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**Delivering Effective Presentations: A Review
of Techniques for Enhancing Audience
Involvement Reflections on a Lifetime in the
Securities Industry**

by

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**DELIVERING EFFECTIVE PRESENTATIONS: A REVIEW OF
TECHNIQUES FOR ENHANCING AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT**

By

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author reviews and discusses the use of several techniques to enhance the impact and interest of presentations delivered to an audience. Attention is given to those steps that can be taken to heighten the audience's sense of involvement and participation in presentations. The rationale underlying the use of each technique is explained and examples of the techniques are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Effectiveness as a communicator is generally considered to be a critical skill for success as a manager. Studies that have examined how supervisors, managers, and senior-level executives actually spend their time support the finding that managers are essentially communicators. One major component of being an effective communicator is one's ability, when called for, to deliver informative, interesting, and persuasive presentations to an audience. This type of communication typically becomes more important as one rises through the managerial ranks in an organization. However, presenters may sometimes find to their surprise and disappointment that their carefully prepared presentations have fallen short of the intended goal and have not had the desired impact on their audience. Often, this is true because presenters have carefully prepared their presentations in terms of the necessary background research, technical preparation, and content, but have forgotten to be adequately audience-minded. Presenters sometimes err in believing that if they distribute outlines or other handouts or if they make use of audiovisual technology to show either traditional overhead slides or more contemporary computer-mediated slides, such as is possible with PowerPoint, that they have done as much as is necessary to enhance audience involvement in their presentation. However, it is argued here that such audio-visual assistance often just makes it easier for the audience to follow what the speaker is saying. Some audience members may find the material being presented in this manner more interesting than they otherwise would. However, in and of itself, the use of such technology does not necessarily make presentations more involving or even more interesting for the audience. First of all, the use of such technologies have become so commonplace and taken for granted that they do not necessarily help get the attention or involvement of audience members. Secondly, slides presented with such technologies may still be poorly prepared. A common mistake, for example, is to show too much information on one's slides. These technologies can make it just as possible to lose one's audience as to win them over. This paper examines various technology-independent techniques for helping presenters be more audience-minded, and increase the impact and persuasiveness of oral presentations by enhancing the audience's involvement in the presentation.

TECHNIQUES FOR ENGAGING AN AUDIENCE

The easiest way to enhance audience involvement while delivering a presentation is to simply ask questions, not just to invite questions from the audience, but to throw questions at the audience. There are a number of ways to do this effectively, and these are discussed in increasing order of sophistication.

Asking Rhetorical Questions

It is often helpful for the speaker to ask rhetorical questions when raising or illustrating a point. There is something powerful and involving when a point is made in the form of a question even when no answer is actually being solicited from the audience, rather than as a declarative sentence. The audience is more inclined to start grabbing hold of and grappling with the rhetorical question that is being posed. For example, let's assume that the topic under discussion is the stresses and hassles associated with

commuting to work. The presenter could begin with a rhetorical question such as, “Have any of you ever had a frustrating morning like I recently had?” followed with the example that he wishes to provide. Certainly, if the example that follows is well-chosen and crafted, many members of the audience will be able to relate to certain parts of it and reject others. In effect they are silently answering the presenter’s rhetorical question by saying to themselves something like, “Yes, something just like that happened to me,” or “No, I think my commute to work is awful, but his is much worse than mine.” The point is that your audience wakes up more and becomes more attentive and involved with the topic when the presenter uses rhetorical questions.

Asking Real Questions

Of course, there is no reason to limit one’s use of questions to rhetorical questions alone. If rhetorical questions help to get your audience more involved, asking actual questions helps to do this even more effectively. There are a number of ways to ask actual questions. One easy technique is to ask your audience for a show of hands by using questions which typically begin with phrases such as, “Who here feels that...?” or “Who believes that...?” or “Who wants to...?” or “How many of you have or are...?” or “How many of you agree that...?” One can then count the hands corresponding to each category of answer, or the audience can roughly judge the count for themselves. The main reasons for asking these types of questions is to relate the general topic to the audience’s own experience or views, and to get a feel for how the audience stands on the issues at hand. A topic becomes less abstract and more relevant and meaningful for an audience when the presenter relates the topic to their experience or solicits their views about it.

