



SECTION I

Laying the Groundwork for Getting Results







CHAPTER 1

The Most Important Element of All

You've got to start with the customer experience and work back toward the technology, not the other way around.

—STEVE JOBS

When I conduct executive-level presentation coaching programs aimed at persuading tough decision makers, I often begin by waving a crisp \$100 bill around the room and asking the participants, “Who would like to win this?” Several hands shoot up in the air, folks sit up a little straighter in their chairs, and all eyes are fixed on the green oval portrait of Benjamin Franklin. Once I have their attention, I continue, “In the next thirty seconds, you’ll win \$100 if you can answer this question correctly: What is the most important element of every presentation?” I set a thirty-second timer for all to see. The competitive outgoing types immediately shout out their answers: “Body language!” “Voice tone!” “Professional image!”

“All good guesses,” I reply, “and critical elements to success, but not the *most* important.” The guesses continue. “The opening?” “The close?” “The content?” The timer is ticking. I urge them on. “Think about it,” I say. “Of all the elements that make up a successful presentation, what is most important of all?” They look befuddled. “Humor?” “Good visual aids?” “Oh I know! It’s the presenter’s level of expertise!” I nod my head, but they sense my disappointment. The last few take a stab. “Preparation?” “Storytelling?” “Props?” The thirty-second timer buzzes and I return the bill to my wallet. The correct answer? The audience.





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Believe it or not, in the hundreds of presentation coaching programs I have conducted over the course of twenty years, fewer than ten people have won that \$100 bill. Why? Self-focus versus audience focus. According to my audience surveys, which also number in the hundreds, failing to speak from the audience's perspective is the most common strategic mistake presenters make. The audience responses indicate that it's the primary reason a sale is not made, a budget not approved, a proposal not agreed to, a request denied. The presenter fails to align with the audience and speak from the decision makers' point of view.

Under normal circumstances, most of us probably strive to maintain a sense of compassion and understanding toward others. We know the importance of listening and empathy when building a healthy relationship. We know that to truly connect we have to see things from the other person's perspective. Unfortunately, when it comes to delivering a high-stakes presentation where our reputation, level of success, and possibly even our job is on the line, our individualistic desire to survive and thrive dominates. All of a sudden, in front of a group of decision makers, including our boss, the company's senior leadership, plus our customers, we become self-focused. We want to look good, sound smart, and be perceived as confident, credible, and in control. We want to make a great impression, win the order, close the deal, earn their trust, get the vote, or gain the funding.

There is nothing wrong with wanting these outcomes. The key is to realize that these payoffs are the consequences of an audience-focused presentation. They are not the main goals. If we become too self-focused we design and deliver a presentation from our own perspective, not our audience's. We choose the content we want to talk about; create the slides that feature our favorite points; present the data we think makes us look smart. But the primary goal of a presentation is to persuade the audience by speaking from *their* perspective. The most effective and most influential presenters I work with, from entry-level sales professionals to chief officers of major corporations, begin the presentation process by asking, "Who is my audience?"

By getting to know your audience first, addressing what is important to them, and solving their issues, I promise you will win much more than a \$100 bill. From your boss and coworkers, you will win respect, recognition, and career advancement. From your customers and prospects, you will win trust, confidence, and most likely their business. So what does this look like?



Talk to a man about himself and he will listen for hours.

—BENJAMIN DISRAELI

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE: LEARNING ABOUT DECISION MAKERS

Judy, an award-winning chief information officer of a large hospital, is a master at knowing her audience. As a CIO, she is responsible for managing a highly complex computer network that keeps everything running smoothly, from ordering medical supplies to ensuring patient safety. One of Judy's software vendors (a client of mine) asked her if she would be willing to give a presentation and product demonstration to one of their prospects, another large hospital, which was considering investing in the same software. The deal was worth more than \$10 million to my client, and the senior account executive had his entire year's quota riding on this one opportunity. I was invited to work with Judy on the preparation process.

