get to know your audience ahead of time

This first step is probably the easiest one to tackle, however, for those of you who are just getting started, it can sometimes appear quite daunting. To make it more manageable, let’s take it slowly and consider a simple scenario: You are to present a new IT protocol

to your company's software developers and marketing department. You might think that you already know your audience; after all, you have worked with all of these people for years. Not so fast: I can guarantee you that, in most company meetings, marketing and engineering departments will want to know very different information about the same IT protocols.

Most company meetings are attended *only* because the audience is forced to be there. That typically intimidates the speakers, and they just ramble on, figuring that the audience will be bored and disinterested no matter what.

What if you took 20 minutes before the mandatory IT protocol meeting, and spoke to a few of your coworkers (who you knew would be attending your presentation) about what they hope to get out of your impending talk? I realize that this is hardly ever done, especially in technical organizations, but on the occasions where I've taken the time to learn about my audience's needs, my talks have been wildly more successful.

You don't need to speak with everyone who will be in attendance, but if you're expecting an audience of, say, 20 people, then try to speak to at least five. If you're expecting 100 people, then try to speak to ten or fifteen of them. There's no special etiquette for these situations, it's simply a case of finding Joe from marketing, who will be attending your protocol presentation, and saying something along the lines of:

- *Speaker, "Hey Joe, I am giving a presentation on the new IT protocols this afternoon, and I want to make it as relevant as possible to those of you attending. Could you tell me if there is anything specific that you, or your department, would like or need to know?"*
- Joe replies.
- *Speaker, "Great, I'll be sure to address that. Do you have any concerns about the new protocols?"*
- Joe replies.
- *Speaker, "OK, I'll bear that in mind. Anything else you think I should cover?"*
- Joe replies.
- *Speaker, "Thanks, Joe! I'll see you at the meeting."*

See how painless this can be? You have just learned what some of your audience is interested in getting out of your presentation, and that's a conversation which you can have with absolutely anyone. After surveying a few other folks in the marketing and development departments, you will have a good understanding of *why* people will be attending your presentation.

Incidentally, as a very nice bonus, by talking to these people you also learn a bit more about your company goals and organizational structure, and become known as someone who cares about other people's needs.

This information is absolutely invaluable, because what could be more compelling for an audience member than a presentation tailored exactly to their needs? With the feedback from this type of audience survey, you can easily manage this kind of preemptive adjustment. You can also mention things like *"Moving our e-mail server seems to be the biggest concern to the marketing department, so I will now talk about how we can make this process less painful."* Doing so will make your presentation interesting because it will now be completely relevant to your listeners. That being said, do be careful not to put anyone in particular on the spot, since some people might be uncomfortable with that.

If you are speaking at a technical conference or a larger event where you will not personally know most of the people attending your talk, it becomes even more important to get to know your audience. Here are a few ways to handle this:

- At a conference, attend banquets, dinners, happy hour, etc., and try to speak with people during coffee breaks. If there are too many people to identify those who will attend your talk, at least try to collect some stories and gather underlying concerns that seem to be a common theme. You can use these conversations to make your talk more relevant to the conference at which you are presenting.
- Attend several talks in the topic upon which you are presenting, and several talks in related topics. When giving your talk, mention how Dr. So-and-So spoke this morning about the benefits of Virtualization, but Prof. So-and-So in the parallel session

was talking about the drawbacks. Now, you can address both benefits and drawbacks within the scope of your own presentation. In one easy step, you just made your talk relevant to those listeners who attended Dr. and Prof. So-and-So's sessions.

- Sure, this requires a bit more work than simply showing up. However, over time, this one habit of getting to know your audience before each talk will make you into the kind of speaker that people come to hear of their own accord, and not because they were required by the management.

Step 2: Pay attention to your audience

Now that you have spent all that time getting to know your listeners before your talk, don't go and forget about them during your presentation. In [my last article](#) I advised paying attention to your audience while you speak, and asking yourself a few pointed questions: Are you noticing anyone falling asleep? Are people playing with their cell phones? Reading magazines? These are all signs that your presentation is not relevant or interesting to your listeners.

Have you noticed the most common response to those signs from presenters who are not 'natural' speakers? Unfortunately, many IT professionals and engineers fall into this category, and the typical response is to simply ignore these signs. How many presentations have you attended where half the audience was falling asleep and the presenter did absolutely nothing about it? It's like an [Elephant in the room](#), screaming "*No one cares what you are talking about!*" Yet the presenter stridently pretends that the elephant is not there, and keeps droning on.

