# HOW TO GIVE A PRETTY GOOD PRESENTATION

## A SPEAKING SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR THE REST OF US

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FREE CHAPTER GIFT

CHAPTER 14: "AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION"

*PLUS, BONUS – TIPS ON TIMING*

# AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

## HOW SHOULD I ENCOURAGE THE AUDIENCE TO PARTICIPATE (IF AT ALL?)

You are probably wondering, "Why would I want to engage the audience? That sounds scary! I'd like my audience to sit there and shut up, so I can finish and get the heck out of there!"

I sympathize with you—I really do. But I also want to make your life as easy as possible and to increase your odds of being perceived as a pretty good presenter. One of the biggest dangers we have to worry about as speakers is that our audience gets bored, zones out, and then remembers us as awful speakers. This is a failure for us.

But if you engage your audience, they won't be bored; and engagement means two-way communication. You've probably had an interesting conversation with a friend, spouse, or family member that lasted all day; not necessarily because anyone said anything brilliant, but because there was a back-and-forth engagement that allowed you to talk—so it wasn't boring.

When people say they don't like to be "lectured to," they typically mean that they don't like one-way communication where one person does all of the talking, and they have to just sit there and take it. This is why everything you do in your presentation needs to not remind people of a lecture. You want to talk to, have a conversation with, and engage people.

Here are some simple tips to help you engage your audience:

- Ask people questions when you are presenting.
- Encourage people to ask you questions at any time—not just at the end of your presentation.
- Look at audience members to see if they understand what you are saying. If they look confused, stop and ask them where you've lost them.
- Encourage people to disagree with you and give other opinions—not just ask you questions.
- Engage audience members not just with your words, but with your eyes, focus, and smile as well.

I know there is a part of you saying, "I don't want people interrupting me during my presentation! They will disrupt my train of thought. I'll forget what I'm going to say. Can't they just shut up until I finish?"

You could do it this way, but you pay a real price, and there is very little upside. If you let listeners interrupt you with questions during your presentation, you often end up with a better outcome—because the questioner may be pointing out a place where you were unclear or fuzzy. The other great value of letting someone ask a question is that it creates a variety of voices in the room, which makes your presentation more interesting.

And yes, it's true; people like the sound of their own voice. It might seem odd, but people will say nicer things about your presentation because you let them talk a little and you listened to them. I understand your concern that allowing audience members to interrupt you at any time will make

you forget what you are going to say, freeze, panic, develop flop sweat, and then have a heart attack and die. Fortunately, you don't have to ever worry about remembering what to say because—as you recall from an earlier chapter—you have a simple text outline in front of you. Since you can glance at this at any time, you never have to burden yourself with memorizing stuff. This takes all the pressure off.

## IS THE TRADITIONAL "SAVING QUESTIONS FOR THE END" METHOD REALLY THE BEST OPTION OR JUST THE MOST COMMONLY USED?

So, you are probably asking yourself, why is it so common for people to hold all questions until the end of a presentation? Two reasons:

1. If someone is addressing a large audience of 100 or even thousands of people, it is too unwieldy to take questions throughout. I assume that the vast majority of the time, you are speaking to small audiences, so this does not apply to you.

2. People hold questions until the end because they are scared. This is a reason, but it's not a good reason.

If you take questions throughout your presentation, you will score lots of points with your audience and seem better than most presenters. You will be making some favorable deposits in the credit department. This means that if you do mess up in part of your speech, or are less than riveting in other parts, you will have some goodwill stored up. The result is that even if you have some gaps and stumbles in parts of your presentation, the strengths of being engaging will outweigh those, and your overall presentation performance will be judged as pretty good.

# TIMING IS EVERYTHING

## WHAT DO I DO IF MY PRESENTATION IS RUNNING SHORT OR LONG?

### RUNNING SHORT

Running short is usually not a problem. Sure, if you have been paid $50,000 to give a keynote speech in front of 5,000 people and you are supposed to speak for an hour and are done after 10 minutes, then you have a problem on your hands. But I'm assuming—since you simply want to give a pretty good presentation—that you aren't in the professional speaking business. Great! That takes all the pressure off.

It's highly unlikely that, if you've been allotted 30 minutes and finish after 20, anyone in your audience is going to be upset with you; in fact, you are likely to be proclaimed a hero! If you have covered your main points and done so in a memorable way, then sit down. Don't worry about running a little short.

However, sometimes people run short because they race through their speech in order to finish faster and sit down. This is a problem. Occasionally, people finish earlier than their allotted time because they strip the speech of all interesting examples, stories, case studies, and vignettes. This, too, is a problem.

Your goal should not be to give a presentation in as brief amount a time as possible or to finish in less than the time allotted. Instead, you want to communicate a few important ideas that you care about and that you want the audience to care about. If you do that, the time will often take care of itself.

