

It's All About the Audience

Earn your listeners' appreciation by making your speech about them.

BY STEVEN D. COHEN, PH.D., ATMB

The key to delivering a successful speech is showing your audience members that you care about them. You don't want listeners to view you as a salesperson pitching a product. You want them to see you as a leader who has their best interests at heart.

The good news is that you don't need to be a mind reader to build a strong connection with listeners. Instead, you can focus on knowing your audience, using inclusive pronouns, referencing the present and highlighting the benefits of your idea.

Analyze the Audience

Before you can lead, you must know your audience. What do people in your audi-

ence really care about? Why should they listen to you? The best way to learn the answers to these questions is to conduct an audience analysis.

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To begin the process, consult the event organizer where you will speak, to learn about the people attending the event. You can also search the Web for recent news stories or social media posts to learn about the group, which can help identify its interests and priorities. What is it that they hope to learn? What can they do with the information you will provide? Once you understand what your audience cares about, tailor your message to its specific needs.

Every semester I challenge students in my Harvard Extension and University of Baltimore classes to conduct an audience

analysis to make their speeches resonate with their peers. One student described his audience as composed of students from around the world, including young and old, female and male, undergraduates and graduates.

“To say we are united by public speaking is too broad; the class includes both those who fear it [public speaking] and those who relish it,” wrote the student. “We are united specifically by our belief that it is important.”

This analysis is effective because the student is now able to give a speech connecting his or her own beliefs with the beliefs of the audience. The student acknowledges the diversity of the audience,

and doesn't dwell on it, but instead focuses on what unites everyone in the room—the belief that public speaking is important.

Remember to conduct a thorough audience analysis—even when you're pressed for time. The information you gather will help determine how to get, and keep, your audience's attention.

Use Inclusive Pronouns

One of the easiest ways to bond with your audience is to use inclusive pronouns like *we*, *our* and *us* instead of *you* and *your*. As Shel Leanne points out in the book *Say It Like Obama: The Power of Speaking with Purpose and Vision*, inclusive pronouns help to “send the message that the speaker and those listening are on the same team,



in the same boat, facing the same fate.”

I often use inclusive language when telling my students about upcoming speech assignments. When students express concern about an assignment, I say, “I know speaking in public can be nerve-racking, but we're all in this together. We've prepared for this moment for the past few weeks, so I know we have what it takes to deliver amazing speeches.”

Although I may not deliver a speech in class, I want my students to know I am on their side. Using inclusive language indicates that I care about my students, and I am committed to helping them succeed.

There is a big difference between saying “*You* must solve this problem” and “*We* must solve this problem.” The first



Audience members enjoy listening to a speaker at the 2014 International Convention in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

statement makes the audience responsible for solving the problem; the second implies that the speaker will work with the audience to solve it. Don't tell your audience what it should do. Instead, use inclusive language to talk about what you can all accomplish together.

Reference the Present

Another way to connect with your audience is to reference the present. Although listeners may think about the past and future while you speak, they will spend most of their "thinking time" trying to link your ideas to their current needs and challeng-

es. Think about the issues your audience currently faces and find ways to address those issues during your speech. Show people you understand what they are facing.

Let's say you are invited to give career advice to a group of college seniors preparing for end-of-semester exams. What can you say to make them listen to you? Here is one possibility:

I know you're looking forward to finishing your finals so you can hang out with your friends and enjoy the summer. I was a college student not too long ago. I know how it is. But I hope we can talk for just a few minutes about one simple question: "What's next?" Today, I want to offer some suggestions to help you use what you're studying to land a great job.

This introduction is compelling because it connects the topic of your speech to the current, primary concern of the students—studying for finals. Initially, the students may not want to think about their post-college plans, but they will be more apt to listen to you once you demonstrate that you "know how it is," and you're willing to help.

Highlight the Benefits


Another technique you can use is to tell your listeners how they can benefit from your idea. Audiences start out listening to speeches by asking "why." *Why should I care? Why is this important?* If the

speaker is successful in captivating the audience's interest, they will end up asking "how." *How do I implement this idea? How do I make this my own?* That's the speaker's job: to take the audience from "why" to "how."

Let's say you are speaking to a group of colleagues about volunteering at a local homeless shelter. Everyone knows that helping the homeless is important. You are more likely to make your message resonate if you emphasize the specific benefits of volunteering. You could say:

I want to invite all of you to join me at the homeless shelter tomorrow at 11 a.m. to prepare lunch for some of the homeless people in our community. This is a perfect opportunity for us to get to know one another better and spend a few hours doing something that will make us feel really good about ourselves. I'm pretty sure we'll laugh a lot as we figure out how to run the kitchen!

In this example, the speaker highlights the benefits of participating, rather than emphasizing that volunteering is the "right thing to do." Who wouldn't want to have a great time while serving the community?

Your listeners will pay attention if you make your speech about them—so be sure to keep your audience at the forefront of your mind. When you maintain an audience-centered approach, your listeners will reward you with appreciation and applause. 

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