

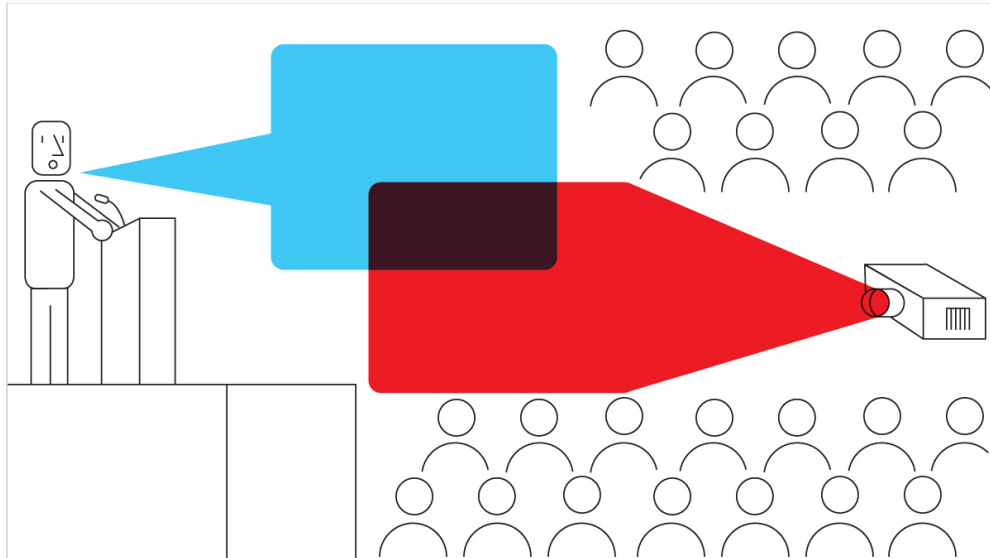


Digital Article / Presentation Skills

The Best Presentations Are Tailored to the Audience

Nine questions to ask before you open your mouth. *by HBR Editors*

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When preparing a presentation, we all remember to think about the basics: what you want to say, the data you need to back it up, any visuals that might help. But what about the people you're presenting to? The following excerpt from the book [Presentations](#) will help you better understand your audience and cater your message to their needs.

The better you understand your audience's goals and concerns, the more likely you are to achieve your objective and your desired outcomes. And the better able you will be to measure those successes.

The audience, not the presenter, is the heart of any presentation. To figure out what makes it tick, answer these questions:

1. How big will the group be? Who will be absent? Are you expecting 5, 15, or 50 people? The size of the audience affects the type of presentation you'll give and the resources you'll need. Keep track of which people can't attend. Absent stakeholders are stakeholders nonetheless; you'll want to follow up with them afterward.

2. What roles do your audience members perform in the organization? To whom are they accountable? Having a basic understanding of their responsibilities will help you engage them. Consider why your message matters to them and how you can make their lives easier. You'll highlight those things when you present.

3. What does the audience already know? What do people need to know? Don't state the obvious, but give people enough background information to understand what you're saying and how it affects them.

4. What are people likely to assume? Which of those assumptions are correct and which incorrect? Anticipating your audience's assumptions helps you make better choices about how to present your content. If there's a misperception you need to correct, this might be the time to do it—gently. For example, if your audience believes that the new system you're proposing will take too much time and effort to learn, clearly explain how you'll help ease the transition with training sessions and extra technical support.

5. How well does the audience know you? If you don't already have strong relationships with the people in the room, you'll need to establish a rapport with them early on. For instance, you might open with an amusing anecdote about your own struggles with the old system you'd like to replace. Show that you share the group's frustrations with the way things are.

6. Will some attendees' goals conflict with others'? If so, acknowledge that up front and explain how what you have to offer may help.

7. What types of presentations are your audience members accustomed to? Think about what's likely to get their attention, given what's worked in the past (data, demonstrations, personal stories). If you're doing something that's new to them, find ways to make them comfortable with it. Talking to a group of number crunchers? Open with a relevant story to give your presentation greater personal meaning, but make it one that they can relate to.

8. Is someone requiring them to be there? Is that person you? This will affect how receptive people are to your message. You may need to overcome apathy or even hostility.

9. Will you or someone else hold them accountable for what happens during or after the presentation? Consult with the attendees' managers about the feedback or deliverables you'll be soliciting, to make sure your goals align with theirs.

Not every question here will be relevant to your presentation. And, clearly, other pertinent considerations exist. The point is not to write up answers to a bunch of questions in a handy book. It's to reflect on the

human context in which you will deliver your message so you can tailor it to suit your audience's challenges and goals.

Anticipating the needs and concerns of your audience helps you calibrate your mind-set as you prepare and execute your presentation. Take the old adage about putting yourself in others' shoes to the next level: *Put yourself inside their heads and behind their eyes. Imagine yourself sitting there witnessing what you have to say.*

Did you do that? *Really* do that? OK, now you're ready to craft your message.

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This story is by the staff at Harvard Business Review.