Presentation Lessons from Comedians

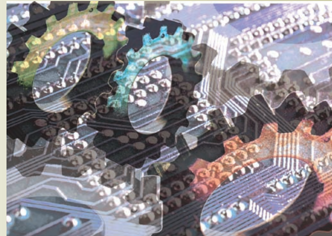
Bob Colwell

You're sitting in yet another interminable conference session. Man, this chair gets more uncomfortable by the millisecond. Who's that over there? He looks like Mike Meyers from this angle. Or maybe Mini Me. What's that interminable droning sound? Oops, that's the speaker going on and on about … whatever his topic is. You can't remember—your mind has been wandering for the past 10 minutes.

You slide back into your reverie and idly wonder if it's true that your memory gets worse as you age and whether there's anything to the folk wisdom that says you're okay as long as you can remember what you ate for dinner in the past week. I think I had grilled salmon a week ago. Or was it that you had to remember for 10 days? Uh oh, I can't quite recall. That can't be good.

But suddenly your attention is drawn back to the speaker, even though you can't quite put your finger on why. Something about his cadence, or pitch, or the way he paused and leaned away from the podium. You can just sense that he has momentarily diverged from his planned course and is about to extemporize.

If there's going to be anything memorable from this talk, it will be now, when the speaker is making remarks off the cuff. The earlier part of the talk could have been a prerecorded audio track, but this part is real, immediate, full-bandwidth. The speaker is operating at his peak communications capacity, and the audience senses that and reacts accordingly.



Presenting is a skill, essential to engineering and to the final quality of whatever we design.

If you've ever attended a music recital by a particularly gifted artist, or a theatrical production in which the cast was having a great day, you've felt that same connection—a sense that there are higher planes of communication between human beings that we sometimes glimpse but don't often feel.

Comedians live or die by their ability to fully capture their audience's attention and take them on a shared journey. They use their humor like the boy in *E.T.* used Reese's Pieces to entice the alien to follow him; they bring the audience along line by line, laugh by laugh. And the audience pays them to do it, without even being rewarded with candy.

I think comedians have a lot to teach technical speakers. Being consistently funny in front of audiences that often include people from many different countries, ethnicities, and religious affiliations is extremely difficult, and it can be hazardous.

It takes exquisite sensibility to get people to laugh without going just a little too far and making them angry or hurting their feelings—at which point effective communication is just about impossible. Genuinely funny technical speakers are rare, but they do exist—Nick Tredennick comes to mind. But you don't have to be Jay Leno to get your points across to a technical audience.

There are so many books, Web sites, manuals, videos, trainers, and courses providing information on how to make effective presentations that it seems like every presenter on Earth could use several of them without overlapping with anyone else. I don't know which are best, but I did take Jerry Weissman's course, and I read his book (*Presenting to Win, The Art of Telling Your Story*, Prentice-Hall 2003), and I think it's a great place to start.

THE BAR ISN'T ALL THAT HIGH

The first thing to realize when presenting is that the audience isn't expecting the presenter to have a Jerry Seinfeld-like command of the situation. They've learned better. While they're secretly hoping for a speaker who will engage their intellect, stimulate their thinking, and make them feel good that they're alive, they're resigned to yet another formless boring data dump by an otherwise intelligent engineer or researcher who not only hasn't figured out how to connect with the audience, he hasn't even realized he needs to.

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Audiences have learned from long experience that most presenters simply launch into their own work as if

- the audience has read and thoroughly assimilated all previous work in their field;
- it can absorb, in real time, all of the material about to be verbally inflicted on them; and
- it can accurately extract the important conclusions from this work with little help from the presenter.

In other words, the audience isn't expecting much, so even modest improvements in your ability to make a presentation can elicit gasps of appreciation from your audience. The bar just isn't all that high.

Weissman says that the first thing prospective presenters need to do is to figure out what they're trying to say. He doesn't mean that they should make an extended list of all conceivable ideas they could possibly stuff into their talk if only they talk fast enough and use a nanofont; he means their paper was selected because the conference committee saw a contribution in there somewhere. The presenter's job is to put a spotlight on that contribution, give the context and history, explain what the contribution is and what it means, and spend a minute or two elaborating on the implications for the future.

After identifying a logical flow of ideas to capture the sequence outlined above, the next task is to conjure up a set of visual aids that will help get the main points across (while simultaneously providing cues to keep on track and on time.) Yes, the presenter must now create a PowerPoint presentation.

