



The Cardinal Sins of Audience Interaction

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Advice about effective presentations usually includes some ideas about how to involve your audience. Presentations with high levels of interactivity can certainly benefit from increased audience retention, greater understanding and more commitment to action—but only if you involve them in the right way and understand the potential perils. Unfortunately, many techniques to add interaction backfire because they make the audience feel uncomfortable, alienated or patronized. Here are the three cardinal sins of audience interactivity.

1. Asking the audience to supply an answer to a question that's not obvious. This occurs when you ask a question and expect a specific answer. It can quickly devolve into a session of "Guess what's on my mind." I've seen presenters use this technique, anticipating the correct answer with the first couple of responses. Instead, what they get is a series of incorrect responses to which they must contritely reply: "No, that's not what I was thinking of." "No, that's not quite it, but that's close." "That might work in some situations, but that's not what I'm looking for." "This is easy. Doesn't anyone know the answer?" These replies make the audience feel inadequate and frustrated. This often occurs when your frame of reference differs significantly from that of the audience. This technique becomes even more risky when speaking to multi-cultural audiences.

2. Asking the audience to repeat something after you say it. This technique usually goes something like this: "Please stand, raise your hand and repeat after me." Such a request takes many audiences out of their comfort zones, especially when it's used early in the presentation. It can be used effectively only after the presenter has built a high level of trust and rapport. In my research on effective presentations, two responses stood out about why this makes audience members uncomfortable. First, it asks them to perform three actions, each of which may cause discomfort, but whose cumulative effect almost guarantees irritation with the presenter. Second, this technique asks them to mimic taking an oath, so for many, it trivializes a very serious act.

3. Asking the audience to raise their hands in an informal poll. The questions in these informal polls are usually designed to simply encourage participation rather than elicit any meaningful information. The audience quickly senses that there's no real point to the question. Even worse is when a presenter frames the poll this way: "How many of you believe X?" "How many of you believe Y?" "How many of you would refuse to raise your hands no matter what I asked?" The last question, designed to evoke a humorous response, only draws attention to the ineffectiveness of the technique and highlights the audience's refusal to participate. Continued attempts usually results in a more obstinate audience rather than a more cooperative one.

These three techniques share a common trait; they are designed simply to provoke a reaction, rather than illustrate an idea or provide a learning point. Effective audience interaction should serve an instrumental goal, rather than become an end in itself.

Anytime you plan to role-play or have a dialogue with audience members, ask for volunteers. You'll avoid picking on the introverts and provide an opportunity for the rest of the audience to participate vicariously through the volunteer. Some techniques you might experiment with include rewarding participation with a prize (but please don't throw things at them), asking a rhetorical question, then giving the audience some time to mentally answer it and getting audience members to supply their own stories and experiences to illustrate your points.

You'll find which techniques work best for you partly by research and partly by trial and error. The keys to success include a willingness to try new things, keeping those that work for you and letting go of those that don't. Most importantly, make sure that techniques designed for audience interaction have a point beyond the interaction itself.



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