Presenters should make every effort, however, to vary the kinds of questions they ask. For example, overuse of simple questions requiring merely a yes/no or show-of-hands type of response is likely to wear thin after a short while. Often, the most interesting and provocative questions are open-ended questions that ask people to think about something and to respond in their own words. These types of questions and responses are far more likely to encourage a true back-and-forth discussion between members of the audience. This is the ultimate indication that an audience is involved in a presentation, if they are discussing the issues on their own between themselves, so that the presenter does not even have to say anything for a while. Of course, the presenter should never abandon his/her role as the leader and the controller of the presentation. In other words, if the discussion begins to get out-of-hand, off-the-track, or to become too time-consuming, the presenter will have to reassert his/her control and possibly end the discussion or redirect it with another provocative question.

Questioning Selected Audience Members

Another way to handle asking questions is to select certain individuals from the audience to respond to your question. The key thing here is that both the person being asked to respond, and the other members of the audience who are witnessing this, become

more involved with what is going on and what is being discussed. Asking questions of individuals can be used to get more specific information from particular individuals after you have asked a question of the entire audience with a request for a show of hands. For example, if you have just asked how many audience members have participated in a diversity workshop in their organizations, you could then ask a follow-up question of one or more of the people who indicated that they had. A questions such as, “Could you tell us what was discussed at this workshop?” might be appropriate in this case. Once other audience members hear what was said, they are likely to add to the discussion as well if their experiences were similar or different. However, it is important to be cautious and sensitive when asking questions of individuals to not ask anything that might be embarrassing in any way and not to ask a question that is too difficult to answer.

Putting the Questions in Writing: Using Questionnaires in Conjunction with Presentations

A very effective way to ask questions of an audience in order to enhance involvement is to do so in writing at a point in time prior to the actual presentation in the form of a questionnaire or survey. The presenter prepares an analysis of the audience’s data that was collected and uses the actual presentation session to provide the audience with their own survey results. The rationale for this technique is that a more extensive set of questions can be asked than might otherwise be possible, the questions can be more comprehensive and systematic, and the data can be analyzed in greater depth than merely counting a show of hands. At the very least, for example, the percentage of the audience indicating one response or another can be calculated, or pie-charts or bar graphs may be prepared, whereas this would ordinarily take too much time to do when asking for a show of hands. Another rationale for gathering data from one’s audience in this manner is that it allows the presenter to provide information to the audience that they are most likely to be interested in, namely information about themselves. Being audience-minded means that presenters should realize that audiences are egocentric and interested in learning more about themselves. Providing information to the audience about their own experiences, views, opinions, and feelings is interesting in and of itself. Moreover, this interest can be augmented when the presenter uses data from the audience in contrast to data from society in general, as it pertains to the topic. For example, the presenter might report that, “Whereas X percent of working women were reported in a recent survey to be smokers, in this audience, only Y percent are.” In order to utilize this technique of gathering information beforehand, the presenter needs to know in advance who will be attending and how to contact future attendees, or the audience will be meeting on a regular basis anyway as in a classroom situation. Presenters should also make every effort to make certain that the questionnaire they are planning to use contains clear, specific, unambiguous questions, instructions, and ways to respond. Effective survey or questionnaire construction calls for certain skills and techniques, but a detailed discussion of these matters is beyond the scope of this paper that focuses exclusively on techniques for enhancing the effectiveness of presentations.

The Great Debate

If the topic under discussion is a controversial one with two or more sides or points of view, the presenter could use a debate format in order to enhance audience involvement and participation. In order to accomplish this, the presenter could do one of several things. One technique is to present one point of view on the controversial issue, and then at several strategic points, to stop and ask the audience for an opposing argument or point of view. To help keep the audience alert, the presenter could alternate the point of view that he/she presents, sometimes the pro or con, and then ask the audience for the opposing viewpoint. An alternate procedure is to divide the audience into two teams, one that will support and argue the pro side of the issue, and the other to argue the con side. If using this technique, the presenter would merely present the relevant issues related to the topic at hand, and at certain appropriate points stop and ask each of the opposing teams for their arguments. To make things even more interesting, a third group of audience members could be assigned to play the role of a panel of judges. They would not take part in the actual debate, but would render their judgment as to which of the two sides prevailed in the preceding debate. The presenter could provide the panel of judges with some sort of scoring instructions, a scoring sheet, or a rating key in order to perform this rating task as objectively and systematically as possible.