To be a good presenter, you *need* to care about whether or not your audience is interested in what you are saying. Luckily, reading the audience's signals is relatively simple. To start with, if you're using Power Point, look around the room after every slide. If not, take a survey of the room after every major point you make.

Make a mental list of what percentage of the room is not paying attention, as well as whether the numbers of those who seem disinterested is increasing, decreasing or staying the same over time. If it seems like the attention of most people is increasingly wandering, it is time to go to...

Step 3: Respond to your audience's signals

This is probably the hardest step to master, but here are a few tricks to help you make it easier. Let's say you are in the middle of your presentation and, as per **Step 2**, you are paying attention to your audience. You notice that half of your listeners are texting, doing crossword puzzles and otherwise demonstrating their disinterest in your talk. What do you do next?

The typical response of a presenter is either to panic ("*I am not smart enough! I am too boring!*") or to become upset and frustrated ("*How dare they not pay attention to me?!?*"). Neither reaction is pleasant or productive, and that is probably why those of us in technical professions often tend to simply ignore our audiences.

If listeners are not paying attention, it's their problem, and has nothing to do with me -

This is practically a mantra in technical academic settings, and so it is no wonder that most presentations given by engineers and scientists are boring and / or confusing. I strongly recommend that you try to take a different approach. Specifically, take the audience's disinterest as constructive feedback about your presentation. Think to yourself, "*OK, what I am presenting is not relevant to this audience. How can I fix that?*"

This is where **Step 1** (getting to know your audience), comes in handy. If you notice that Joe from marketing, who you spoke to earlier, is playing with his blackberry, try saying something like:

"The marketing department brought up an interesting point about our current e-mail setup..."

I bet that will tear Joe away from his phone. *Don't* call Joe out, though, even if his disinterest bothers you. Saying:

"Joe, you really wanted to know about this stuff, and now you'd rather text your girlfriend?"

...Will not win you any points.

You can try to tell a personal story (all audiences like a good story, as long as it's relevant to the talk topic). You could try something like:

"I know that some of you think that the move to the new e-mail server is unnecessary. I thought so too, until last week, when I almost broke my arm after tripping on the cords of our current set up."

Humor always works well, but once again, you have to be careful and read your audience. If you are the only one laughing at your jokes, they are probably not relevant to your audience. So stop making them, or change their tone.

If it is obvious that you are losing your audience, but you just can't come up with a story or an audience-relevant comment, here is a simple idea you could try. Ask your listeners a question (relevant to your topic, of course) or ask to see a show of hands, if you don't want to put anyone on the spot.

"Can I see a show of hands of those of you who still have concerns about the new server system?...Joe, you raised your hand, what is your concern?"

Or try something even more simple, such as asking *"Does what I am covering here makes sense to everyone?"* and then just waiting. There will be silence for a while, and Joe will probably put down his blackberry. You'll get a few nods. If you wait just a bit longer, someone will usually ask you to clarify something. Suddenly, you've succeeded in pulling most of your audience back into your presentation, and all because you made your talk relevant to them again.

Every time I talk or write about presentation skills, I get a lot of great suggestions on other advice that I forgot to include, such as:

- You have to mention to make sure that the speaker finishes presentation on time
- You didn't talk about how figures with small font in power point are distracting
- Be sure to tell your reader not to wear neon colored shirts when presenting

I agree with all of those great tips, but the truth is that if you get to know your audience, and then pay attention and respond to them, your listeners will *tell you* how to make your presentation better.

- If you ask whether everything is making sense during your talk, someone might respond *"Can you explain what the axes on this figure are, I can't see."* You can then make sure to increase the font size in the future."
- When you see that your listeners looking at their watches, you will realize that you might be running out of your allocated time and need to bring your talk to a close. When you are getting to know your audience before the talk, as per **Step 1**, Joe from marketing might say:

"You might want to change that neon shirt before the talk, it will blind half the room,"

You should realize that your outfit is distracting and, hopefully, take Joe's advice.

In a Nutshell

A presentation of any kind is an interactive, two-way experience. Sure, you might be the one behind the podium or in control of Power Point, but for you to be relevant as a speaker, the audience has to also be listening, and you have to help them do so.

Find out what your audience wants to know about, respect them enough to make sure your material is relevant to them, and be prepared to adjust what you're saying if it isn't. Follow these principles, and your audience will help you become a great speaker!

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