



You're Speaking But Are You Connecting?

Excerpt from Chapter 8 - Involve Your Audience to Connect

- **Simple responses connect**
- **It takes more than a verbal request to connect**
- **Caution!**
- **Be creative to connect through interaction**
- **Games and activities can help you connect**
- **Use interaction early; your audience will participate more readily**
- **Summary**

One of the most obvious ways to connect with an audience is to involve them through some type of participation in your speech or presentation. This can be very simple, such as a show-of-hands response, or quite complex, such as in games, role-plays, and simulation activities. Every type of presentation can incorporate audience participation, but your choice of activity will depend on variables such as available time, objectives, setting and, of course, listeners. A role-play in which participants play out customer complaints is well suited to a training presentation where plenty of time is available for preparation, performance, evaluation, and discussion. It would be a poor choice for a ten-minute team strategy session or a keynote address. And, in many cases, the value of the interaction is in how you deliver it rather than in any intrinsic sense.

Simple responses connect

Asking the audience to indicate their responses is a fine way to elicit participation. Speakers often ask for a show of hands, but most participants will also welcome the chance to stand briefly, if only because it lets them stretch. You can also invite them to nod, smile, wave, or cheer in response.

One speaker instructed his audience to pick up their programs, fold them vertically, and set them up on the seminar tables in front of them. He asked the participants to lower them to the table when he touched on any subject of special interest. Some lowered them very quickly, others didn't indicate their special interest until very late in his program. This small activity provided useful feedback for the speaker, who capitalized on it by remembering who had lowered their program at a certain point and referring to them when he summarized his remarks. The activity definitely connected speaker to audience, and they stayed attentive throughout his speech.

Another speaker at a presentation I attended asked us to stand if the following statement described us: "I am a secondary school teacher." Perhaps twenty people stood; the speaker took a moment to look them over, thank them, and invite them to sit. Next he had the elementary teachers and the administrators stand. Not fitting any of these categories, I was feeling a little left out until, after an impish grin and a slight pause, our speaker gave us one more opportunity to identify ourselves with the description: "I am hopelessly addicted to chocolate." I leapt to my feet, happy to be included.

This type of participation was simple; it didn't use a lot of time and it gave the speaker useful information. It might have served to segment the audience, but because of the fourth statement it got us laughing instead. He placed this activity right at the beginning of his presentation, thus paving

the way for further interaction. This very brief participation established an initial connection with his audience.

By contrast, consider the speaker who asked for a show of hands in answer to the questions: "How many of you are from this city?", "How many of you are from somewhere else in the province?", and "How many of you are from somewhere outside this province?" There was a lackluster response to her questions, at least in part because she wasn't paying attention to the group and didn't insist on participation. She barely noted where hands went up, didn't in any way acknowledge the responses, and without any transition began to talk about changes in the healthcare delivery system. Her questions were relevant to this content, because the impact of her remarks would vary depending on where her audience lived, yet she missed the opportunity to connect with her audience and to connect them to her subject.

It takes more than a verbal request to connect

The show-of-hands technique is quite useful as an opening but only if you give it full delivery. When I speak about body language, I often begin by asking the audience to take a stand, to identify their beliefs about the subject. First I ask, "How many of you believe - - let's have a show of hands - - how many of you believe your own body language is affecting your career success?" After asking the question I raise my own hand to model the response I want and simultaneously look at the audience to encourage their participation. Most participants raise their hands, so I reinforce my interest by saying, "It seems like most of us believe our body language influences our careers." My second question is similar but related to success with family and friends. I don't need the verbal prompt but I still use eye contact, raise my own hand (as a believer), and acknowledge the even larger level of agreement.

My third question is about their intimate relations. This generates laughter and almost everyone raises their hands when I raise mine. After a brief pause I ask my final question. "How many of you are getting tired of raising your hands?" There are always a few who raise their hands out of habit and as a response to my body language prompt, but then realizing what I've asked, dissolve into laughter. Some hold their hands even higher and make direct eye contact signalling me that they are indeed tired of the hand-raising. I take a moment to thank them for playing along with me and then connect the activity to the value we all place on body language.

