All Presenting is Persuasive!
By Guila Muir

After stumbling a bit, most speakers are able to name the purpose of any presentation they might give. However, most really stumble when asked if their presentations are meant to persuade anyone of anything.

The answer, 99% of the time, is YES. And yet most presenters don't realize it. As a result, the world is full of "information-only" presentations that do NOT achieve the presenters' or the audience's expectations or needs. Information in itself does not lead people to understand, believe, or act. Information alone is a "data-dump," not a presentation.

Think about it. Why give a presentation at all if you are not attempting to change the audience's behaviors or attitudes?

Persuasion versus Coercion

"Thaw with her gentle persuasion is more powerful than Thor with his hammer. The one melts, the other breaks into pieces." Henry David Thoreau

The term "persuasion" can turn presenters off. Many subconsciously equate it with coercion. And in fact both do share the same continuum of strategies that seek compliance from the listener. Yet persuasion, when done well, answers the audience's questions, address its concerns, and fulfills its needs...while achieving the presenter's goals.

Persuasion is nonadversarial in nature. Because it does not command, negotiate, or coerce, those who are persuaded almost always feel comfortable and satisfied with the outcomes. Why do they feel satisfied? Because the speaker has done her homework. She KNOWS what the audience needs and cares about. The presentation moves out of being a data dump and into the realm of dialogue, even if no formal "Q & A" takes place.

Credibility as Persuasion

"Character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion." Aristotle

Persuasion is more than strategy or technique. Your credibility factor underlies all persuasion. All the charisma in the world falls flat if the audience doesn't perceive you as being credible.

Empirical research (McCroskey, Holdrige & Toomb, 1974) describes five dimensions that must be evident in order for a speaker to be credible:

- Competence: the degree to which you are perceived to be an expert.
- Character: the degree to which you are perceived as a reliable, essentially trustworthy message source.
• Composure: the degree to which you are perceived as being able to maintain emotional control.

• Extroversion: the degree to which you are perceived as bold, outgoing, and dynamic.

• Sociability: the degree to which the audience perceives you as someone with whom they could be friends.

Remember that the effectiveness of your presentation is really about building a relationship with the audience. These five dimensions of credibility are far more effective tools than PowerPoint or any other technology. People are "buying" (or not buying) you.

What's in it for Them?

Jerry Weissman, in his book "Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story" calls persuasion audience advocacy. By that, he means the ability to view yourself, your company, your story, and your presentation through your audience's eyes. You must be able to answer the question "What's in it for them?" at every juncture of your presentation.

If you want to move the uninformed, dubious, or resistant audience to understand, believe, and act, (and what speaker doesn't?) you must:

1. Know your audience.

Do your homework. Find out what your audience cares about, what it wants to know, what its concerns are.

2. Link every piece of information to your audience's needs.

Here's a helpful test.

1. First, determine your next presentation's purpose. Write it down. Reflect on it. Change it if necessary.

2. Then, compose the first draft of your presentation. Focus on the purpose as you write.

3. Go through your presentation. Every time you provide a piece of data, STOP. Then ask and answer these questions:

"This is important to them because..." (answer it!)

"So what?" (explain how it benefits the audience.)

4. When you discover information for which you cannot answer these questions, ask yourself: Does this data help the audience understand, believe, or act? Remove the data if it does not.
You're On!

Once you've gotten through the test and integrated the answers into your presentation, be ready to put on your Audience Advocacy hat once again. Select from the following phrases and insert them into your presentation at the appropriate times:

"This is important to you because..."

"Why am I telling you this?"

"Who cares? ("You should care, because...")

You are Credible; You Meet Your Audience's Needs

 Develop and practice the five dimensions of credibility. They are an innate and natural part of you. A higher awareness of them will increase your effectiveness as a speaker. Remember to "see, taste, and hear" your presentation as if you are a member of your own audience. And always ask yourself: What's in it for them?

Far from being coercive, you are proving yourself to be powerfully aligned with your audience. Your message will benefit, motivate and move them!

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