

The Making of...

***EFFECTIVE
EXTENSION
PRESENTATIONS***



Improving Communication Skills with Facts, Flair, and Fun

~ The Making of ~
Effective Extension Presentations

Improving Communication Skills with Facts, Flair, and Fun

Fred Whitford, Coordinator, Purdue Pesticide Programs

Gail Ruhl, Senior Plant Disease Diagnostician, Plant and Pest Diagnostic Lab

Kendall Martin, 4-H Youth Development Extension Educator, Dubois County

Mary Ann Lienhart-Cross, Consumer and Family Sciences Extension Educator, Elkhart County

Bob Nielsen, Extension Agronomist, Purdue University

Greg Bossaer, Agriculture and Natural Resources County Extension Educator, White County

Arlene Blessing, Editor and Designer, Purdue Pesticide Programs

Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Personal and Professional Reputations Linked to Presentations	11
You Can Choose to Improve Your Presentation Skills	12
Catering to a Unique Audience: the Adult Learner	14
Successful Presentations Incorporate the E's of Extension	18
Gathering the Facts	28
Organizing the Presentation	35
Just Before You Go On	54
Delivering the Presentation	60
Reflections by the Extension Presenter	78
Taking Stock of Yourself as a Speaker	84
Conclusion: We Dream a Better Life for Them	90
Acknowledgments	94



Introduction

The Cooperative Extension Service “extends” information and educational opportunities beyond the land-grant university classroom. We take knowledge to the people in our communities — knowledge generated through the land-grant university system. Extension professionals educate by blending research-based information with practical experience acquired by working with clientele on their farms and in their homes and businesses: through personal contact, phone conversations, correspondence, and site visits. E-mail, the Internet, radio and television, podcasts, streaming video, printed materials, and presentations complement our ability to reach the people.

Extension presentations by university-based and regional specialists, county field staff, and program volunteers represent an important function of the Extension Service. Extension speakers deliver information tailored to specific audiences, offering instruction on agriculture and natural resources, consumer and family sciences, youth development, economic and community development, leadership, and myriad other research-based topics.

Pag 6, top: C. W. Carrick conducting poultry culling demonstration.

Page 6, center: Cattle growers' meeting.

Page 6, bottom: Farm management school.

Right: 4-H club boys are taught the difference between harmless shrubs and economically dangerous plants.



As an extension professional, you act as an extension cord between the research-based university and your clientele, delivering both power and knowledge. Successful programs and presentations allow you to shine and to enlighten your audience. This publication offers tips from experienced extension professionals, tips that can be used at all levels of Extension. The authors' primary goal in sharing their experience is to help you become a powerful extension presenter with the ability to influence others to act on the information you present.

The success of an extension presentation, whether to a small group or an audience of hundreds, is strongly influenced by the speaker's ability to connect with the audience. A successful presentation is not solely dependent on the speaker's subject or his knowledge of the subject. Watch closely and you will see that certain successful speakers connect with their audience, even before the program, by shaking hands and talking with them. Once in front of a group, these speakers often reveal a presentation style and personality that captivate the audience. They may encourage the audience to answer questions and to feel comfortable in disagreeing with them, and also to ask their own questions; usually the audience remains good-natured and attentive throughout these presentations. The audience and this type of speaker may engage in a friendly exchange, each educating the other.



Right: Home canning demonstration.



Consider this scenario. An extension program features three different presenters. The first speaker's infectious excitement and his passion for sharing his subject matter totally capture the audience. They're motivated. They're participating actively and enjoying themselves. And all you can think is how glad you are not to be the one scheduled to follow him!

The next speaker knows her subject well but lacks the passion, charisma, and mannerisms of the first speaker. She forewarns her audience that she has more material to cover than time will allow: an ominous sign, and she caps it with, "Please hold your questions until the end." You watch the audience — just minutes before, engaged and motivated — become disengaged and passive. You witness "Dead Speaker Walking."

The third speaker barely takes time to breathe between sentences, talking nonstop for his entire allotted time. With no openings for questions, the audience watches restlessly as one Power Point slide with graphs is replaced by another with data tables, over and over and over. The speaker says, "I know you can't read these, but if you could you would see...." His laser pointer shines on specific sections of the graphs and charts, with little effect. As he drones on, members of the audience exit to get some fresh air, make a phone call, or go to the rest room. There is yawning going on, newspapers being read. A few people are nodding off; others are out cold with their heads on the table. Only the tough of mind and spirit manage to sit through the brutal ordeal, glancing at their watches and uttering a silent prayer for the end to come. When the speaker says, "In conclusion," those who are still conscious clap loudly to speed things along.

During the lunch break, some of the attendees tell the extension program sponsor just how much they appreciated the first speaker's enthusiasm, humor, and knowledge. They go on to say that the presentation was meaningful and that the speaker held their attention with facts, flair, and fun. A few mention that some of the other presenters should take a lesson from the first speaker on how to deliver a presentation and how to package information that can be understood.

Personal and Professional Reputations Linked to Presentations

As extension professionals and volunteers, you put your reputation on the line every time you give a presentation. The audience attaches a face to your name and to the subject; and a good presentation may incite them to pay more attention to Web pages, newsletters, or radio broadcasts associated with your name. An inspiring presentation may encourage individuals to seek additional resources from Extension, or to call or e-mail you with follow-up questions.

An insightful presentation adds to the prestige and reputation of the organization that invites you to speak; a county extension program, a government agency, or a trade association can be positively impacted by your good performance. And you will be invited back. Conversely, a poor presentation may make it difficult for the sponsor to attract an audience for a future program.



Never forget that the reputation of your land-grant university is on the line along with your own whenever and wherever you speak. You are an extension of the university, and your performance is, in effect, a public relations activity. If you perform well, the university, by association, also performs well.



You Can Choose to Improve Your Presentation Skills

People are naturally attracted to programs that provide useful information in an enjoyable format. Most oral presentations include information that is also available in print, and a ho-hum presentation tells the audience that their time would have been better spent reading a publication on the subject. A good presentation should bring the written word to life:

- Personalize your presentation.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter.
- Display your passion for the subject.
- Assemble your information to make a difference in the lives of your audience.



Delivering a presentation that others will remember is within the grasp of every extension educator. Unfortunately, there are no preset rules or guidelines to make you a more effective communicator. You must acquire the skills and aspire to improve.

As you implement positive changes, you will sense audiences reacting more favorably; as they connect with you, they will absorb your message. A few small steps taken to improve your communication skills will become huge leaps as your presentations become more audience-friendly, more polished, and more effective in enticing the audience to change certain behaviors.



Catering to a Unique Audience: the Adult Learner

Teaching adults is anything but easy; it can be a daunting task. But in spite of the challenges, winning an audience is invigorating and rewarding. Winning a difficult audience means building their trust to the extent that they recognize you as a passionate, informative speaker with an important message to impart.

Identifying characteristics of adult learners is a first step; following are some examples:

- Adults understand that education is an important way of improving their personal lives, their careers, their business ventures, and their recreational pursuits.
- They have access to many sources of information in addition to Extension.
- Their education ranges from school dropout to those with advanced college degrees.
- Adults are most concerned with practicality and usefulness.
- They need to be convinced that something is important before they will open their minds to learning about it.
- They have a wealth of life experiences that influence what they are willing to learn.
- They respond differently to various presentation methods; what works for one person may not work for another.
- They will ask tough questions, especially when they interpret something to be different from what they had believed or from what someone else has told them.
- They will lose interest when a speaker rambles, becomes repetitious, or is not prepared.
- Each person is unique in what he “wants” to learn.



This is a formidable list, but the wall separating the speaker and the audience can be broken down, brick by brick. It can be penetrated when you package your knowledge and conviction into a well prepared presentation powered by passion, energy, and joy. First of all, it is critical to be honest and to believe in the message you deliver. Your sincerity will allow people to let down their guard and become more naturally attentive. A positive approach is essential, regardless of the subject matter; and you must deliver a presentation that is both informative and fun for the audience.



Extension is storytelling at its best. We are always trying to introduce new concepts and new information to our audiences. And we agree that communicating effectively is a difficult task.

It would be easy for us extension educators to read from the extension storybook, word for word. But without energy our words leave the audience with glazed eyes, drooping eyelids, and nodding heads. Storytelling without excitement imparts words with no meaning. Our words, chapter by chapter, have to paint the picture that we're trying to convey. And at the end of the story we must deliver the moral — the punch line — to bring it home to the audience. If we can make our audience hear, feel, and see our story, the seeds we plant today will germinate tomorrow into ideas that grow.

*Think for a moment how many new ideas the following presenters are able to get across to their audiences. There's the one behind the podium who never looks up as he reads every word of a prepared script. There's the speaker who turns her back to the audience to read each slide, and the one who reads from an overhead with words so small that even those in the front row can't make them out. Better yet, there's the guy who stretches his 45-minute presentation to 60 minutes without ever giving the audience a chance to ask questions. Finally, there's the person who answers the question, *Does 1 + 1 equal 2?* by saying "it all depends." Dullsville. Anybody can talk, but few can teach.*

Young children hearing books read to them for the first time do not instantly memorize words, pages, and pictures, nor do they grasp every new idea and concept. But in time children begin to mouth the words, point to the pictures, and name the characters out loud. It's our opinion that adults learn the same way. Issues need to be discussed repeatedly as information is added to their book of knowledge, bit by bit, chapter by chapter. The more we bring up the subject, the more they learn.

So it is still our opinion that Extension and entertainment have more in common than the letter "e." Having fun with the facts means entertaining our audiences so that they recognize the relevancy of our words to their own lives. Extension can succeed if we employ the same teaching methods that our mothers used on us: facts and energy intertwined as a story.

Speaking to the Individual in the Audience

As an extension professional, you must connect with people. Speaking to an audience may be easy, but communicating with individuals within a group can be a challenge.

Your audience needs to know that you are speaking directly to them. Each person, knowingly or unknowingly, comes to a program with an invisible brick wall around himself. Specific bricks in the wall might represent personality, life experiences, personal interests, educational level, work experience, etc. Each brick can be a distraction that prevents the listener from engaging with you. This wall between you and the listener can limit communication and learning.