This opening didn't work perfectly the first time I tried it, but as I learned to ask for exactly what I wanted, model the action I wanted, look at the audience as I asked, and wait until they complied, I began to get the results I wanted. I wanted to connect with them but also to connect them to the topic and their own beliefs about the subject. The fourth question is completely off-topic but injects a little humour into the silliness of raising your hands in public. It lets us laugh at the human condition and thus further serves to connect us.

Caution!

I've had speakers tell me they avoid hand-raising and other interactions because the audience doesn't like it. And to some extent they are correct. If the speaker uses any technique too much, if the technique is poorly introduced or simply a gratuitous interaction, if the audience and setting are very formal, or if the interaction embarrasses anyone, the audiences won't like hand-raising and other methods to engage their participation.

One speaker had us stand and introduce ourselves to the person behind us. Logistically this didn't work, so there was mass confusion, some laughter, and plenty of noise with several hundred delegates speaking at once. In my opinion it wasn't a strong choice because the speaker in no way connected this self-introduction to anything he was saying. But the next speaker was even worse. She had us stand up and hug the person seated next to us. I don't hug strangers, so I voted with my feet and went to the women's restroom. That area quickly filled with disgruntled participants who felt hugging was nonsensical at a business seminar with a time management theme.

Hand-raising has some definite limitations. I was the eighth speaker in a weekly business training program and my audience, primarily from car dealerships, hadn't chosen to take the program. The owners of the dealerships instructed them to attend and learn how to operate their businesses more productively. If you're getting the feeling I wasn't speaking to the most enthusiastic of audiences, you are correct in that assumption.

I had used a hands-up activity at the start of the three-hour seminar and they willingly participated, but about an hour into the program I asked the audience to again respond by raising their hands. Before anyone could respond, a man near the front asked, "Why do all you business types think we want to keep raising our hands?" Someone else quickly backed him up by saying, "Yeah, every speaker we've had has made us raise our hands all evening. Is that the only way you guys know how to give a speech?" I hadn't seen the other speakers, so I'd walked into it with blinders on, but their criticism was fair and served to remind me that even the best technique is worthless, sometimes counterproductive, if overused or poorly chosen for the audience. Interaction techniques have the power to connect you to an audience, but they also have the power to irritate and annoy.

Another audience interaction technique that certainly infuriates many intelligent listeners is one used by motivational speakers. Instead of notes, they offer a one-page handout containing unfinished statements such as, "Success is ___% inspiration and ___% perspiration." The blanks are words, slogans, and statistics the listeners are supposed to fill in on command. The audience is involved in an activity, but there isn't much bonding happening because the speaker and the audience aren't engaged in any interaction. If you use this activity, use it sparingly and consider that few adults like to be told exactly what to do and when to do it.

Be creative to connect through interaction

Seeking a wider variety of audience participation techniques and using your own creativity will do a great deal to improve your presentation. The following examples show some creative ways speakers can use audience participation to forge a strong bond.

Imagine yourself in a high-level audience of perhaps fifteen decision makers. The speaker, Anne, is from one of Canada's First Nations groups, and while junior to all of you in her audience, has made significant contributions in the few months she has worked for your agency. She has been making a supreme effort to sensitize all of you to the special concerns of native groups and has slowly won recognition for her insights and support for her recommendations.

Anne begins her presentation by laying a beautiful blanket over a small table and asks each member of the audience to give her something of value. The first gentleman offers her the keys to his Lexus. She accepts them reverently and places them carefully on her ritual table. The next woman slips off her gold necklace which is also laid on the table. You are next. You reach into your wallet and select your most impressive credit card. But Anne rejects it; she wants you to offer something of real value. The audience gently laughs and several others re-evaluate their offerings. After several tries she accepts the worn photo of your child. A gold watch, a wallet molded to the posterior of its owner, a time management notebook, a laptop computer, and one Gucci loafer are added to the table. Anne gives her attention briefly to each audience member as she accepts their offerings and decorously places them on her blanket. She thanks them for their contributions and promises to return to them later.

Like any good speaker, Anne now previews her proposal and quickly moves into her points, supporting each with stories, examples, gentle humour, and factual information. She invites you to ask questions and voice your concerns regarding her proposal, and after successfully handling objections, Anne moves into her close. She has used fifteen minutes of your time and has asked support for a new approach to handling immunization in remote native communities. If not full approval, she has won your support to move to the next level of investigation on this issue. Closure seems imminent.

