

Getting Audience Participation When Speaking

My lesson

It was a cold, damp November weekend in London. The streets were bustling with tourists and people beginning to do their Christmas shopping. The puddles in the roads glistened with the Christmas lights. Inside a large hotel conference room I was sitting at the back of an audience of about 150 people. The celebrated speaker was going for it at the front of the room and doing a great job, I thought.

Thankfully I'd turned up early for this conference as I was speaking the next morning. I wanted to get to know my audience better and to get a feel for the theme and style of the meeting.

Luckily for me I did.

Over lunch I chatted to some of the delegates and I asked how the morning went? To my surprise many didn't enjoy the session. How come I asked totally surprised, as the chap was indeed an excellent speaker known throughout the world. "He just spoke at us...and didn't give us a chance to get involved and to do things" was the reply. "He was non stop for 2 hours".

That was close

That night, in my hotel room, I completely reorganised my speech for the next morning to totally involve my audience every step of the way. If I hadn't done this...I would have bombed.

"Phew", I thought, "that was close". Ever since that day I carefully analyse every speaking audience so I can inject some planned involvement. Naturally when training small groups we instinctively involve people every step of the way, but as soon as we stand up to speak rather than train, we drop into talk talk autopilot.

Surely audiences don't want to be involved, do they?

This is important. Some audiences just want to listen to you, take some notes and take action themselves. They want maximum content and lots of practical ideas around the subject. They want to maximise your time on the platform and get the most value they can. They don't want to be heard, they just want to listen. And you need to respect that.

This is the same whether you are addressing hundreds of people at a conference centre or 8 people in the company Boardroom

Getting your audience involved is not always ideal:

- It takes time, lots of time. My session, which I burnt the midnight oil changing that night, was packed with participation and involvement exercises but these took plenty of time to run and the amount of

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content I covered was much less than I had planned before I arrived at the venue.

- You can lose control. Setting some form of exercise or involvement means you are no longer in control – your audience is. Letting go can be a hard thing to do for a speaker who has always had that control.
- It's a whole different skill set to be able to involve and facilitate. Often the comfort blanket of what we know takes precedence and we snuggle back with our PowerPoint slides to get on with delivering information.

Why take the risk then?

But on saying all of this, why would we want to take a risk and involve our audience. Let's say they're "up for it" and you know some audience participation is needed. What benefits can it bring?

- *Attention.* Your audience's attention span increases the more they are asked to contribute. Just by doing they can concentrate more. Body movement keeps people alert and has been proven to stimulate the brain
- *Learn by doing.* People can imbed the knowledge by using it. They can truly understand it when doing. Doing it gets it in the muscle.
- *Alternative views.* Hearing other people, in the audience, speak about the subject opens up an alternative insight.
- *Personalising the content,* for example through a question and answer session, makes the presentation more interesting for people
- *Show you care* about them, not just you. This helps to build a rapport
- *Practise more skills.* This helps you become a better all round speaker
- *Appeal to more audiences.* My tailored presentation that Sunday morning helped me to appeal to this audience. It would have been doubtful I would have appealed to them with my original plan.
- *More fun for you.* Seeing people chatting and doing things makes it more worthwhile
- *Gives you time* to take a breath and take stock of your notes and plans.
- *Can carry on for longer* than the standard 45 minutes. Involving the audience gives them a greater attention span so you can carry on for longer and give them more value.

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I'm convinced so how can I do this?

I'm going to share with you 18 ways to encourage audience participation. Some you've heard of before and some you've probably used already. There maybe some new ideas you could use. To help you I've categorised them into low involvement/low risk, medium involvement/medium risk and high involvement/high risk.

That way you can dip you toe in first to see how hot the bath water is.

Low involvement and low risk

- **Audience Polling.** Easily done to get a quick poll of the audience. "Hands up in the room all those that have..." or "Those people that think they inclined to do this, could you please stand up" or "if you like that idea...cheer now"
- **Moving amongst audience.** With a roving microphone you can occasionally move into your audience just like Jerry Springer or Opra Winfrey. Careful though because you'll have your back to some people and lose eye contact, but it does break up the routine.
- **Tell stories.** These involve your audience's imagination, sense of humour and allows them to connect your world with theirs. This is subtle involvement
- **Humour.** Use humour where appropriate. Just having your audience laugh or chuckle involves them and gets those endorphins working which inject motivation and energy into them.
- **Jobs for the boys** or girls. Ask those keen ones to help with your handouts, be the timekeeper, be the fetcher and carrier with, say, the roving microphone. Doesn't involve everyone but gets some people moving around enjoying their role.
- **Ask questions** of the audience. Easy to do in smaller groups, when training, for example. But in a group of 50 or more this can be tricky as peer pressure may ensure you get a loud silence thrown back at you. Rhetorical questions are best earlier on. Also you could use this with humour. After a period of silence you could say...."that was a rhetorical question by the way."
- Put **people's names** in your speech. Do a little research beforehand to find out who's who in the organisation. Who doesn't mind being mentioned and use their names.

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Medium involvement and medium risk

- Use **audience questionnaires**. Have your handout buddies distribute a short questionnaire connected to the subject and ask people to complete these. Keep them short and self explanatory, at least with the instructions on what to do printed on the sheet. The last thing you want is people asking questions about how to fill it in. For example you could be talking about leadership styles and you could use a one page sheet with a few short questions which could show everyone their leadership style. Afterwards you could ask for a show of hands for this style and this style and so on. Time consuming but really interactive. You could have a sheet put on every chair before your audience arrives to save time.
- **Partner Pledge**. Quick and simple and ensures people start to take action following your input. Ask them to turn to a partner and make a pledge to them on what you're going to do when you leave today. Afterwards you could ask for one or two volunteers to say to the whole group what they're going to do. Ideally prime these people early on, that way you won't have an embarrassing silence.
- **Group discussion**. An old favourite in training circles and has it's place in speaking as well. Set up a topic to be discussed which needs personal thoughts and ideas and then ask everyone to turn to their partner to discuss the topic for, say, 5 minutes. Alternatively ask two people sitting next to each other to join in with the two people in front of them, who could turn their chairs around. Or setup bistro style sitting arrangements where you automatically have small groups. Ask each group to appoint a spokesperson who will need to feed back to the whole room.