When the big day came, it was obvious Judy and her team had done their homework. She and the senior account executive had interviewed members of the prospect's team over the telephone and discovered their specific business challenges and key objectives. In Judy's opening speech, she looked directly at the visiting chief executive officer and his staff, called them by name, thanked them for coming, and warmly welcomed them. She revealed a flip chart sheet labeled "Your Wish List." It was composed of the prospect team's top ten problems, which they hoped the software could solve. Judy clarified and verified the wish list with the group, added a couple of more last-minute requests, and said, "Now that we've confirmed exactly what's important to you, we can ensure a tailored presentation that meets your specific needs. Let's get started."

Throughout the day of presentations and product demonstrations, Judy and her team of presenters referred back to this list. They showed how every feature and function of the software solved an issue on the wish list and helped the prospect attain their objectives. It's no wonder that at the end of the day, the visiting CEO stood up to thank everyone and said, "This is the best hospital tour I've ever experienced. Every question and issue we came with has been addressed. You've proved the value of the software and it delivers exactly what we're looking for. I see no reason to keep us from moving forward with the purchase." He turned to the senior account executive and said, "What's the next step?"



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Bingo! Judy and my client got exactly what they wanted by giving the audience what they wanted. This principle of reciprocity is known as the Golden Rule of Presenting.

When is your next presentation? To ensure you achieve the outcome you want, take the time to get to know your audience. Use the following ten questions, as Judy and her team did, to analyze your audience and address what is most important to them.

TEN CRITICAL QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE

1. *Who are they?* Connecting with your audience means understanding them on a professional and personal level. Know their names, roles, titles, responsibilities, and day-to-day work activities. Find out the basic demographics such as their age range, education level, professional experience, economic status, cultural influences, race/ethnicity, and political leanings. What is the gender ratio, men to women? Will the decision maker(s) be in the room? Do these individuals have the authority to buy your solution or approve your proposal? If possible, take the time to find out some personal information. Do the attendees get along and like one another? What do they have in common? Are there any avid sports fans in the group? What are their special interests and hobbies? Are they parents and/or grandparents?

2. *What are their expectations and why are they here?* Find out what your audience expects to gain by attending your presentation. What are their individual motivations? Are they willing and eager participants, or is their attendance mandatory? How interested will they be in what you are talking about? Considering audience expectations is a vital part of crafting a persuasive presentation. If your audience members arrive needing and wanting one thing, and you as the presenter deliver something different, regardless of how good you are, it's likely that they'll be disappointed.

Marty, the vice president and general counsel for a major online retailer, was asked to present to the company's board and executive committee on the topic of privacy. A customer was suing the company due to an alleged breach of privacy, so in their minds it was a burning topic. These individuals had canceled plans, delayed trips, and moved appointments to attend the meeting. Marty, wanting to promote his own agenda at the meeting, began by saying, "I know many of you are eager to hear about privacy, and we'll cover



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that later in the presentation if time permits, but I would like to spend most of this hour reviewing our contracting policies.” There was almost a riot. The chairperson spoke up at once and insisted Marty stick to the issue the audience was there to discuss. In a very public and embarrassing way, Marty learned to stick to the topic and meet the audience’s expectations.

3. *What are their main issues and challenges?* Discover what keeps them awake at night and causes them headaches, hassle, and frustration. Be able to pinpoint the problems that are causing them financial loss, decreased customer satisfaction, low morale, and operational inefficiencies. What do they need to be more successful, meet their business metrics, and fulfill their goals? As the Native American proverb goes, “Walk a mile in their moccasins.” Show them you understand their unique situation and empathize with their problems. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

4. *How does your message solve their problem?* There is an old adage that says every audience is tuned to the same radio station: WIIFM, which stands for “What’s In It For Me?” What are you doing for the people in your audience? Be able to state confidently how the audience benefits from your message. What purpose does it serve in terms of helping them? Now that you know the audience’s main issues, be sure you can show them how your product or idea resolves their concerns and makes life easier for them. This satisfies the other two questions the audience is asking: “So what? Who cares?” Do not expect the audience to figure out the benefits for themselves, regardless of how obvious the advantages seem to you. Clearly and overtly articulate how your solution will help them.