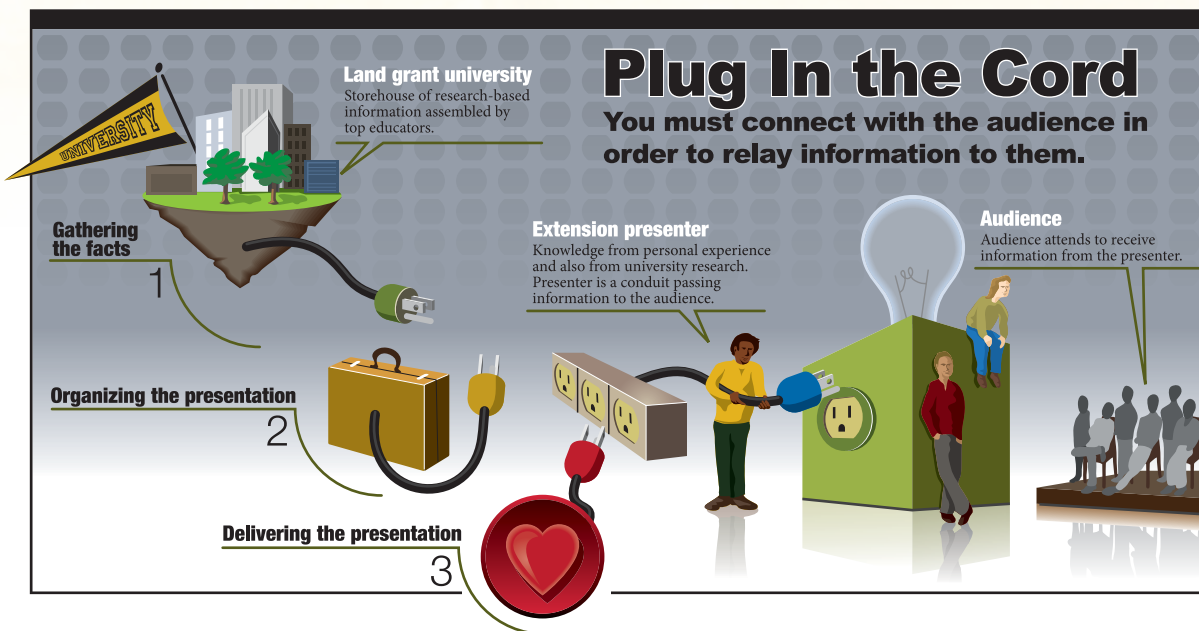
Don't let the wall become an insurmountable barrier between yourself and your audience. Work at being aware of the weak points in all walls. You can then probe, penetrate, and create presentations that are effective, on-target, creative, and energetic. As long as you can keep the listeners engaged, you can generate the intellectual energy to keep the light bulbs burning bright. Breaking down the communication barriers and making a connection with each person propels you toward becoming an effective, motivational, and educational presenter.



Successful Presentations Incorporate the E's of Extension

We often talk about doing extension outreach via new technologies such as the Internet. These technological advances in programming are convenient, but personal, face-to-face conversations are still cited as the most effective form of communication. The bottom line is this: there is still something wonderful about people getting together to learn.

Think about people that rank high on your list of noteworthy speakers — a teacher in elementary or high school, a college professor, a pastor, a coach, or an extension colleague. What was so special about their delivery that left such a lasting impression on you? What are the common threads that connect successful speakers?



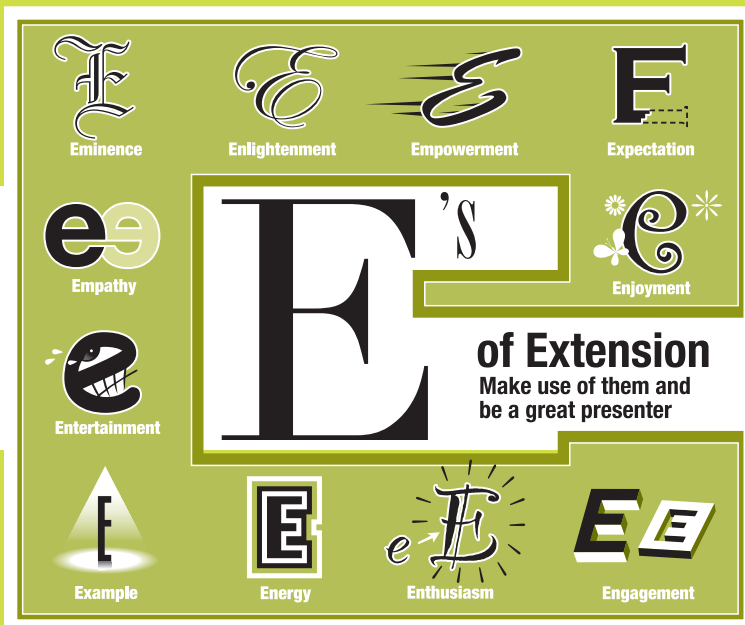
Memorable speakers have special qualities that are difficult to describe but easily remembered. These qualities are linked to what successful extension educators term the “extension gene,” which marks human behaviors and personalities that relate well to most audiences. Think about the last time you were in an interview for a campus or county extension position. Most likely it took you only a few minutes to sense whether the person being interviewed had what it takes to succeed in Extension. One might wager that the hiring decision was based not so much on the person’s technical abilities as on her voice, confidence level, mannerisms, body language, presence, sincerity, humility, humor, personality, and attitude. These qualities make listening, learning, and reacting to the message more enjoyable.

In general, audiences assess a speaker within minutes after a presentation begins. Negative impressions formed during the first few minutes may deter listeners’ attention, keeping them from getting the message. Conversely, audiences that feel at ease with the speaker are easier to engage.



Successful delivery of information, i.e., effective communication, is based on more than an understanding of adult education theory and learning abilities. Good speakers, in general, appreciate the experience and unique qualities of each audience. Although the mannerisms and delivery styles of good speakers may differ, they share certain similarities as communicators.

Highly regarded extension speakers share the elements of successful communication: the “E’s of Extension.” The eleven E’s define the essence of what audiences hope to see, hear, and feel when listening to a speaker. The more E’s of Extension you can incorporate into your presentation, the more effective you will become as a presenter.



1. Eminence — exhibit personal strength

Believe in yourself. Develop and maintain confidence in your knowledge and skills and in the information you put forth. Approach every presentation with the self-assurance that you will deliver a home run performance by providing worthwhile information.



2. Enlightenment — present information in an understandable manner

Present the facts so they are understandable and relevant. There is a limit to how much information a person can retain at any one sitting, and once it's reached, nothing else registers. Present the most important information first and proceed in an organized, sensible fashion similar to reading a book one chapter at a time. Conclude your presentation by re-emphasizing the most important information as the take-home message.



3. Empowerment — present a meaningful message

If you can't establish the importance and relevance of the message, then why be there? Don't waste people's time! Say something that really affects your audience and makes a difference in their lives. An extension speaker has to be credible, factual and honest. You have to make sure your audience understands the relevance of your topic to their own lives. It is critical for the audience to engage with you and embrace the importance of the topic. And, when you finish, the audience will acknowledge that it was worthwhile to attend your presentation.



4. Expectation — explain what you want the audience to do

Clearly define to the audience what they can do with the information presented; that is, what you expect of them. The very reason we want to be good communicators is so individuals can apply the information we present. The audience needs to hear you say in your own words, “If you follow the information I am giving you, I can assure you there will be positive results.” In essence, it becomes a personalized sales pitch for change.



5. Enjoyment — exhibit a passion for the topic you present

Good extension presenters enjoy seeing people expand their horizons through learning opportunities. Audiences sense your passion for what you do and your desire to make a difference in their lives.



6. Engagement — initiate participation

Speakers that interact with and speak directly to their audiences are more apt to hold their attention and induce a response, whereas speakers who address their audiences from beginning to end elicit marginable feedback, if any. An active participant learns more readily, remembers more, and feels better about the information being presented. Engagement is an audience's expression of confidence in you; they appreciate your

personal touch. And their feedback helps you gauge what they are learning and how they most likely will apply the information presented. More importantly, interaction with the audience helps you clarify information.

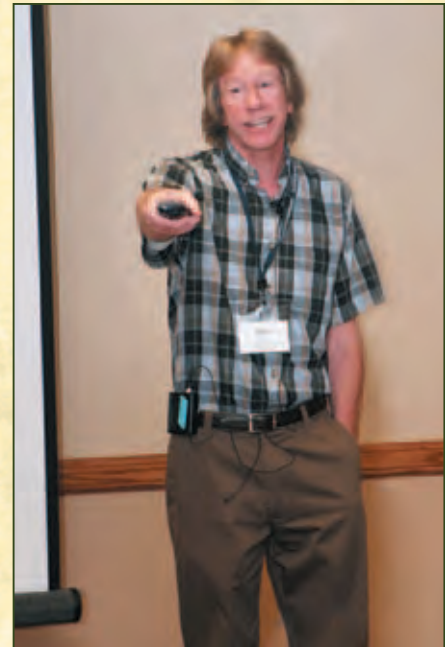


7. Enthusiasm — give them a rush of passion

People enjoy a speaker with a gleam in his eye, a smile on his face, and excitement in his voice. Facial expressions and voice inflection reflect our emotion, which is clearly interpreted by the audience. If you present a good message with enthusiasm, the audience will grasp it. Enthusiasm is contagious!



Photo courtesy of the Foundation for Arable Research, New Zealand.



8. Energy — keep the audience engaged with the program

Energy can be described as animation, body language, and nonverbal communication emanating from an enthusiastic speaker. You are basically taking your enthusiasm for the subject matter and energizing it with your gestures, voice, and posture. Your energy keeps the audience engaged.

9. Example — it's show and tell

We all love the show-and-tell approach to education. It's easy to get excited by, "Look what I have to show you! Is this cool or what?" Show-and-tell engages the audience; it makes presentations easier and more enjoyable. Using objects or stories for emphasis gives life to your presentation and increases the likelihood that the audience will remember it.



10. Entertainment — lift the spirits with laughter

Subtle humor — whether you're a novice speaker or a seasoned veteran at the top of your game — can perk up an audience. An entertaining presentation helps the audience stay focused. Use humor generated by a comment from the audience, or tell funny stories about yourself to keep audiences fresh and attentive. Humor helps create the persona of a knowledgeable friend who is trying to help, rather than the know-it-all expert lecturer. Creative, funny anecdotes that relate to the topic can be great openers to set the tone and reel in the audience.



11. Empathy — care enough to let them know

Empathy is an ability to put yourself in someone else’s situation, trying as hard as you can to understand the challenges and frustrations they face. People need to know that you’ve been there, and that your experience, advice, and recommendations come from having walked in their shoes. The ability to express empathy is one of the most important criteria for becoming an effective presenter.

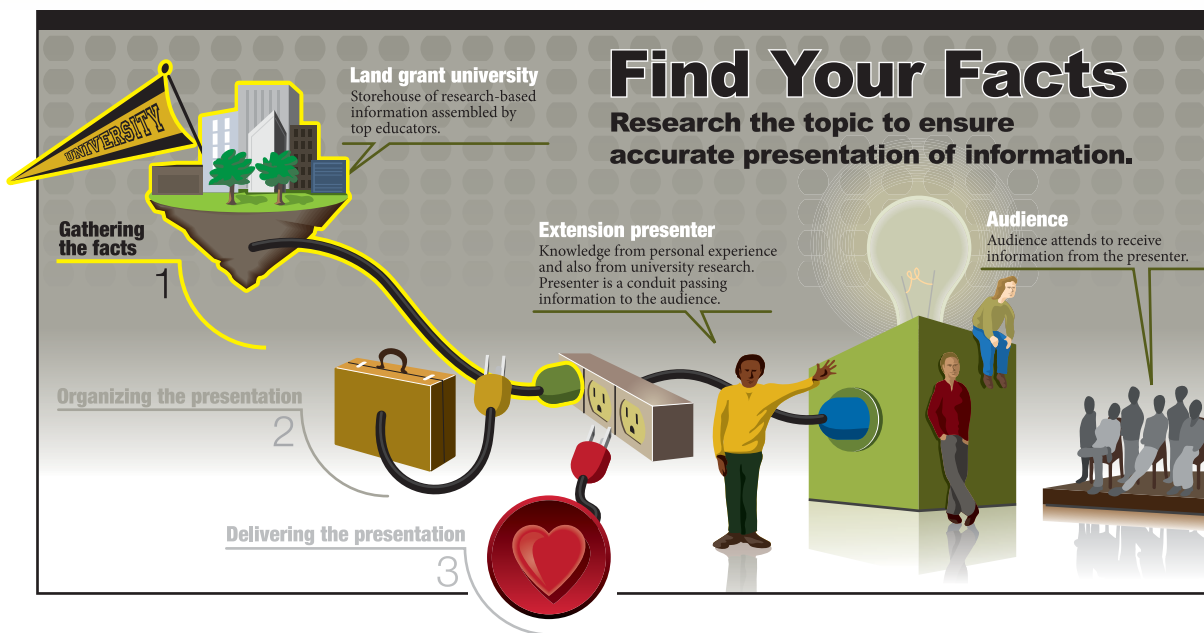


Do the E’s of Extension actually have practical consequences? Listen to a speaker who is in demand on the extension circuit and see if you can detect her incorporation of the “Es of Extension” into each program. If you incorporate them, too, you will increase the probability that your audience will *hear* your message, *understand* your message, and *act* on it.

