



The Art of Engagement: Keeping Your Audience Fully Engaged

A few months ago, the managing partner of a prestigious law firm asked me this question: “How can I keep my listeners engaged while I’m presenting?” In fact, she’s already a superb presenter — but like all good speakers, she constantly strives to be better. I’d like to share with you the advice I gave to her.

By John Plank

The level of interest in your topic and the quality of your information will always vary from one presentation to the other. But the challenge inherent in every presentation remains the same: “How can I be sure that I will engage my listeners?”

There are many approaches and techniques available to you, but there are only a few that I would call “The Essentials.”

THE THREE ESSENTIALS TO ENGAGING YOUR LISTENERS

1. Listener Focused Content
2. Strategically Focused Format
3. Fully Engaged Delivery

LISTENER-FOCUSED CONTENT

This may seem too obvious even to mention. But many presenters fall into the trap of believing that simple information isn't enough — that their presentation must be unique, the very best, the definitive presentation on this particular topic. So their focus is often misplaced from the start.

Don't ignore your creative impulses, of course. But you must begin by preparing content exclusively to satisfy the wants and needs of your listeners. Avoid "nice to know" content; instead, stick with "want to know" and "need to know." Your creativity — what makes your presentation unique — will follow naturally.

That's all well and good, you might say, but how do I know what my listeners want? In fact, you may already have a pretty good idea — but don't torture yourself by guessing! Before you write a single word, conduct a series of short informal interviews with three or four key people who are arranging or attending your presentation and ask them what they're most interested in and what they perceive as the group's likes and dislikes. I have always found that audiences appreciate being asked about their preferences before a presentation. If it's not appropriate to ask your anticipated audience, brainstorm with your colleagues instead.

If you go through this process, you'll probably find that most of your first assumptions were correct. But frequently, those key additions and judicious deletions will make the difference between a good presentation and a great one. As well, the added certainty of knowing what your listeners want you to talk about will inspire your preparation and give confidence and authority to your delivery.

STRATEGICALLY FOCUSED FORMAT

The structure and style of your presentation should enable you to establish rapport, simplify complex issues and compel your listeners to pay attention.

Avoid "nice to know" content; instead, stick with "want to know" and "need to know." Your creativity — what makes your presentation unique — will follow naturally.



Here are four formatting strategies I recommend to ensure a compelling performance.

1. Establish a rapport. As the old saying goes, “I don’t care what you know until I know that you care.” In your first few minutes, you must demonstrate that you know your listeners, understand their individual and organizational achievements and challenges, and are fully familiar with their current situation and opportunities. This establishes you as an authority — and creates interest in what you may be able to provide.

2. Make it an adventure. Outline the challenges and opportunities related to your topic and increase the expectations of the benefits you are going to offer. Start with something familiar to your listeners; ideally, prepare one or two stories to illustrate the challenges and opportunities you’re going to talk about. Very few people actually like presentations; but everyone enjoys stories!

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Your goal is to teach people to remember what you have said, so that they can take action and share your messages persuasively with other key decision-makers.

3. Make it easy to remember. Great presentations are always simple. Provide a brief outline of what you’re going to discuss. Most presentations can be divided into three main parts. Aim for a maximum of three sub-points each: it’s simple, but thorough. There will be nine key points — just enough for a listener to retain in both short and longer-term memory. The simplicity of this format also makes presenting much less stressful.

Remember: without retention, your presentation has no lasting influence. Your goal is to teach people to remember what you have said, so that they can take action and share your messages persuasively with other key decision-makers.

4. Use compelling language. Bold claims and strong statements might impress some audiences. However, if your listeners are independent thinkers, take care to respect their unique perceptions. Use language that arouses interest and curiosity. Pose questions, outline options, describe problems, and cite opposing views related to your topic. This continuously stimulates your listeners, demonstrates the breadth and depth of your expertise, and shows that you are receptive to feedback.

FULLY ENGAGED DELIVERY

This is the hardest skill to develop. You must try to engage your listeners continuously as you present. Here, again, are just the essentials: three key factors towards full audience engagement.

Always think of your presentation as a dialogue. Pose questions, outline options, describe problems, and even raise common arguments related to your topic.



1. Strive to be fully present. Dare to take time to reflect on what you're saying — *while you're speaking*. Simply reciting your presentation, no matter how clearly you speak, will fail to fully engage your audience — and it certainly won't engage you! Your listeners are there to discover more about your topic, to measure your knowledge and skills, and to appreciate your integrity and strengths. You are there to gain a deeper understanding of your topic and discover more about your listeners and their requirements. Immerse yourself in the experience.

2. Interact. As you deliver your presentation, there must be a continuous connection. Always think of your presentation as a dialogue. Pose questions, outline options, describe problems, and even raise common arguments related to your topic. This continuously stimulates your listeners, demonstrates the breadth and depth of your expertise, and shows that you are receptive to feedback.

It's not enough to simply make eye contact — pay attention to and read your listeners' responses from moment to moment. Share each thought with specific individuals in the audience. Quite often, you'll be able to acknowledge their response with a quick nod or a smile. This is extremely powerful and compelling for listeners: they experience a presenter who not only sees them but responds to them. When you have experienced this kind of fully engaged speaking, you will never want to do it any other way.

3. Seize the opportunity. For almost 20 years, I've watched hundreds of professionals transform their careers and their businesses by changing their attitude towards presenting from "Obligation" to "Opportunity." Presentations enable us to learn at a level much deeper than we could ever achieve by simply reflecting in solitude.

We define ourselves more clearly every time we speak. Speaking is the most powerful way to differentiate your organization — and to enhance your personal reputation in your profession.

Embrace every speaking opportunity that comes your way — continual, conscious practice is an essential aspect of improvement. Seek out more opportunities to share what you care about.



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