

# Who is my audience?

*Keep your message from falling on deaf ears by knowing your listeners*

If you have a presentation or training seminar coming up before a new audience, this column will help make that talk a success, and is based on the experience of a student who took my course in Effective Presentation Techniques at the Graduate School of Banking at Madison, Wis.

This past August, Sandra, a vice-president of marketing for a Midwest bank, poured out her feelings about a presentation she made to a Rotary chapter.

"I was given three week's notice. My topic was Online Banking Services. The chairman of our board was in the audience. I distributed beautiful, color handouts, used PowerPoint with attractive visuals, but almost immediately, it seemed as if I was talking to an audience that had fallen asleep—blank stares, empty smiles, and when it was over, robotic applause. The next day my boss got some really negative feedback from our chairman," she said.

"That's why I am in your class. I can't ever repeat this experience again," she whispered.

Sandra had a great speech—but not for this audience. Overlooked was the most important step in the preparation of virtually every business presentation: Knowing as much as you can about your audience. You already know the subject, but do you know your audience?

"Tell me," I began, "you knew it was at Rotary weeks before the talk. What else did you know about that Rotary chapter, and those signed up to attend?" She only knew to expect about 75 people. "What more should I have known?" Sandra wondered.

## Ask the right questions early on

You can have total command of the material, but if you don't know who will be in the audience, then you've got a real problem. Success depends upon meeting the needs of this audience. They are not there for you, they are there for themselves.

Learn all you can about the audience. Who are they? What do they do? What is the gender mix, educational level? How familiar are they

with your subject? What do they need to know, want to know, and, why are they here today?

Going over these pointers with Sandra, I purposefully left something out and asked if she could now tell me what went wrong. "I get it! What a dummy I was! It had to be an age issue! They were all people in their late 50's into their 60's and 70's! My speech was perfect for a much younger audience—because they are more at ease with a computer—and that's why they didn't like it. In fact, I'll bet I actually frightened them a bit!" she said.

## How to discover audience information

Audience analysis begins the moment you are asked to speak. Your first question to the person who invites you should be, "Tell me about the audience?" You want to learn how many are expected to be present, and literally anything about individual audience members that will help you tailor the speech to their needs.

Phone a few audience members well before your presentation, tell them that you are their guest speaker, and recite the four most valuable words in the English language: I need your help.

Explain that you would like to tailor this presentation to their needs. "My topic is X. Would you help me make this more interesting and useful to you and to others in the audience?" Then take notes and see how delighted they are that the speaker took the time to call them. The day of your speech, get ready for, "I was really impressed that you took the time to call me!"

If you are told, "We never know who will actually show up," there still is something you can do. Be there early and greet your audience as they arrive. For example, "Hi, I'm your guest speaker, pleased to meet you! Can I ask you a favor? Today I'm going to talk on XYZ, and I was wondering, what do you know about this issue, and what do you think...?"

Your audience will know that here is a speaker who cares, who wants them to learn and have a good time. And so will you all. *BJ*



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