5. *What do you want them to do?* What is the call to action? The purpose of presenting is to persuade. Ideally, your talk will influence people to act in response to your message. Otherwise, why make the effort? Ask yourself: “At the end of this presentation, I want my audience to _____.” Fill in the blank with your single clear-cut objective beginning with an action verb. For example: “At the end of this presentation, I want my audience to:

- ▶ Recommend my product to decision makers
- ▶ Request a detailed product demonstration
- ▶ Buy my product
- ▶ Approve the budget



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- ▶ Fund my project
- ▶ Vote “yes”

Remember Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*? Even though the book is more than two hundred pages long and the movie lasts nearly two hours and features a cast of colorful characters, Dorothy is striving for one single overriding objective: to go home; to get back to Kansas. Every scene, conversation, song, and dance is motivated by that single clear-cut objective. What is your Kansas? Think about the single most desired action you want your listeners to take away after they hear your message. By doing so, you reap mighty dividends. Not only will you be able to direct your listeners' thinking and craft the content accordingly, but you will also be able to state a clear call to action at the conclusion of your presentation and achieve a measurable outcome.

6. *What is the single most important idea you want to communicate to this audience?* Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, the well-known American songwriting duo, perfected this technique. They created a string of popular Broadway musicals in the 1940s and 1950s. Legend has it that before they began composing, they asked themselves, “Which tune do we want them whistling when they leave the theater?” This decision determined which scenes featured the song, which character sang it, and how often the audience heard it. I recently attended a production of *The Sound of Music*, and sure enough, I hummed “Climb Ev’ry Mountain” all the way home. What phrase, idea, or proposition do you want your audience to remember after your presentation?

I once prepared a computer manufacturer’s CEO for his keynote address to 1,500 salespeople. He emphatically stated that the main “tune” he wanted them all whistling as they left the conference was, “Build customers for life.” He wanted his sales force to believe it was the company’s mission and their job to deliver outstanding customer service. We composed the presentation around this theme. His speaking points, slides, stories, and statistics all pointed to this main idea. It’s no surprise that when I interviewed dozens of salespeople afterward and asked, “What’s the main idea you took away from your CEO’s speech?” every reply included, “Build customers for life.”

7. *How much does your audience already know?* Be sure to find out how much they know about your topic so you can gauge your content accordingly. The amount of details and type of content you include in your



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presentation should depend on your audience's knowledge level. A presentation describing the effects of a new heart medication requires far less detail when your audience is made up of patients as opposed to cardiac surgeons. The key issues to consider are the audience's level of familiarity and comprehension. With that in mind, ask yourself two questions:

How familiar is my audience with the topic of my presentation?

Is my audience likely to understand my terms and concepts, or should I plan on explaining them?

You don't want to talk over your audience's head, and you don't want to talk down to them, either.

8. *What are your audience's attitudes about you, the topic, and the environment?* Several years ago, I coached two corporate presidents, Anne and Larry, from separate and unrelated companies, in the very same week. Both leaders were delivering presentations that were seemingly the same: a thirty-minute, all-employee state-of-the-corporation address, delivered live at their headquarters and broadcast via the Internet to remote offices. Anne's company had a stellar year. The firm gave out unexpected bonuses; they were featured in multiple trade publications as a "Most Admired Company." And, based on employee satisfaction surveys, they were rated as one of the best companies to work for in the state. Anne was respected and adored by a grateful workforce. No surprise, when she walked on stage, the applauding fans rose to their feet. Larry, on the other hand, faced an entirely different situation. His company had posted a devastating multimillion-dollar loss in the previous quarter. He'd laid off hundreds of employees, and rumors were flying that more "head-whacking" was to come. Remaining managers had taken a pay cut, and disgruntled employees were blogging negative comments. As you can imagine, Larry's audience had an entirely different attitude about him, his topic, and the overall corporate environment than did Anne's.

As you prepare, ask yourself about the likely attitudes of the people in your audience. Are they likely to be supporters and advocates of your ideas who are positively disposed to you and your message? Are they opposed to your ideas? Are they undecided, neutral, uncaring? What emotions, biases, prejudices, and opinions do they hold toward you and your topic?

