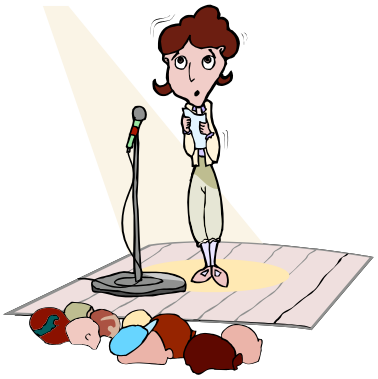
Something for Everyone! Or Not? Establishing the Right Presentation Mix

by Diana Crisman Smith



This article is based on material presented at the FGS Conference in Springfield, Illinois, in September 2011.

Not all lectures are everything to everyone. Some topics are inherently geared toward a specific audience—beginner, intermediate, advanced, specialists, generalists. To be heard effectively, it is important to define and create presentations appropriate to your intended audience. Stating clearly what you intend to present is the first step, by setting expectations. The second step is actually presenting what you have advertised.

There are several factors to consider in tailoring your presentation. Understanding your purpose in each of these areas will guide you in meeting the needs and expectations of your audience.

First, why are you speaking? Of course, because you were invited, but what are you trying to accomplish with your presentation? Are you teaching a skill? Are you informing about a resource? Are you motivating your audience to action? Are you trying to persuade the audience to adopt some action or product? How you present the material depends in a large part on which of these is the most important objective in your presentation. Whichever one is your main goal, organization of the material is key; however, the type of organization may vary.

For example, to teach or inform, the presentation should be straightforward and build on basic knowledge that everyone in your audience should have before attending. Be sure you think about what that basic knowledge is likely to be with your audience. The basic knowledge might be very different when speaking to a national, state, or even local genealogical society versus speaking to a local church or civic group. Information should be presented in a sequence that has some logical flow that could be chronological, increasing complexity, geographic, or whatever makes sense for the topic.

BRIEFLY reviewing at the beginning of the presentation some data on which your new information will build may help clarify some topics for the audience. This might mean reviewing the purpose of the US Federal Census before discussing tips and tricks for using those censuses. Such a review eases the audience into the new material with something familiar.

For a motivational or persuasive presentation, the organization might entail leading with facts on the subject, then leading to the solution, action, or opinion that you are espousing.

The next factor basic to your presentation is the audience and setting. Some of the considerations are:

- Expertise in the subject matter. Is everyone in the audience expected to know how to use the Internet, or use a specific program, or research in a specific part of the country (or world)? If you are discussing the details of a specific software program, make sure that information is included in the advance materials. If you are discussing only Union veterans of the Civil War, make sure that is clear. Even if you have disclosed your intent in the promotional materials, there may still be some in the audience who are lost; watch for signs of confusion and try to determine if there is a way to bring them along without slowing down everyone else.
- Age and educational level. This could be similar for the entire audience (such as speaking to a college class) or vary widely (such as when speaking at a national conference).
- The locale and mood of the venue. The locale could be a conference room, a convention hall,

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or even an outdoor space. The mood could be lighthearted (such as a luncheon) or formal (as a presentation to a college class). It could be a small, informal gathering, or a large lecture. Consider the facilities and equipment available when planning your presentation.

- The expectations of the audience and the sponsor. These anticipations should be based on the advertising done in advance of the event. Confirm with the sponsor what has been done to promote the event, to be certain that you are preparing what has been announced.
- Consider whether the audience is "predisposed" to your message. Are they attending by choice? Or is this the only session available at the time? Is it a required attendance for a course, or a service offered to the public? Was a fee required to attend? If you are the only option during a closed conference, they may not be as attentive or supportive as if they have paid a fee specifically for this topic. Be sensitive to that possibility.

As you prepare your materials, consider your message again. Do you have a variety of methods used in your presentation without being distracting? You should include something for the visual learner (graphics or charts), something for the audio learner (your words, with variations in tone and pitch—no monotone!), and something for the tactile learner (key points that can be written down as notes, or exercises to challenge them).

Finally, remember that part of your presentation is what each person takes away with them as a reminder. Are you preparing a syllabus? Do you have a handout? These should not be a script of your presentation, but some relevant point(s), presented in an easy-to-use form. Sometimes a bibliography is sufficient. Sometimes there is a form that you encourage using to adopt the strategies you have taught. Sometimes it may be a glossary of important terms. Whatever makes sense to trigger the memory is appropriate.

Sometimes you CAN provide something for everyone, if you are thoughtful in your presentation. Sometimes the topic or the venue dictate a more narrow audience. Either way, formulating your material properly will make you a more memorable speaker.

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