If you are allotted 30 minutes to speak and you finish after 90 seconds, then that obviously suggests a problem. Either you rushed too much, or you completely forgot entire sections of your presentation. If you rehearse on video—something you've already pledged to do just once in order to give a pretty good presentation—then you should already know how long your speech lasts. This way, there should be no surprises about coming up short.

Finally, remember that you will never hear anyone say the following: "Wow! That speaker was interesting, memorable, relevant, and gave me a lot of good ideas I can use in my business, but I sure am disappointed that she spoke for 10 minutes less than scheduled."

## RUNNING LONG

For starters, don't panic! Next, don't waste time apologizing for going long because the time you spend talking about going long is actually making you go even longer.

Going long can be a function of several complex factors: Did you start late? Did you plan poorly and have way too much information? Did you get sidetracked? Was the audience so fascinated with you that they bombarded you with questions?

Here are two other factors you need to take into consideration:

1. What are the other time commitments for your audience? It's one thing if you're speaking to your own employees and you are running five minutes late for a meeting that is supposed to end at 9:30 AM. If you are the last speaker of a five-day conference and you were supposed to finish at 4:00 PM and everyone has 6:00 PM flights—and you are still talking at a quarter till 5:00—then you have a huge, HUGE problem.
2. Are people engaged with you? If they are fascinated, hanging on your every word, and are on the edge of their seats, then don't worry if you are a few minutes long.

There are two main reasons for running long. The first is that you started very late through no fault of your own. What I recommend you do is ask the coordinator of the meeting how long they want you to speak. There are three choices:

1. Speak for the allotted time you originally had—say, 30 minutes—even if that means you finish at 11:20 and not 11:00 as originally scheduled.
2. Finish at the originally scheduled time, no matter what. So if you were supposed to start at 10:30 AM and finish at 11:00, and you don't start until 10:50, you would then say everything you need to in 10 minutes, thus finishing by 11:00.
3. The final option is to compromise somewhat, say, giving you 20 minutes so that you still finish 10 minutes later than scheduled but only have to shrink your presentation by one third.

Here's the only secret you need to know in order to appear to be a pretty good presenter: don't act like you are bothered in the least by the time change. Most speakers look and act nervous if there is a change. They apologize for starting or finishing late; they pull on their shirt and tie like Rodney Dangerfield. Don't do any of this. Instead, focus on delivering the most important material you had for the crowd in the amount of time you have (as defined by the person in charge, even if that is you). Don't act stressed or rushed—even if you are.

I realize that what I am telling you to do might seem difficult, but it's actually easier than the approach that most presenters take in these situations. When they realize that they are running late, they start to panic. Next, they start to talk faster and faster, thus destroying the audience's ability to understand them. Then, they eliminate all of their interesting stories and examples in

order to get to all of the facts, thus ensuring that nothing will be remembered. And to top it all off, they waste time talking about time, which is always a completely useless thing to do.

So don't do any of these things. If you've prepared five main points that will take 25 minutes to cover and are suddenly told to finish in 15 minutes, then just cover your first three points—complete with examples and stories. Then let people know that you can send them a memo or other documentation to go over the stuff you didn't have time for if they want more information.

Here is another simple and easy technique. Let's say you have concluded your presentation, but there are a lot of questions. You feel torn; on the one hand, you want to finish on time and you can see that half of the room is anxious and itching to get out of there. On the other hand, half of the room is riveted by what you are saying and has a genuine interest in asking you relevant questions that you could answer in your presentation—and you don't want to disappoint them.

A simple solution is to announce the following: "I know that some of you have to leave, so we are going to conclude as scheduled right now at 1:00 PM. For those of you who have more questions or would like to chat more about this subject, I would be happy to resume the conversation in two minutes right here—immediately after we let our colleagues get by who have to leave." This way, you look like a class act; everybody wins and gets what they want. The people who want to leave don't feel awkward or embarrassed about having to sneak out or step over people, and the people who wanted more content from you will get it. And you appeared to be a pretty good presenter in the process.

Another tip when it comes to avoiding the problem of running long is to time your rehearsal the right way. Most people make the mistake of reading their presentation silently, and then timing it with a stopwatch. They don't take into account that it takes a lot longer to talk to people, pause, walk around, and take questions. What might take you only 5 minutes to read out loud might take you 10 minutes to say in front of people. And then, if you factor in a question or two, it could add another 50 percent. My recommendation is to time your rehearsal, and then add at least another 20 percent to get a sense of how long it will take in the real world.

## FINAL TIP:

Always have a clock, watch, or some timepiece clearly in your view when giving a presentation. You don't want to have to be worrying about going long in the middle of your presentation and not really knowing what time it is. I just take my watch off and put in on the table or lectern in front of me; that way, no one has to notice me making a furtive glance at my wrist.