9. *What are their personality types?* Yvonne, the senior vice president of marketing for a national cosmetics company, was furious when she called me for help. The day before, she had attempted to present her new business



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strategy to her CEO. He interrupted her after five minutes. “I have no idea what you’re trying to say,” he told her. “When you figure it out, let me know.” He excused her and asked his assistant to call in the next presenter. Unfortunately, Yvonne forgot to consider her listener’s personality. Yvonne’s CEO is a fast-paced, quick-thinking, high-driver type who wants to hear the crux of the message in the first five minutes. Yet, Yvonne mistakenly prepared a painstaking presentation with down-in-the-weeds details and a methodical step-by-step process. In the first five minutes, she was still plowing through numbers in the first column of her ten-page spreadsheet. We may argue with the CEO’s lack of manners, sensitivity, and tact, but his job is to produce results for the company and to ensure his time is spent on revenue-generating outcomes. When presenting to this dominant, direct, and decisive personality type, you as the presenter must be prepared to speak in a clear, concise, and convincing manner, asserting your conclusions and recommendations up front.

On the contrary, you may have other decision makers in your audience who are detail-oriented, methodical thinkers who want to hear about your process and logic. The point is to know to whom you are speaking—and know it ahead of time. The fast-paced, risk-taking executive receives information differently than does a fact-oriented, quality-minded engineer, scientist, or technologist. Are your listeners serious minded, or do they laugh easily? Are they talkative, outgoing, and energetic, or quiet, reserved, and somber? As you are getting to know your audience, think about the different types of personalities in the room. What behavioral traits and learning styles best describe them? The answers to these questions will determine what you say, how much you say, and the order in which you say it. This insight is invaluable later in the process as we develop a logical structure and develop persuasive content.

10. *What objections or questions might this audience have?* What would cause this audience to oppose your topic or proposal? What issues might cause a delay or denial of your request? What issues must be overcome to achieve your goal? By identifying the obstacles ahead of time, you will be prepared to show your audience that their concerns are not as formidable as they might have thought. Once you have identified the obstacles to your success, you can muster the arguments necessary to overcome them. No matter how excellent your product, proposal, or recommendation may be, audience members almost always raise objections, have questions, or demand additional information.



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Mike, the chief operating officer of a large computer system manufacturer, was preparing to present to a group of unhappy customers. As I helped him prepare for the possible questions and objections the audience might have, we carefully rehearsed honest and appropriate answers. After a couple of hours, Mike paused. “This is certainly not fun, but very necessary,” he said. “I guess it’s true—real leaders face the music even when they don’t like the tune.” Mike did his homework ahead of time and found out the key issues affecting his customers. He then took the time to formulate and practice effective answers. Only then was he able to craft a thoughtful, audience-focused message that addressed his audience’s key concerns and ultimately salvaged their business.

What issues or concerns could keep your audience from adopting your message and carrying out your call to action? Maybe they fear the change you’re recommending and dread the adjustments it requires. Perhaps they are uncertain about which vendor to choose or whether they can afford your solution. Maybe they are skeptical and doubt your company’s ability to deliver. Whatever the reason, your success as a persuasive and confident presenter will depend on your ability to anticipate your audience’s questions and objections—your ability to face the music of the audience—even when you don’t like the tune. Equally important to predicting their reasons for resistance will be developing the skills to overcome these objections and answer their questions with finesse and confidence. We will cover those specific techniques in Chapter 12.

HOW TO GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE

As you analyze your audience using the ten critical questions, there are multiple resources to help fill in the blanks. Take out your magnifying glass, light your pipe, play the role of Sherlock Holmes, and conduct a full investigation. Here are a few ways to gather critical information about your audience.

- ▶ Speak to the attendees several days or weeks before the presentation. Schedule a call and ask them what they would like to gain from the presentation. Ask what they’re expecting. This interaction provides firsthand feedback, allows you to establish a personal connection in



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advance, and enables you to customize your presentation to meet their needs.