Gathering the Facts

Audiences quickly separate those who know from those who pretend to know. They can tell if you are unprepared. A lack of confidence in your subject area breeds disorganization, and disorganization screams a lack of confidence. This is not the impression you want to make.

Charm may serve you for a few minutes, but after that you must demonstrate knowledge of the subject and engage the audience. It's important to remember that "flash without substance" leads to disastrous consequences. Your challenge is to connect, provide solid information, and make grounded recommendations that make the audience glad they came.



Apply Education and Experience

Science provides a basis for all extension presentations; however, audiences expect extension professionals to bring practical experience that puts science into real-world focus. It is very difficult for an audience to relate to a speaker who cannot blend research and personal experience into a presentation. For example, if you're presenting a class on food preservation, it would be helpful to actually follow the steps and preserve a food prior to speaking on the topic. You need to conceptualize the step-by-step process and experience the challenges and details that others face when they take your message home.



Your information and recommendations are greatly enhanced when you combine experience with science. By walking in the shoes of your audience, you gain new perspectives that can't be gained from books. This blending of science and real-life bolsters your credibility.

There are a number of ways to gain experience that will add to your credibility as a presenter:

- Get involved with research, especially if it is on a scale that closely mimics the real world.
- Perform the task on your own.
- Shadow someone who's successful.
- Watch others do the work at a field day or workshop.
- Ask others to tell you about their experiences.
- Learn from others by reading an extension publication and chatting with the audience.



Try devoting some time to getting hands-on experience on the subject matter before preparing your presentation. This will allow you to connect with your audience from a practical standpoint.





You'll be able to reference things you learned and observed, letting them know that you've been there, done that. Similarly, you can relate any failures, mistakes, or disappointments that occurred. The audience will appreciate the realization that you've faced some of the same challenges they encounter, making your presentation more relevant to them. Something as simple as mentioning that your research plots were destroyed by floodwaters represents a shared experience; but always remember that personal consequences (theirs) are much more important to the audience than those that carry no out-of-pocket monetary impact (yours).



Use the Extension Connection to Do Your Homework

Whether you are a new hire or a seasoned veteran, extension publications can bring understanding to the subject because they are research-based and written by trained extension experts. Their content represents the consensus of the mainstream community, not advocates to the left or right of the issue.



Read the Trade Press

There seems to be a magazine or newsletter for every imaginable group. Magazines written for your audience provide important information on current issues and practices. Reading the trade press helps you gain the organization's perspective, and often you can anticipate the questions that an audience might pose. These publications will help you understand what's important to your audience.

Build and Use a Personal Network of Contacts

You've gathered the facts for your presentation, but you need a sounding board to see if you are on track. Consider calling the people you know to be the leading indicators for their profession. These people — working at universities or in private practice, not-for-profit organizations, and government agencies — are very important to those of us in Extension. We can share our thoughts and opinions with them without fear of being ridiculed, and we know they will offer an honest opinion, not just what we want to hear.

Your personal contacts may listen from a different perspective, maybe with a different focus, and point out where you might want to clarify a point. They may say, "You can say it like that, but if you explained it this way, you could clarify it better for your audience." They might even indicate that the presentation covers too much information and suggest cutting areas of least importance.

Ask for business cards from individuals whom you know to be credible sources of information. Maintain the discipline to write on the card exactly where you met each person and the topic or presentation that interested you. Before you know it, these cards will multiply into your own personal library of excellent sources of timely, accurate information.

Scout the Audience in Advance

One excellent way to anticipate audience questions and reactions is to talk with someone who will be in the audience; ask the program sponsor for phone numbers of key individuals who will be attending your program. Prior contact is especially useful when you are unfamiliar with the group or if you are uncomfortable with some aspect of the presentation.

Give your contacts a copy of the presentation and ask them to review it. Wait a day or two, then contact them in person or by phone or e-mail. Ask them if the subject matter seems clear, concise, and on the mark. Will it meet the expectations of the participants? Let these individuals help you identify points that you may be asked to address during the program, especially questions that you may not anticipate. Get permission to call on them during the program if you need assistance answering a question. Return the favor by mentioning the person's name during the presentation. This will give you credibility based on the respect that the individual has developed among his peers.

Don't Be Arrogant

There's no doubt that you walk a tightrope when it comes to having a firm grasp of the subject matter and deciding what and how much to include in your presentation. The best speakers work diligently not to be viewed as "experts." At the very least, you don't want to be perceived as the high and mighty extension educator from the great land-grant university who has come down from the mountain to share his knowledge with the common folk.

Rather, you want to be perceived as a very likable person with relevant information to share. Someone is likely to take a potshot at you; that is, to pose a question you can't answer, just to prove you are not the expert. If so, don't hesitate to answer like this:

- "That is a great question, but I don't know the answer. Maybe someone else knows the answer."
- "That's a great question. I don't know the answer but let me write it down and I will do some research and get back to you."

You surely don't want to pretend that you are the expert. Never mislead an audience by making something up. Not even the best have all the answers!

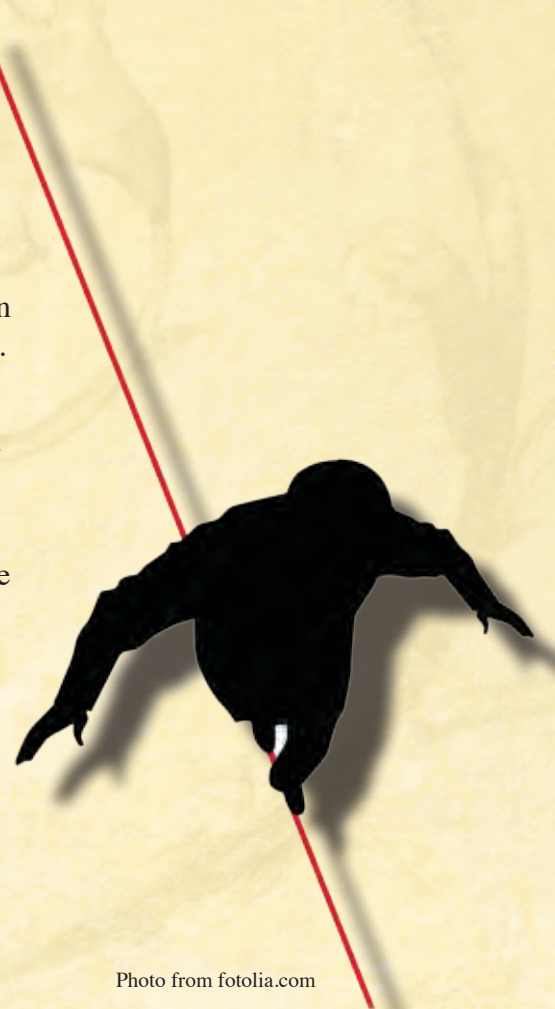
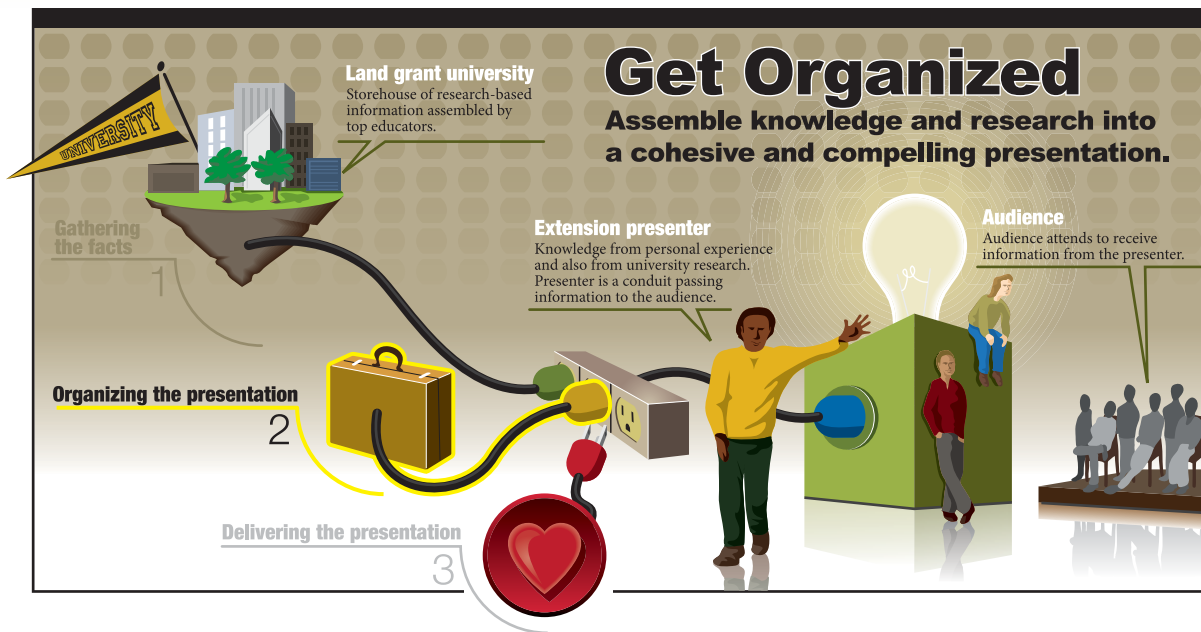


Photo from fotolia.com

Organizing the Presentation

It is difficult to change a behavior. But that's precisely what we in Extension are asking others to do. So, in addition to knowing our subject, we must shape the information into a logical, organized package: one that allows our audience to grasp why change is important in their lives. We must strive to communicate effectively in Extension.



Build the Information Bridge

Your preparation is the blueprint for an information bridge between yourself and the audience. Your personal touch entices people to go with you across of the bridge. You want to build an easy-to-follow information path, encouraging people to listen and learn — and to practice what they learn. Lay a path that will allow the audience to assimilate the facts into a cohesive and understandable story.

