From monologue to dialogue: Adding interaction to your presentations

by Matt Abrahams

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Mustering the courage to present confidently in front of others is hard enough, but when it comes to actually engaging an audience and managing their participation, presenters usually either freak out, forget to add interaction or both. And audiences struggle with interactions in presentations too. They might feel uncomfortable participating and not know what is expected of them.

Why must engaging with your audience be so difficult?

I believe the answer lies not in the audience's reticence, but rather in the presenter's inability to effectively invite his or her audience to participate. The participation opportunities you afford your audience, such as a Q&A session or poll, are an abrupt transition from monologue to dialogue, from presentation to facilitation.

Making this switch is a challenge for both the audience and speaker alike, but it's necessary if you want to have engaging and memorable presentations online or in person. Your audience – no matter if they are a prospect, an employee, or a student – needs you to lead them through this transition. They expect you to "command the room" and help them participate. You're the session leader.

The quick switch to interactivity and a more equal balance of status and power can be confusing and challenging. However, there are simple actions that you as a presenter can take to help you navigate smoothly into and through your participative activities. This ebook will illuminate these participation best practices.

These practices can be distilled down to three broad categories:

1. Managing your anxiety prior to speaking so that you are calm and confident when engaging your audience.

2. Presenting practices to prepare your audience for interactive participation.

3. Facilitating the participation while it's happening, such as calling for questions and queuing them up.

No matter if you are presenting in a virtual or in-person environment, your presentations will benefit from audience participation and interaction.

Managing your anxiety

My experience in listening to thousands of presentations as a communication professor and coach has taught me that having an engaged audience often reduces speaking anxiety, because you are working with your audience, rather than being judged by them. The best way to create this environment with your audience is to reframe the speaking situation.

This anxiety-reducing cognitive action can take one of three forms. The first technique involves reframing the physical, emotional and mental anxiety reactions you experience prior to speaking as typical and natural. These sensations do not show anything beyond your body's normal response to something that is potentially threating. Avoid giving these natural responses special significance. In fact, you can greet or accept these reactions by saying to yourself: "Here are those anxiety feelings again. It makes sense that I feel nervous; I am about to speak in front of people." This type of acknowledgement is empowering and dampens your anxiety response, rather than allowing your nervousness to make you even more nervous.

Another reframing effort that helps relieve speaking anxiety has to do with seeing presenting to others as different from performing. In performing, you place a tremendous amount of pressure on yourself "to get it right." A less stressful and more engaging approach is to frame your speaking as a conversation. How do you become conversational? First, when you practice, don't stand up and deliver in front of a mirror or camera. Practice by sitting at a coffee table or at a coffee shop with friends or family to talk through your speech. Second, include the word "you" frequently when speaking. "You" provides a direct, verbal connection with your audience and leads to a more conversational tone and approach. You can also use audience members' names if you know them. When you converse, you connect with people by using their names.

The final reframing technique that can reduce presentation anxiety involves changing the relationship you envision having with your audience. You will likely start preparing a presentation by thinking "here's what I need to tell my audience," and then proceed to develop and ultimately deliver your thoughts and ideas. A better, more thorough approach to your presentation – especially when giving sales and marketing presentations – would be to begin by asking the question: "What does my audience need to hear?" While this approach initially sounds similar to "here's what I need to tell my audience," the difference is striking. By embracing an audience-focused approach, you will not only engage your audience more, since you're giving them what they need, but you will take the spotlight — and stress — off of yourself, which will allow you to be less nervous.

Practices to prepare your audience for interactive participation

Passivity is the enemy of participation. As a speaker, you need to engage your audience and get them involved. If you fail to invite participation early and often, inertia sets in and your audience will likely be less motivated to engage. To avoid this situation, I strongly recommend using what I call Audience Connecting Techniques (ACTs) to get your audience to participate with you. ACTs demand involvement from your audience. They make audience members sit forward in their chairs engaged, rather than passively leaning back.

One easy-to-use ACT is to **ask your audience to participate**. For example, "With a show of hands, how many of you have…" or asking, "Which side of my slide best represents your experience?" Requests such as these show your audience that they are involved in your presentation.

Another useful ACT is to **ask your audience to visualize a situation or outcome**. Since your audience is seeing something in their mind's eye, rather than just listening to you describe it, they become more engaged, and your point becomes more vivid and lasting for them.

" We emphasize practical techniques for project management – not just concepts and theories – so that students learn exactly how to do something, such as scoping a project. Our on-site courses combined lectures, demos and actual practice using a technique. We needed a web-based tool that could provide similar real-time, varied interaction between the instructor and the students to ensure experiential learning. **"**

Paul Burek on using GoToTraining
CEO
Solutions Cube Group

Possibly the most important ACT is to **focus on the relevance of your topic for your audience**. Helping your audience see the value of your topic to them is critical to engaging them. Be sure to spend time detailing the specific links between your topic and your audience's lives. Relevancy is the best antidote for apathy, and it brings with it a high level of participation.

A final ACT is to **use Think-Pair-Share**. Ask your audience to take a moment to think of an answer to a question you pose or to come up with a potential alternative. Next, encourage them to discuss their response with someone near them. After this brief discussion, solicit their input. Think-Pair-Share is a powerful participation tool because it not only bolsters the audience's confidence in responding, but better ideas typically arise as a result of multiple brains working together.

When you use Audience Connecting Techniques throughout your presentation, you reap benefits beyond serving notice to your audience that they are expected to be involved and participate:

• Your audience feels more connected to your content.

• Your audience sees themselves as your partner in the presentation.

