

Insight 27

Involve Your Audience



“Learning is not a spectator sport.”

Malcolm Knowles

When Persuading For Results, involving your audience throughout your presentation helps maintain their attention. Indeed, self-discovery and practical application is often the most effective way of learning and the most effective way of persuading. There are many ways to involve people, depending on the size of your audience. You may like to give people an opportunity to test your product, or to have them work with your ideas actively. Make sure the activity you use is linked back to your message. The activity should reinforce your message, not distract from it.

Use Imagery

An activity that we like to use in our presentations is showing a visual image and asking the audience what they see. We allow a minute for people to write down their responses. Then we ask five or six people for their answers, or we have people discuss with others what they wrote. Everyone’s interpretation will be slightly different. People are usually surprised at the different responses. To them it is obvious what the picture is of, and they had not considered alternative interpretations. This shows our audience that to understand clients you need to consider their perspective, which may be different from your perspective. Rather than simply describing this, people have a chance to experience it for themselves.

Ask Thought Provoking Questions

A second method for involving your audience is to probe them with questions. Instead of quoting a fact or statistic, sometimes it can be more effective to pose it as a question. For example in a presentation on food preservation, you might ask “What is the only food that does not go off?” This will start the audience thinking, increasing their awareness of the issue, as they logically try to find the answer. Their intrigue will mount as they try to find the answer. Their motivation will increase too. Then, ask for a few answers before revealing the correct answer—honey. The audience will be primed to hear all about the amazing composition of honey. This is much more effective than simply saying, “Honey is the only food that does not go off”.

Statistics by themselves can be quite dry and uninteresting. Turning them into questions involves the audience. However, when you activate your audience members’ minds, you risk having your ideas challenged. So, be prepared to provide the evidence behind your statement. If someone challenges you, do not shy away because it shows that they are listening to you. You have made them think, and they are simply voicing their concerns. This is the perfect opportunity for you to clear up any misunderstandings.

Use Quotation as a Springboard

Like questions, quotations can provide a good source of discussion. Present a quotation that is linked directly to your message and ask the audience for their interpretations of it. The quotation should be directly related to your topic, once again guiding the audience to the point of your topic.

Use these techniques by either asking a few members of the audience for their answers, or by dividing the audience into groups where they share their answers with others. Using groups is ideal for building group relationships within your audience, doubling as a ‘get to know you’ activity.

Visualise

Helping the audience visualise a situation can be an effective way of involving the audience without relying on expensive resources or time-consuming preparation. A colleague of ours recently gave a presentation on optimism to a group of fifty schoolteachers. The presenter was one of about ten people presenting that day. Her presentation was late in the afternoon. She suspected that by this time their attention span would be short, so she decided to begin by stimulating their imaginations.

Before the audience knew what the topic was, she asked them all to imagine a scenario where a student was misbehaving. The presenter went into some detail about the situation and then asked the teachers to imagine their reaction. They were all asked to write down exactly what they would say to the child. She then told them to put what they had written aside until later.

The presenter went on to introduce the topic and talked about using positive communication. She talked about the psychological patterns of children and the effect of an 'optimistic style' of discipline. Her message was logical and powerful. Then she asked people to look over what they had written at the beginning of the session and to critique their own response, noting where they had displayed symptoms of pessimism.

Once people were aware of negativity, they could identify it in their own behaviour. Many teachers were amazed at their pessimistic approach to discipline. Had they not done this exercise before, the teachers probably would have thought, "I don't do that. This is not relevant to my behaviour." The exercise allowed the audience to be more self-aware and provided an opportunity for them to apply their learning immediately.

Give Surprise Gifts

A fun method that we sometimes see used in presentations is taping an item to the bottom of the seats in the audience. This is particularly good for longer presentations, spicing up the session by asking midway that everyone look under their seats. Depending on how much money you want to spend, the object can be anything from a lolly to a copy of your latest book.

Readers familiar with *The Oprah Show* will be aware of Oprah Winfrey's use of this technique. Midway through a session with a guest speaker Oprah will ask her audience members to look under their chairs. The mood in the studio becomes electric as people scream with glee at discovering a free beauty product or self-help book.

Use Your Creativity — find an activity

Incorporating an activity into your presentation is a powerful way of building rapport with the audience. It will keep the audience stimulated and will drive home your message. There are many ways to do this, so you will have to use your creativity to come up with an activity that suits your presentation. A good source of activities is the series of books by Scannell and Newstrom, *Games Trainers Play*.

INVOLVE THE AUDIENCE TOOL
How can I use imagery?
What questions can I ask?
How can I use quotations?
How can I help the audience visualise?
How can I use surprise gifts?
How can I build activity into the presentation?

