



Two Rules for a Successful Presentation

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Rule One: Know Thy Audience.

Presentations are about their audiences, not their speakers. Before you write anything down, or commit anything to a Power Point slide, you must give some thought to your listeners. So ask yourself obvious — but easy to forget — questions like, what time of day am I speaking? How many people will be in the audience? Will they just have eaten, or will they be looking forward to a meal? Will they have heard a number of other speeches, or is mine the only one? The answer to each of these questions should affect the length, style and content of your presentation.

People have more energy and more ability to hear complex ideas early in the day; later in the day their energy flags and they don't want to entertain as many new ideas. Larger audiences demand more energy

from the speaker and want to laugh more than they want to cry. The worst audience (from the speaker's point of view) is a tired, fed, slightly inebriated audience. That audience needs President Reagan's rule for after-dinner speeches: 12 minutes, a few jokes, and sit down before the audience stands up.

But the really interesting things to know about audience members are, what do they fear? What are their dreams? Where do they want to be led? And what have they had recent cause to like or dislike? Only once you understand the emotional state of the audience are you ready to begin to design a presentation for them. Far too many speakers make the mistake of believing that one size fits all. I have seen executives give the same speech about the financial state of the company to investors, to the general public, and to employees — with very different results.

Rule Two: Tell Them One Thing, and One Thing Only

This is a difficult rule for most presenters to follow. But it's essential. The oral genre is highly inefficient. We audience members simply don't remember much of what we hear. We're easily sidetracked, confused, and tricked. We get distracted by everything from the color of the presenter's tie to the person sitting in the next row to our own internal monologues. *I'm afraid the company's not in very good shape. That comment that Joan made last week. Maybe I should dust off my resume. Now, what was that guy up front saying?*

So you've got to keep it simple. Many studies show that we only remember a small percentage of what we hear — somewhere between 10 – 30 percent.

But when a speaker gets in front of an audience, the urge to tell 'em everything you know is very hard to resist. Far too many speakers

perform a data dump on their audiences at the first opportunity. Unfortunately, we can only hold 4 or 5 ideas in our heads at one time, so as soon as you give me a list of more than 5 items, I'm going to start forgetting as much as I hear.

Against this dismal human truth there is only one defense: focus your presentation on a single idea. Be ruthless. Write that one idea down in one declarative sentence and paste it up on your computer. Then eliminate everything, no matter how beautiful a slide it's on, that doesn't support that idea.

Follow these two rules and you'll find that audience will remember — and maybe even act on — your speeches. After all, the only reason to give a speech is to change the world.



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