

Identifying Your Three Presentation Audiences

Knowing who is in your audience enables you to better connect with them

MY FIRST TIME PRESENTING TO A MEANINGFUL audience happened within my first year at IBM. I had joined the company right out of college, so I was still young and, well, unseasoned. I didn't really know what I was doing except trying to explain concepts.

I learned two important lessons that day. One, you don't always know what you think you know until you have to explain it to someone else, or in this case, to a bunch of someone else's. Two, it's critical to know who those someone



elses are when you are presenting; in other words, who is your audience.

It's also critical to know all of this *before* you present. I'll get to that, but first, let's take a closer look at each of these lessons.

Knowing what you think you know. In my experience, there are three tiers of knowing.

1. You think you know what you are talking about. This is delusional, because in your own mind, you are convinced you completely understand a concept, or completely enough that you can discuss it cogently whenever the time arises. Except, you don't.

2. You know what you are talking about, and can hold an intelligent conversation with others who already have a bit of an understanding of what you are talking about. This tier is also a bit delusional because while you have hold of a concept, it's still not a solid grasp.

3. You have a firm grasp on the concept, can converse about it intelligently, garner some insight, and most importantly, explain it fully to someone else who doesn't have a clue. This is the tier of understanding you must possess when you present.

Identify your audience. As you have seen, it's imperative that you identify your audience. Understand whether you are presenting to an audience of decision makers or information gatherers, or both. Address each group as most appropriate to better attain your objective.

Three audience categories. Your audience can also fall into three categories: primary, secondary, and hidden. You've probably heard this before. Still, I'd like to describe each category.

1. **Your primary audience** encompasses the people that are physically present in the room. These are the people who can immediately fulfill your goals. Address your entire presentation directly to them.

2. **A secondary audience** is people not in attendance, but are directly related to, and have an interest in, your primary audience. This secondary audience will look upon your presentation from some distance, but nonetheless will be interested in what you have to say. More than likely, your primary audience will consult with your secondary audience who, in turn, can influence your primary audience's decisions and thought processes.

3. **Your hidden audience** encompasses people who want to be aware of your presentation on a peripheral level. This audience can include any number of people for both personal and professional reasons. Your hidden audience also has the opportunity to hold sway over your primary and secondary audiences.

How to address your audiences. Focus your presentation on your primary audience, while being aware that your secondary and hidden audiences are also interested and, at some level, are listening.

Address your comments during the presentation as if all three audience groups are present. Chances are good that those in attendance—your primary audience—will talk to members of the secondary and hidden audiences. Your presentation is the time to frame their comments so that you can control the information that gets passed along.

My first presentation. So, in what manner did those two lessons enlighten me during my long ago, first business presentation? In a word, painfully. Here's what happened.

My astute manager, Janie, asked me to present the concepts of the book I was writing at that time (about the marvels of virtual storage management). Because she already knew less than one, she first had me present informally to the members of our small (12-person) group. That's when I gained my understanding of lesson one.

Next, she had me present to an audience of three dozen people, none of whom I knew. I assumed these people were my only audience. Except, a secondary and hidden audience was evaluating not only my ability to explain cogently, but also my potential to become a professional worthy of the company's attention. That was indeed eye-opening!

How to proceed. While this conclusion is obvious, it still bears summarizing. Before giving any presentation, make sure you can explain what you know to an unknowing audience, and also make sure you know to whom you are presenting and what you want them to do with the information you impart. This can only bring you closer toward a human connection with your audience. 🌟

—RICH MAGGIANI

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