• You will feel less anxious because you and your audience are actively working together.

Facilitating the participation while it's happening

Once you have your audience prepared, practiced and even eager to participate because they feel connected to you and your topic, you need to facilitate the interaction smoothly to maximize the benefit and continue their willingness to be involved. While there are many types of participative activities that can be employed during a presentation — such as brainstorming, decision-making, polling — the most prevalent participation opportunity is the Q&A session. I will use the Q&A session as an example of how to facilitate effective participation online or in person.

To begin, you need to consider when to take questions from your audience. My advice is to take your questions at the end of your presentation if you are a nervous speaker. This compartmentalization allows you to stay focused on the task at hand — presenting or answering questions. If you are a more seasoned speaker or have content that is very complex, you should consider taking questions throughout your presentation at designated times that you define for your audience at the beginning of your presentation.

When it comes time to ask your audience for their questions, you need to solicit their queries in a way that maintains your credibility and authority while being humble, open and responsive. This transition to an actual conversation with your audience can be tricky, but it can be made easier by (1) the expectations you establish when you call for questions, and (2) how you actually collect the questions that you intend to answer.

Too often, Q&A sessions are opened with generic invitations like "Are there any questions?" Broad invitations such as this are often too open ended for audience members to come up with focused, concrete questions. Rather, I suggest asking for the exact type of questions that you desire to answer. For example, "I would like to spend 5-10 minutes answering questions about the solution that I provided." This more restrictive opening

helps your audience know what types of questions to ask, establishes you as being in control and leads to questions that you are prepared to answer.

It is important to reflect on the anxiety involved in the Q&A session. As the presenter, it is easy to understand anxiety that you might feel, but audience members also experience nervousness during the Q&A session. While you have had a chance to warm up and become comfortable with speaking in your environment, audience members do not have that advantage. Further, they are feeling the influence of several pressures. First, audience members might fear looking stupid and foolish by asking a question. Second, they may be highly sensitive to the power dynamics (e.g., the boss being present) or societal norms (e.g., it is disrespectful to question a speaker). Finally, audience members might not want to put you on the spot and make you look bad. Unfortunately, as a presenter who desires good, interactive questions, you must take on the added burden of helping your audience get their questions to you.

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Stephanie Lewis
Training and Development Representative
ECi Acsellerate

When accumulating questions, you have a few options available that go beyond the standard call and respond methodology. The first is to prioritize the questions coming in. In an online presentation platform, you should be able to flag questions that come in as you're presenting, so when you get to the Q&A, you already have some questions to start answering. As new questions come in, it may help to have someone online with you to filter and ask the questions to you so you can stay focused on your answers.

When answering questions, paraphrase the question asked. This confers several benefits to you:

1. You validate and reward the asker, which will likely encourage more participation. (Although you should avoid saying "good question" to every query.)

2. It ensures you will answer the correct questions.

3. If you can paraphrase and also think of an answer at the same time, you buy yourself a little preparation time.

4. You can reframe an emotional or challenging question to be better suited for you; for example, a question such as "your pricing is ridiculously expensive…how do you get away with charging so much?" can be rephrased as "you are asking about our product's value."

Nonverbally, Q&A online should be done with video conferencing. This allows your non-verbal communication to not only engage your audience, but also being able to see a speaker increases audience trust and familiarity, leading to better conversation. When responding, remember to address your answer to the entire audience and deliver your answers in the same speaking style — cadence, vocal variation, etc. — as you used during your presentation. You want to avoid becoming a different speaker in terms of your delivery.

To help your audience understand your responses, link their questions to what you previously said and/or what other audience members have said. This facilitation tool of linking ideas and concepts helps your audience stay on topic and rewards their contributions. Further, to help your audience understand your answers, invoke the A.D.D. method of answering questions:

- Answer the question (one clear, declarative sentence).

- Detail a specific, concrete example that supports your answer.

- Describe the benefits that explain why your answer is relevant to the asker.

The verbal and nonverbal facilitation techniques mentioned here will not only encourage participation from your audience, but they will sustain it.

In online presentations, consider sending through the chat panel links to relevant articles related to the Q&A topics discussed.

Wrapping up

Audience engagement and participation serve as a hallmark of a compelling speaker, but facilitating this type of experience can feel daunting. However, by addressing your anxiety, preparing your audience to participate and then facilitating their participation with ease, you can confidently transition from monologue to dialogue and establish interactive presentations that benefit both you and your audience.

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About Matt Abrahams

Matt Abrahams is a passionate, collaborative and innovative educator and coach who teaches Strategic Communication for Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and Presentation Skills for Stanford's Continuing Studies Program, while also teaching at De Anza College. He has published research articles on cognitive planning, persuasion, and interpersonal communication. Matt recently published *Speaking Up Without Freaking Out*, a book written to help the millions of people who suffer from anxiety around speaking in public. Additionally, Matt developed a software package that provides instant, proscriptive feedback to presenters.

Prior to teaching, Matt held senior leadership positions in several leading software companies, where he created and ran global training and development organizations. Matt received his undergraduate degree in psychology from Stanford; his graduate degree in communication studies from UC Davis; and his secondary education teaching credential from SFSU. He is currently a member of the Management Communication Association (where he recently received a "Rising Star" award) as well as the National and Western States Communication Associations. www.boldecho.com

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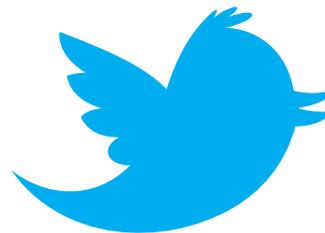
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