Organize your presentation to make it easy for your audience to follow you across the information bridge; you'll need logical, progressive steps: a beginning, a middle, and an end. During the presentation, entice the audience to progress from one side of the bridge to the other, carrying new knowledge, information, and skills that they can put to use.



Link the Facts to Real Life

A master educator uses relevant stories to help audiences better understand or recall information; that is, to direct their focus on the material being presented. If they remember the story, they'll remember the message. New facts are most effective when accompanied by examples that link them to the learner's current knowledge. These examples place new, unfamiliar concepts into areas of the brain where old, familiar concepts are categorized and stored; easily understood examples form the bridge to learning. The best way for individuals to remember the information you present is to relate that information to real world situations. This helps place the facts in perspective. Give examples that help illustrate why the issue is important, and ask the audience for more examples.



Simplify the Facts

Most of our clients are intelligent people capable of comprehending our message, but it behooves us to keep things simple and concise: to provide just the right amount of information. You've probably met the person who, when asked what time it is, tells you how to build a watch. Don't burden your audience with too much information. Instead, condense your topic to hold their interest, and use handouts that they can read later. A farmer once said, "Tell me enough to pique my interest. If I want to know more, I will ask or I will go look up the information for myself."



The focus of the extension presentation should be on the needs of the adult learner, not how much you know. Too much information leaves the audience confused; we want only to whet their appetite, to entice them to keep coming back. In real estate, it's location, location, location. In Extension, it's focus, focus, focus.

There are three primary questions to ask yourself when building a presentation:

- What information is necessary to make sense of the subject?
- What is the best way to package the facts to make them understandable?
- What are the take-home messages?

How can the subject matter be presented in a simple, organized manner? Even the most technical of subjects can be broken down into understandable pieces. Use analogies to help the listener understand complex concepts. For example, "Elongation of the internodes of a corn stalk lengthens the entire corn stalk, somewhat like the elongating sections of a telescope lengthen the entire telescope." Simplifying the facts boosts audience comprehension; and, in turn, you'll come across as someone who knows what he's talking about. But if you bewilder the audience with technical jargon and lengthy explanations, you'll leave them confused; and they'll remember you as the person who talked a lot but didn't say anything! Make sure your message can be understood; this is the real value of education. It's not being able to win *Jeopardy* by recalling facts. It's simply being able to apply information in a useful manner.

Know More than You Share

It helps to know more than you will be sharing with the crowd during any presentation. Do some extra reading and gather background information from credible sources to broaden your understanding of the subject. This will give you more confidence and expand your ability to offer informed answers to questions that arise. There is a fine line between being knowledgeable and being the expert.

Don't Be a Thesaurus Babbling

Most listeners appreciate the plain-spoken, easy to understand word. Using big words can actually turn off an audience by making them feel stupid or by giving the impression that you are talking down to them. And there is the issue of their understanding what you are saying; if they have to guess at the meaning of your words, they lose interest. Keep your presentation plain and simple; the ability to do so marks the true communicator.

Change Behaviors with Key Messages

We hope that audiences remember all of the information that we impart; unfortunately, that is not how it works. But there is no reason why we cannot help our audiences remember some key, take-home messages. What is it that you want the audience to remember? Limit what you say and focus on the take-home messages; at the end of the presentation, summarize your topic into three to five key points.

Provide handouts. Many extension audiences would rather listen than write. What this means is that a presentation can be educational, enlightening, enchanting, and entertaining, but without supplemental material the take-home messages may not make the trip! Announce that



everything you are going to say is in the handouts. Tell them they can read the handouts later. This places significance on your handout material and frees up the audience to concentrate on your message rather than getting two steps behind, trying to take notes. Handout materials supplement the presentation. Include details, citations, and statistics in the handout, but let the pictures tell the story during your presentation.

Fill-in-the-blank documents and single-page bulleted items can capture and hold participants' attention. For example, you can point out specific items in the publication by having them turn to a page. You may ask the audience to fill in the blanks for key points you want them to remember.



Include your phone number, e-mail address, or Web page address on your handout so people can follow up with you, later, if they want to. If you hand out a publication that does not list your name and phone number, ask the audience to write them on the document. Make a point to tell the audience that you are more than willing to discuss their specific questions. Once again, this step will increase your credibility as a reliable source of information. Use hand-outs or provide a Web site where the audience can reference additional information.

The bottom line is that you can cover a tremendous amount of material that will never be digested. Your success hinges on how much of your topic the audience remembers, not how much you are able to cram into an hour. Your handouts will tell “the rest of the story,” so don’t feel like you have to include every tidbit of information in your presentation.

Use Good Visuals

You’ve heard speakers say, “I know you can’t read the graph,” and then go on to explain what the audience can’t read. Another great line is, “This is a poor picture, but I think with some imagination you can see....” Face it: time spent explaining a picture that no one can see is time wasted. Don’t use visuals that aren’t clear to the audience.

Clutter negates communication. Make your visuals clear, relevant, and on target. Edit data and use only what supports your presentation. If it’s difficult to understand, visualize, or explain, then don’t use it. Use overheads, Power Point, and video pictures to tell your story; and limit the amount of text that you include.

Tables and graphs with writing too small to read are worthless, and so are those with outdated information: what’s happened



since 2002? And why use metric measurements? How many of our constituents know the metric system? There's nothing like a red flag to tell the audience that you didn't fine-tune your presentation for them; and while you're waving it, you can watch your credibility go down the drain!

The whole point of using charts and tables is to better illustrate your key points; but the purpose is defeated if they're not readable. Try thinking "bottom line" instead. In other words, don't overdo the visuals. Audiences in general don't need massive amounts of data, just solid information that they can take home.

The use of statistics can impede learning. All of us have heard a speaker say something like, "I understand you see a difference of 20 bushels between these two herbicides, but the yield difference is insignificant." The statement assumes that the audience understands statistical analysis, because to most growers an input that creates a twenty-bushel per acre increase is a stand-up-and-take-notice result. Why present this information if the difference has no significant meaning?



Practice Your Presentation

Extension professionals spend an enormous amount of time traveling. Try practicing an upcoming presentation out loud. Visualize your teaching aids as you run through your talk. You will be able to fine-tune rough sections and give some extra thought to the major points you want to cover. It also helps to time your presentation. Just do not get so engrossed that you forget to drive defensively!

Taping your presentation allows you to hear what your audience will hear. And the time spent preparing Power Point presentations is valuable practice time as you create and recreate the slides. As you play the slide show over and over, looking for mistakes, you're actually practicing the talk, albeit subconsciously.



Match the Delivery Style to the Message

The topic often dictates the delivery style. For instance, a light-hearted, jovial style would be inappropriate if the presentation deals with technical or health-related subjects. However, if the program is aimed at stretching the family's dollar, a more personal delivery could be just right.

Use the Sound System

We've all heard speakers begin a presentation by shouting something like, "I hate microphones. Can everyone in the back hear me okay?" Most audiences will politely say they can, even if they can't hear all that well. But after a few minutes, the speaker starts forgetting to speak loudly, and hearing from the back of the room becomes difficult at best; those who have hearing deficits may not be able to tell what the speaker is saying. The result is that people are straining to hear; and straining to hear makes listening impossible!

Make it a point to use the sound system. Everyone in the audience will appreciate this simple courtesy. Although sometimes you can get by without a microphone if you walk among the audience as you talk, be aware of those with hearing difficulties.



Hold Their Attention

Perceptive speakers recognize that every audience is different. But one consistency is the need to gather the flock within the first minutes of the presentation. It can make the difference between engaging and losing an audience. The more time you give them to start thinking about what they are going to do after the meeting, or where they need to go, and what they could have gotten done had they not come, the less they will concentrate on you and your message.

Learning requires focus, so grab the audience's attention right from the beginning. Do everything within your power to engage them. Use lead-ins such as "Why do I need this?" or "Here are the key points."

Asking questions at the beginning of the presentation is a technique that helps focus attention on the subject and yourself. Use "Have you...?" questions where yes or no responses, coupled with a few stories, create a dialogue that will begin to build the information bridge between you and them. Another opening comment speakers often use is, "There seems to be a lot of interest in this topic, so I'm here to tell you more about it." You could also say, "Why do you think there is so much interest in this subject?" The quicker you can answer the "why" behind the message, the more likely the message will capture their attention.



Take Questions Now

The individual with a question is obviously listening to you. You've said something that captured her attention and piqued her interest, and by interrupting your presentation she is providing you a teachable moment. It makes sense to answer the question, then, instead of waiting till you finish speaking. In some cases, answering the question helps the audience understand the rest of your presentation. Sometimes, though, the questioner raises an issue that you know will be coming up shortly. Sometimes the question is so much on cue it's as if you planted it in the audience so that your very next visual answers the question. Don't hesitate in this instance to say, "Great question and I have a slide coming up that will provide the answer."



When you are explaining a step-by-step process, allow your audience to ask questions as you go. Think of it in the context of teaching math: your student has to learn addition and subtraction before he can comprehend multiplication and division. If he has a question about addition, he needs your response before proceeding to multiplication. If someone in your audience has a question on step one, answer it before advancing; otherwise, you may lose that individual and perhaps others in the audience. Conversely, if you wait until the end of your presentation to answer early questions, it not only detracts from your message but often causes you to have to repeat each step of the explanation.

Comments and questions from the audience reflect what they are thinking, so learn to judge whether they are grasping your message. If you feel they are not getting it, alter your presentation accordingly. Try stating the information differently or adding to the explanation. The process will benefit everyone in attendance and increase the overall level of retention.

Answering questions during a presentation is a very effective communication strategy, but it eats up time; so if you enjoy pausing to take questions, allow for them. Pre-plan your talk so you can get your point across, taking questions as you go; use a good handout to which you can refer the audience for additional answers and information.



If You Don't Know, You Don't Know

Never try to answer the question if you don't know the answer. A newly hired extension educator learned a hard lesson by answering a question incorrectly. The question was posed by a farmer and was followed by a second and third question from two more farmers. After answering the first two, the speaker told the third grower that he did not know the answer to his question, at which point the first farmer asked whether he was sure of the answer he had given to the original question. The specialist was forced to admit that he was not. It was an embarrassing moment.



Extension educators and specialists are not expected to know the answer to every question posed to them. Never hesitate to admit that you don't know. Instead, offer to research the issue and get back to the individual. One method that works well when faced with a question that you can't answer is to ask the audience if anyone knows. Usually, one or two people will provide a legitimate answer or at least trigger a response.

Our audiences don't need guesswork. Saying "I don't know" is a much better response than guessing. Yet another option is to say, "You know, I think I know the answer, but I'm not sure enough to hang my hat on it; let me get back to you after I make a few calls" or "I'm not exactly sure, but I know someone who will be able to help us; I want to be sure we get this answered correctly." Hand the person your business card and have them write down the question on the back of it, along with their name and telephone number. This will serve as a reminder that you need to follow up with that person. Then don't forget to do it. It's better not to offer the assistance than to offer it and not follow through. Sometimes you can answer the question by making a call right after your presentation. The person will remember forever that you went the extra mile to get him the information he needed; and you will always remember the answer. It's a win/win situation!