The Play's The Thing: Using Skits

Depending on the issue or topic at hand, a powerful technique for enhancing audience involvement is to act something out in front of the audience. Clearly, certain topics or issues may lend themselves more readily to this dramatic treatment than others. For example, when delivering a presentation on such issues as “Dealing with difficult employees,” or “Managing your boss,” or “Effective networking techniques,” or “Dealing with discipline problems at the workplace,” or “Effective negotiating strategies,” or “Providing performance feedback,” one could make a strong case for the use of skits to demonstrate effective or ineffective techniques. Skits might require the availability of more than one presenter, so in many cases this technique could not be used by a solo presenter, but could be used by a pair of presenters or by a team of presenters. It is also possible for solo presenters or for a team of presenters to ask the audience for a volunteer role-player to act in one of the roles. This could be done in advance of the presentation or right at the start depending on one’s desire to prepare the volunteer to play the role in a certain manner, or to just let the volunteer spontaneously “wing it.”

The use of an audience volunteer in conjunction with the use of a dramatic skit is likely to be quite stimulating and involving for an audience. Not only are we utilizing the power of drama in the form of an acted-out and scripted skit, but the audience can further identify with one of their own who has been taken from their midst to participate in this play. Audience members are likely to feel a combination of relief that they are not up there, envy because they are not, and curiosity about how well the volunteer will perform. They may wonder, “What will he say next?” or “How would I have handled that?”

Even more benefit can be derived from the use of skits by combining them with the use of questions as discussed above. At appropriate points, such as at the conclusion of a scene or an acted-out meeting, or perhaps at the conclusion of the skit, the audience could be asked such questions as “What did the manager do that was effective/ineffective?” “What did the subordinate do that was effective/ineffective?” “What could have been done to make that meeting more productive?” “What important concepts that we mentioned earlier did you notice in the skit?” “What should the boss do next?” Between having seen the skit and responding to such questions, the audience is likely to get highly involved in the presentation.

Using Cases and Exercises in a Presentation

Presenters can quickly get their audience involved by distributing an appropriate case or exercise that pertains to the topic at hand. Depending on time availability or constraints, a case could be distributed to the audience for reading and analyzing the presentation, thus allowing for a lengthier case, or at the start or conclusion of the presentation, when a shorter case would probably be preferred since time for reading and thought would be taken from the presentation period. The presenter could lead a discussion of the case after it is read and thought about by the individuals in the audience, or after groups in the audience review and discuss the case among themselves. The case could be used to initiate further treatment of the topic during the rest of the presentation, or to summarize and review key points raised earlier in the presentation. It is quite conceivable that one’s entire presentation on a topic could be based entirely on leading one’s audience through a discussion of a case with the use of thought-provoking open-ended questions. Similarly, either an individual exercise such as a quiz, problem, inventory, or a group-based exercise such as a conflict resolution or negotiation type of activity could be distributed to the audience at an appropriate time to illustrate certain concepts or procedures that will be discussed later or that were previously discussed. Audience members who participate in such activities will be interested in learning about the quality of their own or their group’s analysis on a case, or about the quality of their or the group’s performance in an exercise. They can learn about this from a forthcoming presentation. Alternately, if these activities are used to conclude the presentation, this provides audience members with an opportunity to immediately apply the lessons, procedures, or concepts that they have just learned about in the presentation. In either case, heightened audience involvement and interest is likely.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented and discussed the use of several techniques for enhancing the quality and impact of presentations delivered before an audience. Emphasis has been given to recommendations that are likely to heighten an audience’s sense of involvement and participation in the presentation. It is felt that these procedures will culminate in a win-win outcome for both the presenter and the audience. Presenters will find that presentations can be enjoyable and pleasurable, rather than a dreaded and stressful exercise. They will be gratified by the positive reactions and high energy level found among their audience. The audience, in turn, will feel that the presentations are

more interesting, exciting, and personally relevant. They are likely to appreciate the opportunity to be an active and involved participant, rather than to be passively lectured to. They will appreciate that the presenter is more audience-minded and concerned about meeting the audience's needs.