Oh no! Not audience participation!

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By Dave Zielinski

Some may hate it, but getting audience members involved is often the best way to engage, inform and persuade them.

In the world of presenting, there are two words that make almost everyone cringe: *audience participation*. And yet, many speakers - often the best ones - insist on selecting audience volunteers, breaking people up into little groups, forcing strangers to talk to each other, soliciting questions or otherwise forcing individuals to speak up. Why do presenters continue to insist on audience participation, even though most people prefer to sit back and listen?

Because it works.

Proponents of so-called "participatory presenting" say that nothing surpasses presenter-audience interaction as a way to engage, teach or persuade listeners - not just in training settings, but in many workaday business presentations as well. Many believe engaging an audience in some fashion - i.e., viewing audience members more as co-presenters than passive information receptacles - has become the forgotten element in current presentation practice. In their view, the average Microsoft PowerPoint presentation is like a sensory deprivation chamber that has some visual and audio stimuli but no way of engaging both the body and the mind.

"When you genuinely involve your audience in a meaningful way, the release of pent-up energy can be amazing, and there's no feeling quite like it in presenting," says Nick Morgan. Morgan is founder of communication-coaching company Public Words in Arlington, Mass., and author of the book, *Working the Room: How to Move People to Action Through Audience- centered Speaking* (Harvard Business School Press, 2003). In his view, what today's stand-and-deliver PowerPoint parades are missing is the "kinesthetic connection" between an audience and the presenter. The ability to create this dynamic interaction between presenter and audience is becoming a lost art, Morgan says.

Scott Simmerman, a frequent presenter and head of the Performance Management Co. in Taylors, S.C., puts it more bluntly: "Sometimes there is a need to turn the darn projector off and let people think and talk among themselves, which is hard to do when you are wrapped up in a presentation stage show."

Why involve them?

Evangelists of audience interaction claim that the rewards for presenters willing to take the risk of involving their audiences - even if audience members are initially reluctant - are enormous. One such evangelist is Sivasailam Thiagarajan (known as Thiagi), head of Workshops by Thiagi Inc. in Bloomington, Ind. Thiagi has been promoting and modeling the power of active learning and "interactive lectures" for more than 30 years. He cites a litany of research to support the notion that when audience members are involved - when they help you paint your presentation's canvas - they learn, retain and embrace new information more willingly. They're also more easily persuaded to consider new viewpoints, which is especially important if the message is about change.

Consider the "two minds" findings of Seymour Epstein, professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Epstein's research in psychology suggests people have both an experiential mind and a rational mind. The experiential mind learns directly, thinks quickly, pays attention to outcomes and forgets slowly. The rational mind learns indirectly, thinks deliberately, pays attention to process and forgets rapidly. Epstein's contention is that the best learning happens when both of these minds are engaged - and audience involvement is the best method for appealing directly to the experiential one.

Beyond games: Sharing stories

Of course, trainers often use illustrative games, small-group discussions or other experiential activities to get their messages across, but how can the average presenter use such techniques to advantage? Presenters who think interactivity only means using bingo games, bursting balloons or extensive Q & A are missing the point, says Public Words' Morgan. There are plenty of other ways to involve audiences, he says, and many are easy to use in standard presentations. These include getting audiences to compete or "play" in some way (e.g., a debate, say, or play-acting a scenario), adding real-world spin to key messages, asking audiences to provide real or hypothetical examples of your concepts, using integrated quizzes, or getting people to make a pledge to their fellow participants as a way of committing to a new behavior.

Morgan believes one of the most effective tactics is getting audiences to weave their own personal stories into a larger one the presenter is telling. A simple way to do this is to break people into small groups, have them tell each other stories, and ask that they collect them in a format for reporting back to the whole group.

One presenter Morgan knows used a variation on this technique in a presentation on handling employee layoffs effectively. To help bring her messages to life, the presenter asked audience members to share their own personal stories (or those of friends) about being laid off. A small incentive helped coax the first volunteer - anyone who would stand up and "testify" would receive a free deluxe shaving razor (a tie-in to the Gillette Co., one of the presenter's case studies). That opened the floodgates and the pink-slip tales came pouring forth, adding credibility to the presenter's points about how the handling of layoffs greatly affects the attitudes of the "survivors" as well as the departed.

In another case, a presenter spoke to a group of chief information officers (CIOs) about how to successfully bridge the divide between technical and non-technical employees in their organizations. Morgan says the speaker wanted to present three models of statements a CIO might use. But rather than just describe the models, he opted to coax three audience volunteers to respond to a posed problem each might face as an imaginary CIO. The presenter divided the audience into three groups and had each group coach one of the volunteers according to one of the three models mentioned in the presentation. (The audience didn't have to invent the models - that would have been too much to ask.) The groups filled in the models with specific wording the volunteers could use.

The audience as a whole was then asked to respond with applause for each volunteer as they "did their jobs" to determine which approach was best. Says Morgan, "The point wasn't really to determine a winner, but to get audience members to consider some alternatives and to use their creative power to invest in new ways of thinking about a CIO's role." The results, not only in terms of the audience's enthusiasm, but also the positive feedback the presenter received for weeks afterward, more than repaid the risks involved in using the tactic.

The fear factor

And make no mistake - there are risks. After all, if these techniques are so effective, why don't more presenters use them? Fear of losing control and limited mastery of content are the two biggest reasons, Thiagi believes. "It's usually the presenters who don't know their stuff who require absolute control of a presentation. Those who do know it cold have an easier time transferring control to an audience."