I Want to Be Heard

Be prepared for the person in the audience who wants to commandeer the presentation and come across as the expert. Deal with him politely, but maintain control of the situation. Don't allow anyone to steer your presentation off track. If you get questions about a point that will be covered later in the presentation, ask the individual to hold his question for a few minutes. Then be sure to get back to him at the appropriate time.

A clever way to stay on track, even when a person continually wants to interrupt, is to say, "We've heard from Bill. Are there any other thoughts on the subject?" This is a subtle hint to Bill that he has had his fifteen minutes of fame. You might have to tell a more

belligerent individual that, in the interest of time, you'll have to address his concerns during the next break or after the program. Ironically, when you speak with him one-on-one, he may tell you how much he enjoyed your presentation and apologize for disrupting it.

Stop Talking Before They Quit Listening

Speakers have more information than anybody wants to hear at one time. People have only so much attention and so much interest to devote to any one speaker. Focus on the must-know points.



Tell Them What You've Told Them

Repetition is a fundamental part of education; it's a memory tool. So begin your presentation by telling the audience what you're going to tell them. Then tell them. And conclude by telling them what you've told them. Repeating the key points ensures that they didn't get lost among myriad other comments.

Ask the Audience, “What Did You Learn?”

Your role is to lead the audience to the other side of the bridge and then to ask what they learned along the way. Two questions will entice feedback: “What is the take-home message?” and “What one thing will you remember from this presentation?” Once you ask the first person, the rest will begin thinking what to say if you call on them. This becomes your final opportunity to connect one-on-one with the audience.



Know That When You're Finished, You're Finished

If you finish your topic and have time left, take a few final questions and thank the audience for their attention. Don't bother trying to fill the gap by talking about something else because, at this point, the audience knows you're done.

Leave Your Name Behind

Make sure your audience knows how to contact you in the future. Leave some business cards on the table; point out that your Web site is listed on the handouts; make a Power Point slide showing

your personal contact information. If you distribute a publication that you authored, suggest that they write your phone number next to your name. If you are not an author, ask them to write your name and phone number above the list of authors; or provide a label with your personal information on it. Better yet, have your business card made into a magnet. People tend to lose paper, but they will put a magnet on the refrigerator!

Plan a Little Extra Time

Answering questions after the program shows the audience that you are approachable. As people watch you work with an individual, they see that you are willing to work one-on-one and that you're more than a speaker: you're genuine.

Some people aren't comfortable asking questions in front of a group; others may want to discuss a sensitive topic that they would rather others not hear. Private conversations with these folks give you an opportunity to offer a nonthreatening opinion on their specific situation. And they will remember that you took time after your presentation to have a discussion with them.



Just Before You Go On

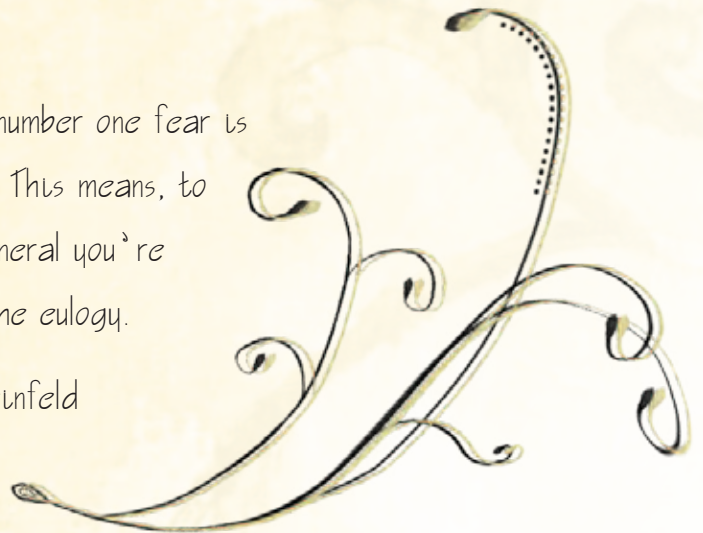
What happens mentally in the minutes prior to being called as the next speaker is just as important as delivering the presentation. Success — and, unfortunately, failure — can take place moments before you are introduced.

Believe in Yourself

You have given a great deal of thought to your presentation and the take-home messages you want the audience to remember. You've done your homework, so be confident. Believe in yourself, your preparation, your desire to help, and your talent. And never forget that most people in the audience would never want to trade places with you!

According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Death is number two. This means, to the average person, if you go to a funeral you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.

— Jerry Seinfeld



Be Yourself

Each speaker has his own comfort level, techniques, and style; that is, his own way of making his point understood. So you must identify your own strengths, then capitalize on them. Once you recognize your own talents and use them to your advantage, your presentations will begin to reflect your passion for the subject.

The Show Must Go On

As speakers, we have an obligation to those who come to listen and learn from our presentation. We could be having a bad day or a long week, but that's irrelevant; we have to give it our best. Being tired is not an option, nor is it an excuse. After all, we expect this much from our audience. We expect them to find a place to sit — or stand, if it's a field day. We expect them to give us their full attention, even if they're tired and crabby, and they expect the same from us. When speaking, give it your all. The good news is that if you believe in yourself as an educator, the very act of going on with the show can lift you out of your doldrums.



Photo courtesy of the Foundation for Arable Research, New Zealand

Being a Little Nervous is Okay

It's natural, even for experienced presenters, to be slightly nervous when addressing an audience. Outwardly, most veterans seem calm; but internally they may feel anything but relaxed. A slight case of the nerves can stimulate extra adrenaline that gives you the gusto to deliver your talk with enthusiasm and passion. This is important because, without it, your delivery would be more robotic. Your nervousness will not be noticed by the audience — so don't tell them — and soon after you begin, you will settle into your comfort zone. If the day comes that you no longer feel somewhat anxious before a presentation, consider it a sign of complacency and take the time to reassess your program delivery.



It's hard to always keep the fuel tank filled and the battery charged. And when we run out of steam, the road seems longer, the day shorter, and the paper pile taller. But it's when we're bone-tired that we ask some pretty tough questions of ourselves: What good am I doing? Is anyone listening?

We would argue that these times are important because they make us focus on ourselves instead of programs and clients. Such reflection always takes us back to why we wanted an extension career in the first place: we just enjoy working with people.

But knowing what we like about our job doesn't fill the tank or recharge the battery. For us, it's a compliment here and there that adds the fuel. Nice words that over a period of a few weeks transform us from a doubting Thomas to a let-me-at-'em educator.

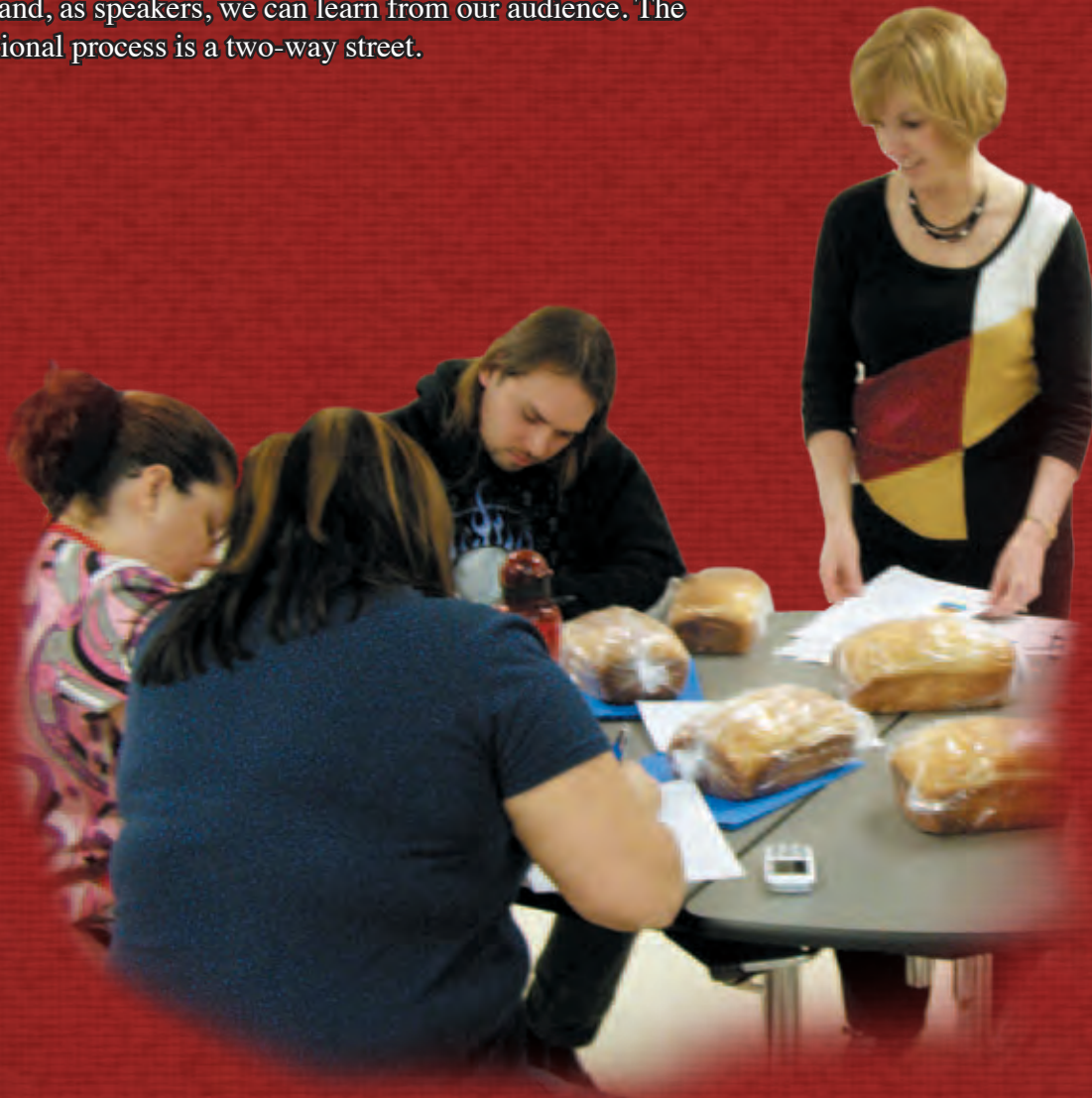
It's a charged battery that gets us moving. Our battery is recharged by countless hand shakes and smiles that we are lucky enough to get from audiences and colleaues. We get charged when people tell us they come to our programs because we speak their language and provie common sense solutions to their problems.

All of a sudden the line seems shorter, the road less traveled, and the pile of paper less threaening. We put the pedal to the metal and get to the next business or educational program because the problem no longer seems so great that we can't somehow solve it or make it better. Extension is on the loose with a full tank of gas and a brand new battery!

Every Person Can Learn

It's easy to misjudge people in your audience; and the minute you start judging someone or guessing at their level of expertise, your ability to connect and communicate wanes.

Every presentation offers the audience an opportunity to learn; and, as speakers, we can learn from our audience. The educational process is a two-way street.