- ▶ Send out a questionnaire or survey. If you cannot personally speak with the attendees, consider sending a quick five- or ten-question survey that can be completed in ten minutes.
- ▶ Speak to their managers or senior leaders. I always find it helpful to ask the boss what he or she wants and needs their people to gain from the presentation.
- ▶ Talk with the audience's coworkers or people inside the organization. Insights from fellow employees will help you get a feel for the overall attitude, atmosphere, and environment.
- ▶ Read the latest articles relating to your audience's industry, company, or interests. Gather as much current information as possible about their values, mission statement, and performance data. Be sure to read their marketing materials, annual reports, newsletters, brochures, product spec sheets, or other related collateral material. Browse the company website and relevant industry websites.
- ▶ Visit their facility, store, or office. Nothing impresses an audience more than a presenter who has done his or her homework, especially when that entails gaining firsthand experience and taking the time to see their company in action.
- ▶ Study their competition. If you are delivering a sales presentation, be sure to know the companies and products that your prospect audience considers to be their main rivals.
- ▶ Converse and mingle with participants as they enter the room. Ideally, you should arrive and set up early enough to be fully available to participants as they walk in. Use this time to gather last-minute information from audience members that you can weave into your presentation, such as their names, relevant stories, humorous examples, special requests, learning goals, and schedule adjustments.
- ▶ Use an Internet search engine to investigate the key decision makers who will attend your presentation.
- ▶ Ask questions during the presentation to gather on-the-spot feedback. In a later chapter we will look at various audience interaction techniques, one of which is asking the audience questions during the presentation.



TOP LOGISTICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTIONS

Success is the sum of details. —HARVEY S. FIRESTONE

In addition to the ten critical questions that lay the groundwork for your audience analysis, you will also need to know the answers to a number of logistical questions to ensure that your presentation runs smoothly. Prior to your presentation, as you talk with the organization's leaders and/or employees, see how much you can learn about the following:

- ▶ Who will be introducing you? Are you introducing yourself?
- ▶ How many audience members will be present?
- ▶ Will people be joining you remotely via the telephone or Internet?
- ▶ How much time do you have for your presentation, including Q&A?
- ▶ What is the time slot of your presentation?
- ▶ What is your placement on the agenda (first, middle, last)?
- ▶ What agenda items, speakers, and topics precede and follow you?
- ▶ Where is the presentation location/venue?
- ▶ What is the earliest you may access the room for setup, walk-through, and rehearsal?
- ▶ What is the room setup and seating arrangement? Can they be changed?
- ▶ Will you stand or remain seated to present? What are other presenters planning to do?
- ▶ Are you giving a team presentation with other presenters or are you solo?
- ▶ What audiovisual equipment will you need? Laptop, screen, projector, microphone?
- ▶ If you use a microphone, is it a handheld, lapel, or stationary model?
- ▶ Are you expected to use a lectern? If so, can you leave the lectern and move around the stage and room to better connect with the audience?
- ▶ What kind of lighting is in the room? Are the slides still visible with the lights on?
- ▶ Is there a meeting theme, occasion, or special event tied to your presentation?
- ▶ What is the expected attire for the attendees? For the presenter(s)? Is it formal, business, business casual, casual?
- ▶ Will food or beverages be served before, during, or after your presentation?



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- ▶ Will special VIPs, senior executives, dignitaries, guests, or the press be present?
- ▶ After your closing, do you introduce another speaker, or close the entire program/event?

Getting to know your audience is much like building a relationship with anyone else: the more you know about them and the more time you invest in learning what is important to them, the more likely you are to establish rapport and create a meaningful connection. The bedrock of a great presentation is showing your audience you know them. So, if you are ever in a workshop and the facilitator offers \$100 for the correct answer to the question “What is the most important element of every presentation?” you can be the first to call out, “The audience!”

CHAPTER 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ The audience is the most important element of every presentation.
- ▶ Answer these ten questions to prepare for a persuasive presentation:
 1. Who is my audience?
 2. What are their expectations and why are they here?
 3. What are their main issues and challenges related to my topic?
 4. How does my message address or solve their issues? How does it help them?
 5. What do you want them to do as a result of hearing your message?
 6. What is the single most important idea you want to communicate to this audience?
 7. How much does your audience already know?
 8. What are your audience’s attitudes about you, the topic, and the environment?
 9. What are their personality types?
 10. What objections or questions might this audience have?
- ▶ As you complete your “homework” by learning more about your audience, find out everything you can about the venue, how you’ll be introduced, what the audience already knows, the objections you could face, and the single most important idea you will want to communicate.