Encouraging an audience to participate, and being able to go with, and manage, the flow of what happens when you do, also requires presenters to think about their content in an entirely different way. PowerPoint slides lend themselves to linear, structured presentations, not presentations that are spontaneous and largely unscripted. Indeed, in Nick Morgan's opinion, exclusively PowerPoint-based presentations almost always fail to make that all-important kinesthetic connection with an audience.

Other common tools in the presenter's arsenal, however - an electronic whiteboard, a document camera, even the humble flip chart - engage people on a different level by "capturing the audience's thoughts, not merely sketching your own," says Morgan. Writing down what people say during a presentation or a meeting is also a way of validating it. "Audiences are drawn in by that kind of feedback," he says, "and it's flattering to see your words and thoughts captured by a speaker."

That is not to say PowerPoint cannot be used more creatively to spur audience participation. Thiagi, for instance, employs more-abstract PowerPoint slides to encourage audience discussion. He might project a Salvador Dali-like piece of art during a session on corporate diversity, then ask audience members to turn to a neighbor and explore what they see in the picture, especially how the visual reflects the current corporate standing with respect to diversity. According to Thiagi, the point is to get participants to use their imaginations to draw some connections to corporate practice. Thiagi eavesdrops on these conversations, and summarizes key thoughts for the group while adding his own perspectives.

Getting more from Q & A

Without attending a workshop or spending a lot of time learning a new bag of tricks, how can the average presenter engage an audience more effectively? Plenty of speakers can involve their audiences more by simply handling Q & A with more aplomb, experts say. The speaker who poses a question to the audience, waits impatiently for a few seconds, and then answers it himself is sending a crystal-clear message, says Morgan. It telegraphs "that there is nothing for them to do, that they can sit back and let the presenter handle everything." If true interactivity is the goal, he says, sometimes a presenter has to tough it out and wait - to make the audience answer the question themselves.

Others address an audience's natural reluctance to ask or answer questions by employing a variety of creative engagement techniques. Thiagi often passes out index cards, asking everyone in the audience to write down one question a confused person might ask about his presentation. Participants turn their cards written-side down and pass them to someone else, continuing to pass on the cards in a random fashion until Thiagi yells "stop" (after about 15 seconds). He then selects people at random to read aloud the question on their cards - extending the option of pretending to read the question on the card while really asking their own.

Balancing needs and wants

Proponents of participatory presenting believe that these audience-involvement techniques can, with some forethought, be applied to almost any presentation scenario, and that the benefits of doing so are almost always worth the risk. Still, there's the fact that most people are initially reluctant to participate in any activity that has even a small chance of causing them personal embarrassment, especially in a professional setting. Plus, there's the inescapable fact that failed attempts to involve the audience are embarrassing to the presenter. We've all seen, for example, the person who returns from a workshop or conference session enthused by the great new icebreaker or learning game he experienced, only to be met with rolling eyes or stinging post-session reviews when he unveils it in his next departmental update or brainstorming session.

To avoid such calamities, many coaches advise that presenters pick their tactics wisely. Understanding context and audience expectations are key to making participatory tactics work, says David Green, curriculum director for Dale Carnegie & Associates in San Diego. Framing the speaker's decision to use these tactics in terms of needs versus wants can be helpful, Green says. A presenter might think an audience needs experiential activities to truly grasp a message or learning point, when in fact what the audience wants is a simple, rapid, one-way transfer of bullet points. Save the Jeopardy-style games, trust-builders and gimmickry for another time.

Straddling the line

"There's a fine line between the audience's comfort level with interactivity and knowing when there's value in having them become more active participants in your presentation," says Green. He speaks from experience. Early in his career, Green used a simple interactive exercise in a session on change management at a business luncheon. To illustrate how difficult it can be to sustain change, he asked pairs in the audience to turn back-to-back and change five things about their appearance, then have their partner guess what they'd changed when they turned back. The point, however, was to illustrate how rapidly people changed their appearance back again when the exercise was over. Later, when he read session evaluations, Green found that more than half of the audience complained about the exercise. "It was a one-hour business luncheon, and people were expecting to sit back and and take a few notes, but not to be part of the presentation themselves," he says. "They were expecting a one-way information flow, so in their minds, that fine line was violated."

Indeed, the use of involvement techniques when the expectation is for an uninterrupted "information dump" risks killing momentum and distracting the presenter as well as the audience, says Jerry Cahn, an executive with Presentation Excellence, a presentation-skills training company in New York City. "If you're delivering a 30-minute Webinar to portfolio managers, analysts and the financial community, they want to hear your company's whole financial story in one fell swoop, not be stopped frequently to answer questions," he says.

Thiagi knows that how audiences view his games and simulations varies depending, in part, on their occupations and cultures. The games engineers prefer are often different from those that appeal to social workers, and audiences in Japan will react differently to a particular tactic than those in Australia. To account for these differences, Thiagi has a dozen or more modifications for any exercise he uses - to increase or decrease the level of competition, to modify the level of self-disclosure, physical movement, cognitive complexity and other factors.

You may not want to go that far, but it's worth putting some audience-participation tactics into your bag of presentation tricks. How successful you are in using those techniques to enliven and improve your presentations is limited only by your forethought and creativity. A heightened awareness of the power of involvement to elevate the humdrum to the memorable - and the skill to make it happen - will go a long way toward making your sessions more enriching and valuable for everyone.

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