It Is Not as Important to Them as It Is to You

As speakers, we sometimes believe that what we have to say is of utmost importance to others. Don't you wish this were actually true? It has to be more important to us, because it's what we do for a living. Our goal is to engage our listeners, to draw them into the fold through our passionate delivery, to make them realize how important our message is. You have to transform apathy into appreciation and action by connecting with your audience. Direct them to the gate, have them open and walk through that gate, and watch them walk down the road. Don't give up easily; the most difficult breakthrough may be the most important.



You Will Not Hit a Home Run Every Time

The goal of education is to expand opinions and change attitudes and behaviors, but it is unrealistic to expect that your presentations will have a positive impact on everyone. Your primary challenge is to provide an atmosphere that inspires a willingness to learn. It doesn't matter how much good information you provide if those in the audience are not open to change. A willingness to learn is the responsibility of each individual; that is, an individual must be interested in making changes based on the information you present.

What factors deter the audience from the learning process?

Although you can never predict the external forces in play, nor the audience's frame of mind, the following may be contributing factors:

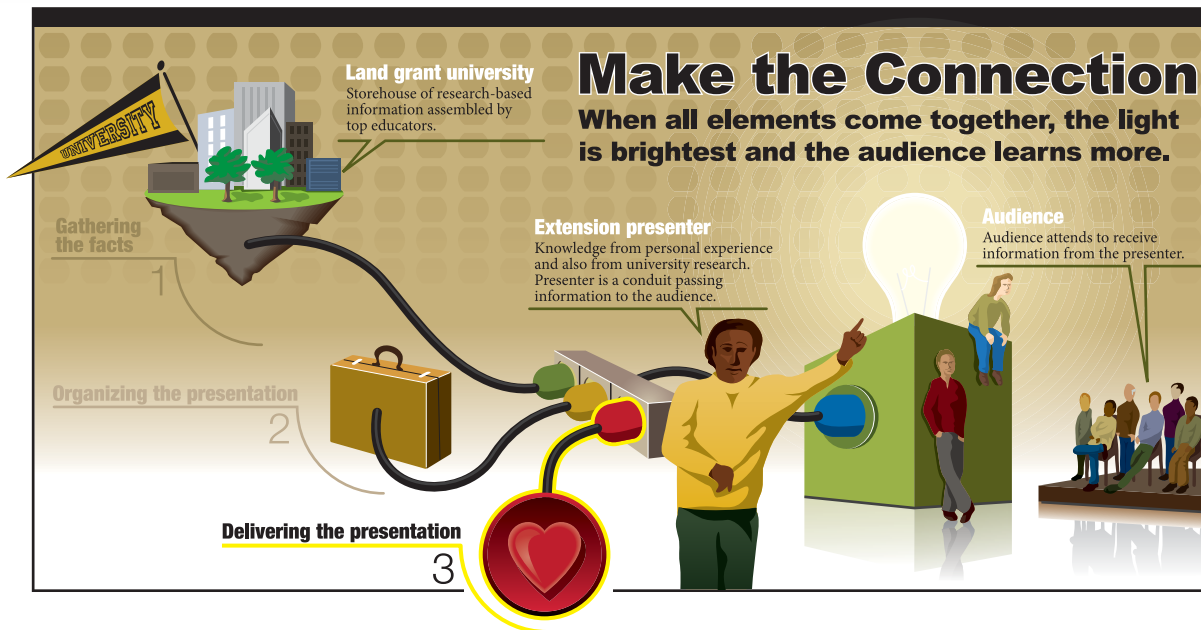
- Speakers might be off their game.
- Poor acoustics, lighting, or room temperature, and distracting noise, can reduce attention spans.
- The subject matter is of no interest to them.
- Personal problems at home or at work can greatly inhibit learning. While most people make every effort to be polite and listen, their problems can overwhelm their abilities to concentrate on the information being presented.
- The audience may be mentally and physically fatigued after a multi-day program.
- The audience may already feel versed on the subject.

Your challenge is to turn these negatives into positives. If individuals seem inattentive, strive to capture their attention and make them feel your passion; next time, they may be ready to learn. Don't adopt the attitude that if you fail to make an impact, you're not a very good speaker. Don't be satisfied that, as an extension educator, there will be another day, another time, another chance to make a splash. Your goal is to engage this audience and make them want to come back.

Delivering the Presentation

How can a program fail if you had the facts, did a good job organizing the presentation, and delivered a great message? Maybe you were simply a “podium peddler.” Were you wedged behind the podium, reading verbatim from a written script, a PowerPoint, or an overhead? Did you leave the audience looking at the top of your head as you tried to convey too much information?

Contrast this scenario with a better one: the exact same topic, same set of facts; but the speaker asks questions of the audience, makes eye contact, changes the inflection in her voice, and works the room by walking around. A speaker who demonstrates energy and enthusiasm keeps the audience charged and connected. Successful extension presenters develop people skills to complement their knowledge of the subject.



Facts without a personal touch are just facts. Revisit the analogy of plugging into your audience. You may have the power running, but until the individual decides this is something they need or can use, they will not connect. They won't plug in to it. And the power — that is, the message — never leaves the cord. The challenge is to get the audience excited about the topic so they choose to plug into the message.



Teach What You Believe In

If you play to your strengths, your heart, and your instincts, you will become a believable source. The power of your words will be stronger. But don't be hesitant to address issues or viewpoints that differ from your own, especially if you have the facts to back up your point of view. As extension professionals, we are viewed as objective sources of information, but also as "slayers of untruths."

It is important not to speak on subjects that you don't believe in. If the message is one you disagree with, don't want to promote, or cannot ethically or morally support, then leave it to others. You cannot fake energy and enthusiasm, or even make learning fun, when your heart isn't in it.



Arrive Early for the Program

Arrive early for a chance to see the room setup and check the temperature, lighting, and sound system. In some cases, you may offer suggestions for improving the learning atmosphere. Set up your computer and audiovisual equipment, adjust the sound, etc., and make sure everything is working correctly. Locate the light switches or arrange for someone to operate them for you when needed. This pre-planning will make your transition from audience member to speaker go smoothly when you are introduced. This is an extremely important part of building credibility. Always be prepared.



Work the Crowd Before and After the Program

Many speakers establish their persona long before stepping up to the microphone. They arrive at the program early enough to greet the audience, shake hands, and talk to them. They smile, ask questions, and enjoy themselves. Whether or not it's realized, the speaker's actions indicate to each individual she greets, "You're the most important person in my life right now." The audience is quick to take notice and become comfortable.

Sometimes a speaker can turn a crowd around by seizing an opportunity. An extension specialist from campus was asked to speak at an annual soil and water conservation district meeting. Before the presentation, the audience watched the speaker pick up a crying baby and gently walk around the room with her until she fell asleep. The crowd instantly warmed up to him. The goodwill generated by working the crowd follows you to the podium when it's time to speak.



Keep Your Bio Short and Sweet

Some speakers believe that calling attention to the degree behind their name, citing their numerous awards, and outlining their life's work is vitally important. But long biographies have a chilling effect on an audience, for various reasons:

- Focusing on academic achievements portrays you as a know-it-all.
- Audiences wonder if the rest of the presentation is going to be as boring as your biography.
- People don't want to hear, "Look at me. I'm what's important here today."
- Time spent on the bio subtracts precious time from the topic of interest.

Ask the host to keep your introduction short: "The next speaker is so-and-so, from the Cooperative Extension Service. She is here to speak on the topic of..." However, it is okay to share information that the audience would find interesting, such as your personal hobby or something funny that happened recently. For instance, a master gardener was introduced as "so-and-so from the Extension Service, who loves gardening. He grows roses, hostas, and hydrangeas." The focus was on his interests and his personal background, not his Ph.D.

Think about sitting in the audience, listening to a moderator reading a prepared statement on a speaker's life history: things he's done, the committees on which he's served, the papers he's written, the degrees he's earned, etc. What's the mood of the audience after being told how qualified the speaker is? Irritated due to the introduction? Not the best way to start any program! Avoid tiresome, lengthy introductions that set up the audience to be bored and unimpressed.

Many speakers prefer not to be billed as the expert. This works well, because most audiences could not care less about your educational background, whether you have a Ph.D. from a well-

known university or from the school of hard knocks. What they want from a speaker is information they can understand and put to use. The message is what counts.

A biography targeted toward a specific audience can really help a speaker. A 4-H extension educator was addressing a group of extension homemakers. He instinctively knew that they were questioning what he could possibly say that would be of interest to them. He deliberately stated in his short bio that he was a fifth grade 4-H cornbread champion. The brick walls crumbled, and the sound could be heard around the room. The homemakers were hooked.

Speaking to the One Among the Many

It is difficult to make individuals in a large group believe you are speaking directly to them. But one of the easiest methods to make a personal connection is to ask open-ended questions. Or, if you already know someone in the audience, ask him a direct question.

The focus of a presentation might be to make sure that all equipment is properly secured to the trailer, so the speaker might ask, “Have any of you ever observed items alongside the road that fell off a truck or trailer? What did you see? Have you ever had to swerve around an object on the road? Have any of you witnessed something falling off a trailer?” Some will answer out loud while others will simply think to themselves; either way, you will have their attention. Your questions bring everyone into the conversation and make a point that you are talking about something they should listen to. You’re connecting with the audience through shared experience.

Another powerful connector is the use of first names. When you call a person by name, he’s thinking, “Hey! She’s talking to me.” If you can’t read the person’s name tag, simply ask their first name before posing the question.



The most important word in any language:
A Person's Name

Here are some other strategies that you can use to make a presentation feel more like a one-on-one discussion:

- Focus on the participants (e.g., make eye contact) while asking for comments or answering questions.
- Comment on something that is unique to the person (e.g., college clothing, a special book, a belt buckle, jewelry, purse, or bag). But be careful with this; you don't want to make them uncomfortable.
- Use the word "you" when addressing an individual.
- Give the presentation at the audience's level. While the stage looks nice and photographs well, the eye-level approach makes audiences feel more like you are one of them.
- Get as close to the audience as practically possible, moving from behind the podium to the front of the room, through the aisles, or to the back of the room. Don't concentrate on one side of the room over another.



Be Courteous

It's not so much that being polite helps; it's more that being impolite hurts. When you are less than courteous to an individual, you are actually being rude to everyone; it is one of the surest ways to lose an audience. Conversely, one of the best ways to hold your audience is to demonstrate unequivocal respect.

A few basic principals are important in ensuring that you come across as a courteous person:

- Listen to questions without interrupting in mid-sentence. Not only is iterrupting rude, but it puts you at risk of misinterpreting the question, which can be quite embarrassing.
- Appreciate differences of opinion. Give others the opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions, and always be respectful if they differ from your own. Remember that someone's personal experience with a problem may be as valuable as all the research that you've done on the subject. You can say, "I can see how you could think that. Let's think of it another way." Taking the time to listen will elevate you in the eyes of the audience.



- Don't be insulting, even when a participant is being rude. Extension speakers sometimes have to ask individuals to quit visiting, or to move outside to talk on their cell phone. You might even have to ask someone to put down a newspaper. Even though these distractions disrupt the audience and show disrespect for those who are trying to listen and learn, never attempt to retaliate. Always be polite. Be friendly, but firm, when asking someone to stop a behavior that interferes with the program. Use positive energy to minimize negative distractions, and always take the high road.

