

Practical Tips for Genealogy Presenters

by Thomas MacEntee

A genealogy colleague recently asked me for advice on speaking in front of an audience as a presenter for the first time. While there are many genealogists who currently speak at conferences and in front of other organizations, there are some who have considered giving similar presentations but don't know how to get started or feel they aren't up to the task.

With almost twenty-five years of computer classroom training under my belt—and several years as a church choir soloist—I've encountered almost every possible public speaking and audience-related situation:

- Arrived at a speaking location only to find there is no connection cable from the projector to the laptop you brought with you? But, of course!
- A fire alarm went off in the middle of your presentation and it was an actual fire? Been there.
- The mayor of a major U. S. city walked in just as you get ready to start your presentation? Yes!

I've embarked on the genealogy speaking circuit recently and am certain I will see similar situations—some predictable and some unpredictable. Here are some tips, some stories, and some things I've learned along the way.

- **Know your presentation blind**. This is probably the most important piece of advice I could give, and if it means practicing for hours on end, then do it. You should know your material inside and out. You should be able to close your eyes and see your presentation slides and materials. Why? See *Expect The Unexpected!* below and you'll understand that the key to being able to adapt to any unforeseen situation is having committed your material to memory. I've witnessed many potentially disastrous presentations that were salvaged because the speaker had solid knowledge of the materials.
- **Modularize your presentation**. Create a presentation which is a collection of parts or components such as *Introduction*, *Section One*, *Section Two*, etc., and then *Summary* and perhaps even *Further Information* and *Contact Information*. The more components you have, the more adaptable you and your presentations become. Example: for a social media presentation you can have a Twitter section, a Facebook section, a blog section, etc. If a potential client wants a presentation on just Twitter you are all set. So, too, if the clients wants an overview of social media.
- **Have more up your sleeve**. I strongly recommend having more than one presentation handy when you arrive at the speaking location. No, you aren't going to pull a "switcheroo," but you never know when you might need slides or materials from those other presentations.
- **Arrive early**. This is a "no-brainer" and is just part of being prepared. It also gives you a chance to speak with audience members. They may ask questions or make comments that will give you an idea as to what they want to hear during the presentation. This is part of taking the pulse of your audience.
- **Perfect your timing**. Make sure you have a watch or some other device that displays time and place it on the lectern or table in front of you. Or use the clock on your netbook or laptop. If you know your presentation inside and out then you should know where you'll be at the halfway point. If you are running behind, then pick up the pace or do a quick review of sections that are of lesser importance. If you are running ahead of time, add on one of your "modules" and tell your audience, "I know this topic isn't on the slides but I'd like to mention . . ." Also leave about ten minutes at the end of the presentation to take questions from your audience or to further explain points which may need clarification.

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- **Your audience wants "real**." What sets a good speaker apart from the rest of the crowd is the ability to speak from the heart and to be passionate about the subject. Mention how the topic relates to you and how it might relate to your audience.
- **Use humor**. A good speaker will use humor from time to time, especially to illustrate a point. Of course, humor is not appropriate in every situation but you should be able to gain some smiles during your presentation as well as nods of heads.
- **Roam**. Do not hide behind the lectern: make sure you can walk around the front of the room or perhaps the entire room. An audience wants to be engaged; a stiff, frozen body up front is not a way to do that.
- **Take the pulse**. Knowing your audience is a skill that takes time and experience to develop. But once in place, your ability to judge your listeners quickly and correctly will allow you to consistently give a great presentation no matter the mix of audience members. This is why being able to adapt and knowing your material blind are important. I've had presentations where I was sure that a certain script and style would work. However, ten minutes into the lecture I could see that I was not connecting with the audience. So, I quickly (but seamlessly) moved to a different format and worked off-script in order to save the presentation and give the audience something meaningful.
- **Don't let technology trip you up**. Make sure you know the ins and outs of the technology you are using including your laptop or netbook. Inquire ahead of time at your speaking location what will and won't be provided (screen, projector, audio). Don't assume the setup will be "standard" or something with which you are familiar. Have a backup of your presentation on a USB flash drive, and maintain your presentation in different formats. If you are using PowerPoint, make sure you save the file also as a PPS format so it can be played without having PowerPoint installed. Also, make PDF copies of each slide. If worse comes to worse, you can always display the PDFs.
- **Expect The Unexpected**. If it is going to happen, it will…and probably right before your presentation. A great speaker appears unflappable even when the absurd happens such as fire alarms at the conference hotel or a projector break down. You may be a wreck on the inside but the goal is to appear calm on the outside and to be able to roll with the punches.
- **Give something to take away**. And I mean more than just the knowledge you've imparted to your audience members. A speaking engagement is a prime opportunity to market yourself, your blog, your website, your business, your book, etc. It might be a good idea to discuss this with your client ahead of time since they may limit what you can display in terms of signage, books, etc. But make sure that every person who comes up to talk after your presentation is given something such as a handout or even a business card so they'll remember you and the presentation.

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