

Three Critical Elements of Effective Presentations, **Association Magazine**, June - July 2006

We've all done it on at least one occasion – delivered a presentation full of excellent ideas and coming to a brilliant conclusion, only to find that somewhere, between the opening and the closing, the audience drifted away.

Why does this happen? And, more importantly, how can we prevent it from happening again?

Many of us in the association world spend a lot of time speaking to audiences: some large, some small, all important. In today's society, we're bombarded by messages. Our job is to make sure that our message gets through all of the interference caused by all of the competing, and conflicting, messages. Our information, our unique story, our call to action has to be the one that people remember.

My field of expertise is health and safety. In this field the key is prevention – focusing on the things that can be done ahead of time to prevent accidents from happening. Focusing on the planning, the training, the preparation before the work pays dividends in health and safety, and it will pay similar dividends in making your presentations better.

There are as many techniques and tricks for making presentations effective as there are presenters, and each situation is unique. However, there are three general "buckets" of issues to think about that will increase your chances of being the speaker that everyone remembers when the conference or meeting is over.

You can be a more effective presenter if you know just three things.

1. Know your message

Our world is complex. Our issues are complex. Our messages can't be. Unless you are teaching a course, keep your messages tight and brief – failure to do so can cause your audience to lose their focus.

How succinctly can you express your message? Can you sum up the message for each presentation in one sentence? You should be able to. Think about and clearly define the key message you want each person in the audience to take away from your presentation. In the association sector, it could be something like:

- Membership in our association is declining, and unless we start a recruiting drive right now, we are in serious trouble.

- Our revenues and participation are at an all time high, and we need more volunteers for leadership positions.
- The demographics of our members have changed, and we need to update our services to meet customer expectations.
- Our association can help you do your job better, faster and more effectively, and you should become a member today.

You can add examples to your core message, compelling stories, supporting data, and expert opinions. But, if you want the audience to remember the key message, select only one key message to deliver, and keep hammering it home. This is especially useful when the event you are speaking at is covered by media. Media love the ten or twenty second sound bite – and if you have the one sentence summary on the tip of your tongue, you improve your chances of seeing yourself, and your association, covered on the evening news. Trying to summarize a complex message with a microphone in your face is simply too difficult, even for a seasoned professional.

Some might argue that some of the messages we have to deliver are complex, and don't lend themselves to a one sentence summary. If this is the case, and sometimes it is, perhaps a presentation is not the way to go. Perhaps you need a panel discussion, or a round table, or any kind of forum where there are multiple speakers and the opportunity to pursue several different ideas.

Match the presentation complexity to the message complexity – multiple speakers can cover multiple messages, but single speakers should stick to single messages. And even single messages should be honed and polished until they are easy to remember. Know your message.

2. Know your audience

You can't know everyone in the audience, and you certainly can't know their background, interests, education and level of familiarity with the topic. However, you can, and should, find out as much as possible.

Are those who will be listening familiar with your topic? Is this new information, or are they industry experts? Is this something new for them, or is this something that is already a major concern in their lives? Are you presenting information that is an update of what they are familiar with, or are you going to be controversial? Are you an "insider", speaking on a known topic to your peers, or are you an "outsider", bringing something new, or asking for involvement from a new group of potential clients?

Failing to match the message to the audience is a sure way to lose their attention. You can do this by using jargon with an audience that is not familiar with the business. You can do this by speaking about an industry issue that is critically important to only a small number of those listening. I've done it by

presenting a general overview of health and safety in my industry sector when the audience was really interested in our response to a recent and specific government policy announcement.

Even in the absence of a critical issue, people in the audience need to relate to what you are saying – "What does this have to do with me?" "Why is she telling me this?" "What exactly am I being asked to do?" Don't leave those questions unanswered. Learn as much as you can about your audience, and determine how you need to tailor your message to them.

3. Know yourself

We have all heard audio clips of Winston Churchill, exhorting his people to fight on in the face of adversity. We all can't speak like he did, and our subject matter is not likely to be as compelling. We have all watched stand-up comedians keep their audience glued to every word. Most of our material is not quite as amusing, and few of us are as talented as performers.

But, each of us has a style that comes naturally to us. You can change, you can get better at public speaking, and you can learn what works and what doesn't. But above all, you have to be yourself.

Can you remember lots of numerical and statistical data easily, and recite it without error? If not, don't include too much of it in your presentation, or you will have to read it, and that will become dull, quickly.

Are you a great story-teller, with a natural sense of humour? If not, don't try to tell a joke. Humour can be wonderful in presentations, but if you can't tell a joke in front of a crowd without stumbling over the punch-line, consider showing a cartoon.

Are you physical – do you move, gesture, point, or walk around when you talk with your friends or in your office? If so, you need to incorporate some of that energy into your presentations. If you don't, you may find it difficult to maintain your natural enthusiasm.

I remember doing a presentation to staff where I sat at the head of the table and delivered a message that I thought was both important and well-crafted. The feedback was terrible – people didn't remember the key points, and everyone took their own interpretation away. It was hardly the result you want from an important staff meeting. One of my senior staff finally put her finger on it – "You didn't seem to have that much energy - maybe you should stand up rather than stay seated." It was true – I naturally move a lot when I talk to people, and sitting still at the head of the table had caused me to slow down to the extent that my voice and my enthusiasm suffered. I didn't speak loudly enough, and my voice had become a monotone. Since then, even with a smaller group in a meeting

room, I try to stand when I talk. When I stand I move, and that adds energy and enthusiasm to my speaking.

That may not work for some people, and it certainly won't work for everyone, but we are all different. Find out what works for you – know yourself – and then do what works best.

At the end of the day, speaking to an audience is a wonderful opportunity to deliver a message, to gain support for your association and to begin to change the world. If you are to accomplish any of those things, however, the audience has to remember what you said.

Deliver one simple message, one that can be summarized in one sentence, a ten second sound bite. Make sure that it is targeted to the specific audience to maximize the likelihood that they will be fully engaged during the presentation. They need to focus on you and what you are saying to them. Finally, be yourself - use the speaking techniques that allow you to be who you are – an enthusiastic and energetic advocate of your association, and its mission and vision.