You Win When They Speak, Too

You may consider your presentation a success when people in the audience feel comfortable asking and answering questions. Such interaction indicates that you have made them feel comfortable and gained their trust. It means that the audience is listening, participating, and reacting. When people feel that their opinions matter and are appreciated, they become easier to teach.

Repeat the Question

We all have attended a program where someone asks a question that cannot be heard by the audience and where, instead of repeating the question, the speaker just answers it. This can be very annoying.

Repeating the question can also clarify and sharpen a question that perhaps needs to be rephrased or reframed. You can do this by asking, "Did I hear you say...?" and repeating the question. Use each question as a way of connecting with others who have similar questions. It signals to the audience that you want to have a discussion and that you are comfortable taking



questions. This type of dialogue promotes involvement and participation. Even if the question was clearly heard by everyone in the room, the simple act of confirming it facilitates your giving the best possible answer.

Acknowledge Their Emotions

Sometimes we trigger an emotional response from someone in the crowd. Maybe you were talking about the benefits of pesticides when a parent in the room says that her daughter died of nonhodgkins lymphoma from herbicides used at the school: “How can you talk about the benefits when my daughter died from exposure?”

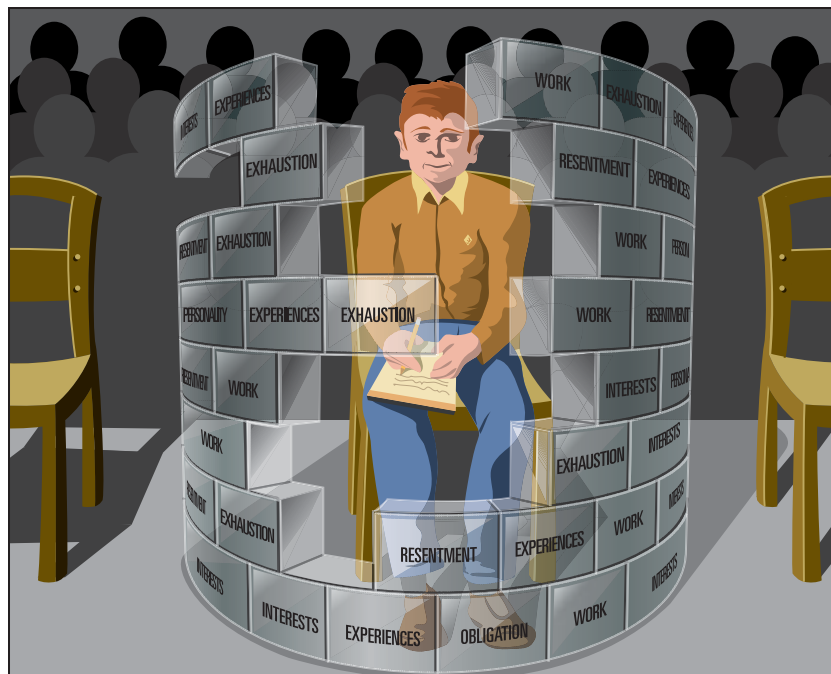
Emotions are feelings; they are neither right nor wrong. Failing to acknowledge them equates to telling the person that their feelings are unimportant. In the example



Photo on pages 70–71 from fotolia.com

used here, the feelings expressed by the parent are real. And deep. Whether or not the girl’s disease was related to pesticide exposure is immaterial to the discussion. Audiences react negatively to a speaker who downplays heart-felt emotions or belittles someone for their remarks. These situations call for empathy.

When emotions run high, find some common ground. Try saying something as simple as, “I understand your point of view,” or “I am sorry to hear that.” Then expand the discussion. You may have to agree to disagree, but at least you have given validity to someone’s thoughts and feelings. Most audiences are quite receptive when the speaker gives support to a member of the audience.



Bricks Come Down

**As the audience’s natural barriers come down,
their attention and receptiveness increase.**

Be Respectful of People's Time

People set their agenda for the day based on what is advertised by the program sponsor, so we need to honor their commitment by delivering our presentation within the allotted time frame. Speakers who go over their time allotment are disrespectful of their audience. Keep in mind that people who have come to hear your message may have other time sensitive commitments that day as well: another breakout session to attend, or an appointment right after the program is scheduled to end.

At times, your time slot may be altered through no fault of your own: earlier speakers exceed their time, the program sponsor adds an unexpected ten-minute break, or the host fails to factor in the amount of time it takes to hand out door prizes or to fill out attendance forms. These unplanned events are brutal for speakers scheduled just before lunch or as the final speaker of the day. The best approach is to shorten your presentation, if at all possible, and get the program back on schedule.

Show Enjoyment for the Subject Matter

Some people come to programs thinking that the subject of your presentation is going to be dreadfully boring. But by the end of the presentation, they may say, “You made something that I thought was going to bore me to tears so exciting that the time spent listening to you just seemed to fly by.”

Have fun with your presentation; let the audience know by your actions that you truly enjoy the opportunity to work with them and address their issues. Everyone wants to listen to a passionate speaker who loves his topic. If you enjoy the subject, people will sense your enthusiasm. Your expression of joy creates a ripple effect that influences others.



Laughing and Smiling Lead to Learning

Education should be fun and enjoyable. The more empathetic we are as speakers, the easier it is to get our message across — even when it's a hard message to share. Think of a baby looking at you; the minute you smile at the baby, the baby smiles back. If you smile and speak with conviction, the audience will reflect your attitude.

There is a certain amount of showmanship that should be incorporated into every extension presentation. It helps to keep people interested, but the challenge is not to overdo it and come



across as insincere. For most speakers, telling preplanned jokes is risky business. Either you forget the punch line or the audience misses the point. Light-hearted anecdotes, funny pictures, or short video clips that relate to the subject matter — or are just drop-dead funny — can help eliminate stress and recapture the attention of your audience. Speakers who can make an audience smile and laugh can keep them engaged for the entire presentation.

Show Yourself Doing the Work

When an opportunity arises, ask someone to take pictures of you working with your clients. If possible, stage the photographs to promote your message and help set the tone of your presentation. Extension speakers continually battle the presumption that all we have to offer is plenty of book learning and little or no common sense or experience.



Pictures that show you “working your subject” make the audience realize your experience. They show that you’ve been in their trenches, tried your hand at it, and walked in their shoes; and this lends credibility to your teaching. The old saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words” is really appropriate here.

The Occasional Slip of the Tongue

Occasionally you may say something that you wish you could take back. Above all, there is absolutely no reason to ever use profanity, distasteful examples or jokes, or degrading remarks. Be careful about using words or comments that may be considered inappropriate. The use of profanity is unacceptable; simple phraseology that we hear every day gets magnified in front of an audience. Even though certain inappropriate words are commonly used as forms of expression, never use any word or phrase that someone else might consider vulgar.

When this happens, apologize for using inappropriate words, and immediately restate your remarks in the way you meant to say it. All you can do when you say something you didn’t mean to say, or what was said was taken the wrong way, is to work on never letting it happen again.



Dealing with Offensive Remarks

Occasionally, someone in an audience will make a racist comment, throw out an anti-immigrant slur, tell an ethnic joke, or just make an offensive statement. This creates a very difficult situation. It is important not to laugh or give any credence to such remarks. A brief statement such as, “Excuse me, but that is not appropriate” is all you need to separate yourself from the interrupter. Then proceed with your presentation without missing a beat. It is not unusual for a few individuals to let you know after the presentation that they found the remarks offensive. All you can do at the time is to say how truly sorry you are about the remarks and point out that they did not represent your views or those of Extension.

Reflections by the Extension Presenter

Desire forms the line that separates an average presenter from a great speaker — the desire to steadily improve, that is, from one presentation to another. After each presentation, great speakers work through a mental list of what worked and what didn't, mentally keeping the former and tossing the latter. The axiom that “practice makes perfect” definitely applies. The great speaker wants to be better today than yesterday.

How Does the Audience Respond to Your Presentation?

Presenters who have a reputation for engaging an audience while delivering a meaningful, memorable presentation seem to have

internal radar. Part of this philosophy is that extension speakers know they have only one chance to talk to individuals from the audience. Committed extension professionals are disappointed when they fail to engage the audience. If you have ever had this feeling, then you have what it takes to make it in Extension. It shows that you care about what you do and about the people with whom you share information. Caring about the audience is one of the most important characteristics of a successful extension speaker.

After presenting a few programs, you must learn how to monitor audience reaction during your presentation. First of all, you have to look at the audience to decipher their reaction. While you present the information, watch for nods, attentiveness, and facial expressions. By reading body language, you get feedback indicating whether or not you are connecting and communicating with the audience. Sometimes you can modify the presentation to turn the program around or at least point it in the right direction. Sometimes a subtle change can make a huge difference.

It is important to captivate the audience throughout your presentation. If you are not constantly sensing the audience's pulse, then chances are your energy level will fall off or the connection with the audience will wane. You do not want this to happen. You want to keep your audience in the palm of your hand until you have completed the delivery of your message. As you become more confident, you may focus efforts toward becoming a better observer; that is, determining what works and what doesn't for each audience. When you conclude, try to leave the audience wanting more!



Thoughts on the Completed Presentation

Your degree of success hinges on your willingness to complete one important statement: “If I could do it over, I would (fill in the blank).” Then promise to make the change before presenting another talk. This type of personal review — what worked, what didn’t, and what needs to be changed — is the key to improvement.

The way you feel about your presentation is a good indication of how your audience received it; if you feel good about it, they probably liked it. But even the best programs can be improved by making minor changes.

The time to pinpoint areas for improvement is soon after a program. If you felt that the audience didn’t connect, why was that? Did you run long and not have time to take questions? If there was one part of the presentation that was particularly awkward for you or the audience, what caused the problem? Did you leave out something important? Were your visuals well planned and easy to read? Why didn’t the audience interact more?

In the old days of Extension, when slides and overhead projectors ruled, revising presentations was difficult. In fact, many extension professionals would prepare a set of visuals at the beginning of the winter meeting season and use them intact to the bitter end. But today’s technologies allow us to tweak our presentations continually, even between sessions at a conference. Get into the habit of making improvements to your presentation as soon as you realize they are needed.



In many respects, Extension is like having the basketball crowd in a small room. Each time we face our crowd, the pressure to score the big presentation is like facing a game-winning free throw attempt. Instead of hearing groans, although we may occasionally hear a few, we see the whites of their eyes and the expressions on their faces. With the “game” on the line, it’s one shot. One chance. One opportunity.

We in Extension ride the ultimate roller coaster. Some days, we’re speeding to the top; others, we’re zooming to the bottom. Just like any entertainer, we strut our stuff in full view of the public. While our message is not song and dance, or even sports, we entertain our audiences with facts: We educate. It’s difficult enough to be on public display, but to make learning fun at the same time is challenging. One chance. One opportunity.