The trick is to get their attention back to you when the activity has finished. Bring people back to the room using the Thunderbirds theme on your laptop "5...4...3...2...1...we are go...Thunderbirds are go". Or you could say this. Use a claxon horn or a bell or something that will soon anchor the audience to know you want them back in the room. I saw someone doing an impersonation of the hypnotist from Little Britain the other day. Brilliant. "3,2,1...you're back in the room"

- **Questions from the audience**. As traditional as Roast Turkey on Christmas Day. Usually taken at the end of the presentation and that's fine as long as people know. You could take questions periodically, say, every 30 minutes. Or you could ask for them at any time and this is usually OK for smaller groups. But the worse scenario is that no one wants to ask a question. Faced with this prospect you could dish out index cards to everyone and get them to write questions anonymously. Ask them to pass the completed cards around the audience and ask people to read these out. Since the question doesn't belong to them,

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you'll get lots of people volunteering. A great idea I saw the other day, with a young audience, was phone text messaging. The speaker asked everyone to text a question to her mobile number. Sure enough within a few minutes the speaker was able to read out the questions she was receiving and answer them. Very clever and it appealed to the young audience. Smart phones are beginning to take over along with wireless hotspots everywhere so you could even get them to email you questions to your laptop.

- Use **audience photos**. Need permission for this but incorporate audience pictures in your PowerPoint presentation. I did this on that cold November weekend in London. On the Saturday afternoon I took pictures of people and asked them if I could include them into my presentation. They were only too pleased and it worked very well.

High Involvement and high risk

- **Forum Theatre**. This is great fun and allows audience members to get involved in a role play without actually role playing. Let me give you one example of how this works and there's plenty more. You need some actors on the stage or some very outgoing and enthusiastic audience members. Set up a situation, for example a sales scenario, and tell the actors, secretly, to do it badly. Run the acting for a few minutes and then ask the audience what they're doing badly and how they could do it differently. Ask the audience to give their ideas straight to the actors who then act out this way or using their words, or whatever was suggested. Really involving.
- **Flipcharts around the room**. Here you want some input from the audience in the form of ideas or suggestions linked to a subject. Have flipchart easels placed around the room beforehand and write on each chart the subject you want ideas on or the question to answer. Next put audience members into teams and ask them to physically walk over to a flipchart. You're pretty much dividing the audience amongst the charts here. Shout go and ask them to write down their ideas. After 2 minutes ask them to move onto the next chart and do the same thing. After about 10 minutes you should have lots of ideas or input to use how you wish.
- **Energisers**. We know what these are, don't we? Activities that put energy into the group. There are thousands out there, some risky some not, but they all serve the purpose of re-energising the audience in some way. The best ones are where the actual energiser is connected to the subject in some way otherwise some people think they're wasting their time.
- **Quizzes**. Highly energetic and can be run in countless ways. Teams, individuals it doesn't matter. The point is that you've prepared some questions on the topic and you're going to run a quiz of some

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description to teach further information or test to see what people have learnt in a fun manner. Easy when you have smaller groups but large groups will work too. I've seen pub quizzes run with up to 70 or 80 people. Teams are needed here and more time given after each question for the teams to huddle and discuss the answer before they write it down.

- **Volunteers on the stage.** Does what it says on the tin. Let me give you an example to get you thinking about this. A speaker asked for 12 volunteers from the audience to come onto the stage and act out a particular character. The characters were all the challenging types of delegate you can get on training courses – the joker, the griper, the dinosaur etc. I and 11 others volunteered and we had great fun acting out scenarios that were pre arranged by the speaker.

She had no problem getting 12 volunteers because the audience consisted of like minded people but if you do this, you need to be certain you'll get volunteers coming up. You might get people on your side earlier on in the day so they already know they're going to volunteer. Remember to award these people with praise and applause. Little gifts or small toys are also a wonderful gesture from you.

- **Bistro Exercises.** My final suggestion for you and the most effective. It is the bistro set up I used on that cold November Sunday. I had permission from the audience the day before to actively involve them throughout the presentation and I did. I arranged the room so that we had bistro tables which contained about a dozen people each. I then organised a series of games, activities, exercises that each table would do amongst themselves facilitated by me.

For example we asked alternate tables to act out body language movements and the adjoining table had to guess what the body language meant. We had tables solving puzzles and riddles to learn more about the subject. We set various syndicate exercises for each table. Each exercise had the instructions on handouts or on PowerPoint slides so that the instructions were clear. All in all extremely interactive...but then again I had permission from my audience...will you?

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Wrapping Up

So there we have 18 suggestions for you to involve your audiences ranging from low involvement to high participation. Remember check out your audience first before you encourage involvement and prepare well in advance. Some audiences really don't want to participate. Imagine the scene...you're sitting at the back of a large room expecting a content rich speaker just to give you lots of information and ideas. You just want to listen and take notes. And then you hear the dreaded words "and now for audience participation..."

Alternatively you could be sitting at the back of the room and the speaker has been talking non stop for 45 minutes and you're tired, your legs are stiff, your mind begins to wander and you begin to think about your holiday lounging on that sun bed by the pool without a care in the world and suddenly... Zzzzzzzz.