

Presenting Technical Information to Nontechnical Audiences (Aug 08)

By Dianna Booher

Passing on information is not the problem. The problem is turning information into communication. Sitting through boring meeting after boring meeting while somebody stands to the left of a computer screen and narrates a slideshow in a darkened room just does not make the grade anymore—if it ever did.

Connecting with an audience to push them to action or to a decision takes a very different mindset and skill than doling out data.

Translating technical concepts to laypersons rather than other technical colleagues requires a different mindset, more attention to detail, and a higher skill set. Scratching below the surface, you understand why this is the case. You cannot just dump the details and expect laypeople to make sense of it all—to sort the trivial from the significant, make assumptions, and come to the same conclusions as you have.

You need to think of creative ways to explain complex concepts that avoid references to background, jargon, or short-cut thinking in the same amount of time as you would ordinarily use. You typically have to adopt an entirely new viewpoint on the information and data—to apply it to other purposes.

Keep Asking Yourself “Why Me?”

Why have you been selected to present this information or message? What specific qualities or credentials do you have? Pinpointing your unique qualifications will provide a major clue about the strengths only you can bring to the talk. For example, as the specialist who did the research on a project, can you answer questions more authoritatively than anyone else? Do you have access to certain data that no one else has? Have others with the same expertise been passed over, and you have been invited to speak because of your humorous approach? Are you a recognized authority for a certain viewpoint? Will the audience expect to hear your personal experiences about already accepted ideas?

Keep Asking Yourself “Why Them?”

Why has this particular group assembled to hear you? Have their bosses, clients, suppliers, or spouses requested that they attend? Do they have an interest in the subject? Do they want to hear what you have to say so that they can contradict you and subvert your efforts and ideas? Did they come to hear someone else, and you happened to be on the program? Is this their monthly organizational meeting, and they are expected to show up? Honest answers to these questions can help you choose appropriate opening remarks, the right tone, and the best order for presenting your ideas.

Keep Asking Yourself “So What?”

Technical presenters accustomed to speaking to other technical professionals often assume that the information they share points the audience to clear conclusions. It does not.

Facts rarely speak for themselves. They need interpretation. To keep yourself on target with a nontechnical group, continually ask yourself “So what?” as you prepare. Then, do not forget to add the “So what this means to you/us/the organization/the bottom line is that . . .” to every point. And when you come to a section of details where you cannot look the group squarely in the eye and complete the statement “So what this means to you is . . .,” this is generally a clear indication that you should omit these details.

Never Decide That Your Content Dwarfs Your Delivery

The philosophical nature of many technical professionals demands that they be thorough and precise. This is why such professionals often go overboard in creating visuals—too many, too cluttered, and too meaningless. The visuals serve as notes so that they can remember every single detail, and what they do

not remember to say, the audience members can read for themselves.

Being thorough in your preparation is always a good idea, but when you start to prepare slides, err on the side of fewer rather than more. Yes, your content typically generates your invitation to speak. That said, your delivery can be so dull and painful that your audience simply cannot absorb your content. Both delivery and content count.

Know When to Be Persuasive, Not Just Informative

One of the biggest hurdles technical presenters face is changing their mindset about their mission. When our instructors conduct oral presentation workshops for technical groups and come to the section on shaping their content, someone invariably pushes back with this comment: “But we’re not supposed to draw conclusions and make recommendations. They [usually meaning the senior executives] just want the technical perspective as a basis for drawing their own conclusions.”

Seldom is this the case. Technical presenters are valuable to their audiences precisely because they guide the group to draw the appropriate conclusions based on the technical data. In short, take a viewpoint about your data.

Avoid a Data Dump

Think of your data or technical information as a lump of clay. To make it useful, you have to shape it. For the most part, each audience will prefer a different shape. Some will prefer an indoor flowerpot. Some will prefer a large patio planter. Some will prefer a brick retaining wall on which to display the flowerpot.

Therefore, you may have to build a new mold for each reiteration of your presentation. And even if you can use the same general mold (structure) for multiple groups, you will need to select your details carefully and then regroup and reorder them in the way that makes the most sense to match the interest and needs of your specific audience.

If you find yourself presenting on any given project, using the same set of slides for different audiences, making the same key points, and elaborating with the same details, you probably are off target and in danger.

Prefer the “Us” Versus “You” Tone

In our culture, we tend to hold the person with the most information at a higher status. And that higher status can erect a barrier with an audience. Expert, teacher, critic, peer, guide, or motivator—each is appropriate in certain situations. The trick is deciding which to use with any given audience.

In general, adopt an “us” tone rather than a didactic one. In a contest between “eloquent but cold” and “adequate but cordial,” the latter tends to make a stronger impact and pry open more minds.

Use the Precise, Technical Word—But Only When You Need It

In shopping for jewelry, you know that the most ornate, gaudy settings do not necessarily mean the highest-quality gold. The same is true for showy language that calls attention to itself rather than to the idea it conveys. Why refer to weeds around the warehouse as “vegetation around the exterior periphery of the storage facility”?

Use the precise word without being unduly technical. There is a difference. Mark Twain observed, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” As a technical professional, you certainly do not want to misuse words that you will need for accuracy on technical topics. However, neither do you want to use technical jargon when a nontechnical word conveys the idea just as well.

Limit Your Visuals to the Necessary Few

It is understandable why technical presenters tend to use so many visuals: Their information is, well, technical and therefore tedious to commit to memory. Therefore, the charts become their notes. However, put yourself in the chairs of your typical audience—for four hours, eight presenters, and 293 slides. This is death by mouse click! With every slide you are tempted to display, ask: “Is this absolutely necessary to my bottom-line message?” If in doubt, leave it out.

Effectively communicating technical messages to nontechnical audiences presents a challenge for even the most seasoned speaker. Do it well and your audience will leave feeling informed, not ignorant.

(If your fingers itch to create the data slide as your notes, have at it—then hide it! Or, provide the data as a handout or in a report.)

About the author:

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