Give an illustrious, motivating speech, and we’re everyone’s best pal — even though, 30 minutes ago, they didn’t know we existed. They’ll shake our hands, slap us on the back, and ask for business cards. Hitting the mark is wonderful; it’s an ego booster. But you guessed ‘er, Chester! If there’s an ego booster, there’s also an ego buster. Screw up the presentation, and when we’re finished we get only token applause; it wouldn’t register even on the most sensitive applause meter. Hand shakes? Forget it. The crowd scrambles for the door, and we’re left putting away our show-and-tell props all by ourselves. We’re lucky if someone offers to stay behind and help lug our things to the van. The ultimate downer is when they ask us to turn out the lights and lock the door on our way out! Enter, the Maytag Man...the Extension Twilight Zone: definitely an ego buster!

But then we think about what the older, wiser adults told us all through school: as long as you give it your best shot, there’s no shame in failing. Right, Mom! Believe me, words don’t help when the last failure is all we think about during the three-hour jaunt back to campus. And think we do: What could I have said or done, or what shouldn’t I have said?

These are the times that shape, break, or neutralize extension educators. Extension is a job of mental survival and balance. We “perform” in front of audiences to make them think and smile. But we who practice the role of Extension occasionally give performances that fail to meet our own expectations. From failure, however, comes success when we incorporate “what I should have done” into upcoming presentations. We learn more about ourselves from failure than from success. Failure builds character the old fashioned way; it’s earned with the stripes of life. Good extension folks do worry about failure, but they also turn negatives into positives for the next show. Just ask the player who missed free throws during the game but won it with a last second shot!

Reviewing Personal Feedback

If you find yourself wondering if your presentation was on track, try analyzing your audience feedback. Focus on the areas that draw compliments and on those that are never mentioned; there is a reason for both. Compliments are something that money can't buy, and if someone tells you, "I've heard you several times and I always learn something new. That's why I keep coming back," or "I came to this meeting simply because I knew you would be speaking," build on it. Conversely, if you notice that a certain area of your presentation is never brought up, maybe you should drop it from your talk; or, if you feel it is important enough to retain, work on making it better.

Take advantage of conversations that materialize after the program to conduct a little research. Ask members of the audience about your presentation:

- Did it meet your expectations?
- Did you cover what you needed to know?
- Is there additional information you would like to have heard?
- Was it understandable from start to finish?

Similarly, ask the sponsor of the meeting if your message was on track. This shows respect for their efforts in hosting the meeting.

Critical Reviews: Written Evaluations

How important is it to read the comment cards or program surveys? Some say they don't read these evaluations because they offer mixed messages about the presentation: one person may say the talk was "better than sliced bread" while another may say it was one of the worst they have ever heard. People seldom comment on how a presentation might be improved.



Some speakers tend not to read evaluations because they fear criticism. They may receive ten good reviews and one bad one, and they tend to focus on the bad one. They take it personally. Remember that it's not about pride or ego; it's just hard to read negative remarks about something we've worked so hard to "perfect." We all want people to enjoy what we've said, and when someone doesn't, some of us can't help receiving their negative remark like a punch in the gut.

Read audience comments when given the opportunity, but don't over-evaluate them. Basically, you will already know how well you did. If there are compliments, appreciate them; and if there are comments identifying a weakness that you need to address, take advantage of the chance to improve. If there is a negative comment, don't dwell on it; but if someone is particularly critical, or if there are several negative reviews, give some thought to what you might do to improve your presentation. Learn from the experience, make whatever changes are appropriate, and look forward to the next audience.

Taking Stock of Yourself as a Speaker

Our presentations are always about building new bridges between ourselves and the members of our audience. We must understand that the positive client relationship is dependent upon good communication skills; and if we can't communicate well, we can't build those important relationships.

Unfortunately, some extension personnel believe that their communication skills allow them to connect with an audience when, in fact, they do not. Speakers who focus solely on the subject matter fail to realize that they need to connect with the audience, first, in order to convey their message effectively. When speakers are too into themselves, their words, and their subject matter, they can become oblivious to negative response. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

This is why it is important to examine your skills through self analysis and outside evaluation. Such reviews may be heart wrenching and uncomfortable; but if taken seriously they can elevate your presentation skills and allow you to connect with an audience.

An Honest Self Evaluation

Take a blank sheet of paper and list your strengths as an extension speaker; i.e., what positive attributes do you bring to your presentations? Once you've done that, redirect your attention to list areas in which you want to improve. Use the suggestions in this publication to add to both lists; this will assist you in developing your own personal strategy for improvement.



Minimize the “Uncomfortable” in Your Presentation

Be honest with yourself. What makes you uncomfortable as a speaker? Are you a poor speller who fears misspelling something on a flip chart during your presentation? Are you afraid of the hand-held microphone? Start by altering or eliminating whatever makes you uncomfortable, e.g., ask a volunteer from the audience to come forward and make notes on the flip chart. Ask the program sponsor, ahead of time, to provide a cordless mike. This will free you to concentrate on the job at hand: teaching!

If math is your weakness but your topic requires it, ask a colleague to share the presentation with you. Team teaching allows people with different subject expertise to work together to present the educational material. It also makes the presentation more interesting for the audience, especially if it's a long one.

Talk to a Mentor

Take the time to watch and listen to extension colleagues who are considered successful presenters. Arrive at a program early enough to listen to other speakers. Spend quality time talking to extension personnel whose presentations you enjoy. Their subject area may be irrelevant to your endeavors, but they may possess a style and/or mannerisms that you enjoy and could emulate. Talk to these individuals about their views on what it takes to be a successful presenter. Spend time discussing your personal evaluation with them and ask their views on how you might build on your strong points and eliminate undesirable traits.

REMEMBER

The audience needs to
know that you care,



they care what you know

Ask a Friend to Evaluate Your Performance

Early in our careers, we have difficulty identifying which methods are working for us and which ones are not. Presenting a topic in a timely manner, trying to determine whether we are getting our points across, and assessing how our audience is reacting can be overwhelming. Add to that the fear associated with public speaking and the dread of being asked a question they can't answer, and many young speakers are ready to bolt. Learning to overcome these roadblocks will help you become an effective communicator.

First of all, find a friend who is willing to provide an honest, unbiased assessment of a presentation that you make before a live audience. And remember, if you ask someone to provide feedback, prepare yourself for constructive criticism. Don't take it personally. Utilize practical feedback to improve your presentations and your effectiveness as a public speaker.

An example might better explain the importance of outside reviews in enhancing presentations. An extension educator once attended farmer meetings with a campus extension specialist who had recently joined the university staff. The young specialist



Photo from fotolia.com

realized that something was wrong with his presentations when the audience just sat in their seats, saying little, even when asked to answer questions. And he knew he had to improve as a speaker if he wanted to pursue a career in Extension, so he asked his colleague what he could do to make a better impression and encourage more interaction with the growers. The extension educator replied, “Do you really want to know?” because he was afraid their friendship might be jeopardized if his remarks were taken personally. The young specialist said he really wanted to know how he could better present his technical information and how he could make his speaking style more appealing and interesting to farmers. An open dialogue ensued.

The informal evaluation process initially focused on the many strengths associated with the educator’s presentation: his technical understanding of the subject matter; his ability to offer useful, practical advice; and his warm and friendly personality. Next came the discussion of what was keeping him from reaching his audience. He needed to reduce the number of images, refocus multiple messages into fewer take-home points, speak slower, appear more comfortable and relaxed, and encourage the audience to ask questions at any point during the presentation.

In just a few weeks, the specialist began to realize results from the changes he was making. His audiences were engaged during his presentations. The improved confidence and self-worth gained from his new successes increased his eagerness to push himself even further as a speaker. It didn’t take long for this specialist to become one of the best presenters on the extension circuit.

This type of outside review by a friend is essential to improving the quality of extension presentations. The end effects are similar to those gained from asking others to review, edit, and comment on an extension publication, a grant proposal, a newspaper column, a press release, or a journal article. We’ve all experienced how extremely useful a peer review can be.

A friend can provide personalized feedback — things that you can’t see or feel as a speaker — at the conclusion of a program. You should discuss your presentation style, material delivered, and audience response. Modify your personal list according to the comments provided.

Conclusion: We Dream a Better Life for Them

All eyes are on you each time you step in front of the public. If you expect to be heard, to change behaviors, and to make an impact, it matters what you say and how you present yourself and your message. Giving a presentation is important business and can have serious consequences; expectations may at times seem overwhelming, unreachable, and unrealistic. How do you measure success or failure as a speaker?

- Is your message worth remembering, or is it just another talk to be forgotten?
- Is your success measured by future invitations to speak?
- Are you seeing your message acted upon, or is it being ignored?

Effective extension speakers are not born. Those who connect with their audiences have worked hard to develop their techniques and hone their speaking skills. If you have a desire to be a better speaker, all it takes is practice, persistence, perseverance, and hard work. You can be one of the best.





Getting Past the Barrier

Once the bricks are down, audience members participate fully and their retention level expands dramatically.

Our goal in extension is to impart knowledge to the people. We go to them to teach, to share our experiences, to answer their questions, to advise and enlighten them. We go to leave something behind: new information or a new slant on a subject of importance; motivation they can use to change or improve their personal lives, families, farms, and businesses. In some cases, our goals are to help build an infrastructure for a better community and to develop leadership skills.

Public speaking can be a positive and motivating experience. It also can be stressful. But when we do it well, it is a most rewarding experience. Connecting with an audience is exhilarating; the feeling of accomplishment is intense. And the personal pride we feel when someone stops to shake our hand or to say thanks for making the program meaningful is the best. We love to excite an audience, and the absolute best feeling of accomplishment is when a person tells you that they took your message home and put it to use. That is the true measure of impact for the extension presenter.





Acknowledgments

Unless otherwise noted, the photographs in PPP-81 were provided by staff of the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.

Thanks go to Steve Adduci and Paula Adduci for thier original illustrations. Thanks, also, to the following individuals who offered constructive comments during the development of this publication.

Janet Bechman, Purdue University
Bruce Bordelon, Purdue University
Tony Carrell, Purdue University
Raymond Cloyd, Kansas State University
Jim Criswell, Oklahoma State University
Stacy Herr, Purdue University
Pat Hipkins, Virginia Tech University
Bill Johnson, Purdue University
Michael Manning, Purdue University
Michael Martin, North Carolina University
Sandra McDonald, Colorado State University
Steve Mckinley, Purdue University
Glen Nice, Purdue University
Chris Parker, Purdue University
Brian Raison, The Ohio State University
Michael Reetz, Purdue University
Val Slack, Purdue University
Robert Taylor, Purdue University
Marcia Werne, Indiana Resident
Dan Wixted, Cornell University

Phrases that appear in the illustrations on pages 87 and 93 are used with the permission of Kevin Blanchette and Kathy Dempsey, respectively.



PURDUE AGRICULTURE

New 7/09

It is the policy of the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service that all persons have equal opportunity and access to its educational programs, services, activities, and facilities without regard to race, religion, color, sex, age, national origin or ancestry, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, disability or status as a veteran. Purdue University is an Affirmative Action institution. This material may be available in alternative formats.

The Purdue Extension Education Store
<http://www.extension.purdue.edu/store>
1-888-EXT-INFO



ppp-81

Purdue Extension
Knowledge to Go
1-888-EXT-INFO

The information provided herein is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service is implied.

Front and back cover photos, including silhouette, from fotolia.com.