Suddenly, your agency chief remembers the keys to his Lexus are still on her blanketed table, and Anne has made no mention of them nor any move to return them. Exerting his leadership, he inquires about the purpose of the table and the objects of value. You sense a collective holding of breaths around you as the audience expects to hear the meaning of such a ceremony. Anne pauses, grins widely, and says, "Oh, that. I just wanted you to stay through until I finished my proposal, and I was worried you wouldn't unless you had invested something of value in the presentation." This evokes relieved laughter in the group and increases her acceptance and level of respect in the agency. She has connected using audience participation.

Few of us would ever use this particular activity, yet we can learn from her skillful audience participation technique. I was in Anne's audience and greatly admired her skill. She played on her cultural heritage by bringing the blanket and ceremoniously laying it over a table to receive our gifts. This established a mysterious, almost mystical feeling in the room. She then asked for our valuables and with only one correction was able to get items of distinct value from us. As she accepted each gift she was required to interact with each member of her audience, and since we were also required to interact with her, we couldn't ignore the person speaking to us. She wasn't simply a someone making a funding request; she was Anne, interacting closely with us.

Once she had established the feeling and the connection, Anne had our attention and our respect. The ceremonial gift giving was a ruse, yet we didn't mind because we had great pleasure from it. In fact, the punchline gave us an opportunity to relate to each other on a more relaxed basis, thus ending the formal relationship and establishing a congenial atmosphere for the continued discussion of the immunization program and other important matters. Anne not only reached her immediate goal, she also built a relationship with her audience. It will be hard to ignore her in future decision making because Anne has proven herself not only as a thinker and a doer, but also as a warm humanitarian with a fine sense of humour.

Although you've likely seen platform speakers use interaction, you can see the value of audience interaction even in a formal governmental meeting where a proposal was being made to a high-level audience. Another audience interaction technique I've seen used in small audiences of this nature was set up before the session.

In this example, the speaker was addressing other department heads about a change in her department, a change they would need to support in order to save their hospital a considerable amount of money. She feared her audience would stonewall her, and that the change wouldn't get due consideration let alone approval. She knew the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), who would represent the administration department, had the most to gain by supporting her. In an earlier private meeting with this person, they had reviewed concerns from some other departments and built a strategy together. When the speaker laid out her proposal and called for questions, the room was silent, exactly as she expected. Enter the CFO who, right on cue, addressed the head of emergency services personally and said, "Yvonne, weren't you concerned about the cost of training for this change? You and I were talking about that on Monday." Yvonne looked a bit surprised at first but suddenly began airing her concerns which got everyone into the fray. The proposal got full discussion, and the department heads eventually approved a carefully amended plan. Planned interaction created the connection in this business speech.

The previous examples have used minimal interaction to achieve their purpose, but sometimes an entire presentation is shaped around interaction. Autumn Scaper, addressing the business of Pensions and Benefits Consulting at a Human Resources conference, showed her peers, myself included, how to bring their information to a non-expert audience. She first divided participants into eight teams. Using the general rules of the television game show, Jeopardy!, we were to select categories and try to be the first team to give the correct answers. Each team had an audible signal to let the judges know they wanted to answer first. Using a fairly primitive multimedia system, we selected topics from the list, and after attempting an answer, were given the correct answer and more detail. Detail varied from slides and cartoons to full video clips, and each was interesting and unique. Autumn's personal delivery enhanced the connections in this program too. She used plenty of humour to keep the group amused, called many participants by their names, complimented individuals and teams for their creative answers, had prizes for the winning teams, and stayed afterwards to talk with the curious and the well-wishers, of which there were many since Autumn

had so admirably won their approval.

Games and activities can help you connect

Games rarely become the entire focus of a presentation although adjusting popular games is certainly a way to achieve audience participation. Competition can cause some people to disengage, but in Autumn's case the style and purpose of her session were well advertised to the conference registrants and her session was wait-listed. She made the situation less threatening by having us perform on teams, and anonymity was further enhanced by dimming the lights for the multimedia. The awards at the end of her program were blatant advertising for her company, a factor that could have been a negative, but the audience was so supportive that all I heard was a little good-natured teasing. In fact I heard one of her competitor's remark about the high-quality sweatshirts with more than passing envy. Autumn's session represented her well, it reflected well on her firm, and it connected.

Games and activities can also be used briefly, yet effectively, in presentations. On two separate occasions I've seen speakers use a quick participation game as a way to introduce the theme of change. Participants were first asked to find a partner and stand facing one another. They were then instructed to take a good look at each other. After about a minute, they were instructed to turn away from each other and change three things about their appearance. Amidst plenty of giggling, clothing was rearranged, jewelry, shoes, and belts came off. Partners were to face each other again and try to determine the changes. Next they were instructed to face away again and change seven more things about their appearance. Almost immediately there was a terrible rumbling in the audience because changing three things was easy, but making so many additional changes was hard. The activity was suspended and the participants, giggling while they dressed themselves again, took their seats. Both speakers remarked that extensive change is hard on people, and we shouldn't forget this principle in planning change.

The preceding exercise connected participants to each other and provided an effective lead into the topic. Activities such as this where participants interact without the leader don't always forge strong speaker-listener connections, but have value in that they establish an environment of participation such that any further requests from the speaker will likely get strong compliance.

I sometimes use brief theater games to help business and professional clients take a fresh look at interpersonal communications. I'll usually demonstrate the game with a couple of volunteers, which teaches the activity and gives me an opportunity to bond with my audience. These activities work for me in keynotes and seminars but they'd be a poor choice in a boardroom presentation or a very formal address.

Asking participants to guess or estimate a figure is a way to bring participation into a business presentation. The chief of staff at a hospital used this technique in a series of presentations to government, employees, and the community. He gave them current costs, outlined operational changes giving the savings for each change, and asked them to predict the final saving. His audiences

tended to sum the savings of each change and arrive at an acceptable figure just over a quarter of a million dollars. He then gave them the real answer which was much closer to a half million in savings. He'd gotten them involved, he'd connected, and now he had their attention as he showed them how each change, when combined with the others, created a much greater saving; the whole was greater than the parts. This minor interaction with his audience helped the chief of staff win support for his initiatives and forged strong relationships with his various constituents.

Use interaction early; your audience will participate more readily

Whether participation is extensive as in the mock Jeopardy! game show or a simple small interaction such as a request for the audience to guess at a final figure, it works to connect speaker, topic, and audience. But, even knowing its value, I've still found speakers who avoid anything involving audience participation for fear they'll have to deal with the results. It's true that once you get participants talking, moving, and interacting they do require a bit more management.

I used to do negotiation seminars as part of a government project to provide business skills upgrades for owners and managers of small businesses. I always delivered my seminar about eight to ten months into the program with only the vaguest idea of what the other seven or eight presenters had said or done. Believing they already knew a lot about the topic and would learn more through interaction and discussion, I always had the participants actually negotiate three cases. They really enjoyed themselves, and periodically a participant or a program manager would remark how it was the first time he or she had seen the group really interacting. Apparently group interaction was one of the goals of the program, a goal no one had figured out how to address.

After a year or two I was invited to develop the opening seminar for this program. I was to address the subject of networking and to get participants interacting with each other. It turned out to be quite an easy task as they readily interacted with me and with each other once they were given specific directions and told this was part of their program. The problem came when we tried to get them to stop interacting, a delightful problem in my opinion. However one of the program advisors told me he wasn't sure he wanted me to keynote his next program. Apparently he'd had trouble getting them to sit down and listen at the start of the subsequent seminars, and the other speakers were complaining about the highly interactive behaviour of the participants. It's difficult to believe anyone would choose a passive audience over an active and engaged one, but I suppose there are speakers who would find it distressing.

If you are still resisting the idea of interaction, think back to the communication cycle introduced in Chapter 1. The more interactive you are with your listener, the more likely you are to get their verbal and non-verbal feedback, thus completing the cycle of communication. The more passive your audience, the more difficult it will be to sense audience needs, interests, and concerns. Interaction helps us get the audience information we need to make the best choices as we speak.

Summary: Involve your audience to connect

- Use participation early to establish the expectation
- Give clear directions so participants know what they are to perform or do.
- Model the behaviour if you can - for "hands-up", raise your own hand.
- Insist on participation - give directions, look at them, await their response.
- Reward participation - it could be tangibles, but even thanking the audience or ending with humour makes most participants glad they participated.
- Connect the participation to the content of your presentation