A TUFTIAN DIGRESSION

You don't have to agree with everything data presentation guru Edward Tufte says, but I think everyone would agree that Tufte has thought long and hard about what it means for humans to communicate. Tufte has published several classic books on illustrations, graphs, and diagrams, and he doesn't pull his punches: He names names, uses books and Web sites as examples of what not to do (and why), and offers real proposals for what might work better. Yes, he's opinionated, but his opinions aren't arbitrary, and they're thought provoking regardless of how well they resonate.

Which is why an article by Tufte titled "PowerPoint Is Evil" (*Wired Magazine*, Sept. 2003) garners attention. Tufte decries the tendency for using "bullet-oriented" visual aids to establish an almost military-like relationship between presenter and audience, along with its tendency to bulldoze subtlety and replace it with short, ambiguous phrases. I agree with Tufte on one point for sure: PowerPoint lowers the audience's IQ by 20 points.

It takes exquisite sensibility to get people to laugh without going too far.

It's your job as presenter to realize that and compensate for it. For example, you can temporarily lift the audience out of its torpor by your body language, your cadence, and various other surprises and tricks. Watch professional entertainers to see how they do this. Tufte wouldn't like this, however—he's concerned only with data, not with keeping the audience interested.

When Tufte takes aim at PowerPoint's facilities for converting moderately promising data into completely useless but colorful charts, he can't miss. He calls this "chartjunk" that "pokes a finger into the eye of thought."

In his analysis of the presentations associated with the space shuttle *Columbia* disaster (*The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*, Graphics Press, 2003), Tufte states, "Designer formats will not salvage weak content. PowerPoint allows speakers to pretend that they are giving a real talk, and audiences to pretend that they are listening." As someone who gives a lot of talks, all of them PowerPoint-based, all I can say is, "Ouch, you're messing with my illusions."

But for all the criticisms Tufte levels at PowerPoint, it's not a given that PowerPoint must be used in the ways he denigrates. Tad Simons points out (www.presentations.com) that Tufte seems not to have ever actually used PowerPoint, and he seems to think that because certain of its features are commonly misused, they can *only* be misused.

It is also by no means clear how a presenter would be expected to be more effective without using any visual aids to accompany a presentation. I've been at talks where the projector or laptop malfunctioned and the speaker had to deliver the talk using only the power of his oratory. It is certainly possible to do that—Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr., and John F. Kennedy come to mind—but the ratio of great orators to boring pedants seems vanishingly small to me. Most of us need help.

WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

That's where Jerry Weissman comes back in. His attitude is that if you get your story right, the delivery will follow. How many people do you know who can tell a story well, in a way that makes people stop talking and pay attention?

Weissman says that when the story isn't clear, the audience has to work too hard to make sense of it, and they will resist it, become irritated, and finally lose confidence in the presenter. Conversely, once the story is clear, the audience will come along for the ride even if the presenter has all the oratory skills of the father clownfish in *Finding Nemo* (the one who couldn't tell the joke that ended, "with fronds like these, who needs anemones?")

Weissman identifies five hazards (which he calls "cardinal sins") to avoid in a presentation:

- no clear point,
- no audience benefit,
- no clear flow,
- too detailed, and
- too long.

When the talk is over, the audience members should know why that talk was worth delivering, and they should be able to translate that point into some kind of personal benefit. Weissman says that presenters must explicitly tell the audience what the benefit to them is; he calls this WIIFY: What's In It For You.

If the talk is a gale-force hurricane of technical minutiae, few audience members will get the real point. If the talk skips and bounces around, most audience members will have fallen out of the presenter's bus and be lying by the side of the road when the bus gets to its destination.

If the presenter gets everything right, she can still ruin everything by simply talking too long. Again, we should take our cues from professional entertainers: Leave them wanting more, never the reverse. If you see a lot of yawns and surreptitious glances at wristwatches, consider that the audience's way of telling you you're living on borrowed time; wrap it up.

Weissman also makes a blindingly obvious point, well worth making but strange in that for every talk someone gives, he is an audience member for 10 others and should therefore know better: Do not, under any circumstances, read the foils to the audience.

As Tufte says, respect your audience. Implying that they can't read as well as you can isn't a path toward the desired outcome. It also conveys the impression that the presenter has no additional insights to contribute, and it makes the audience wonder if she didn't prepare these slides or maybe she just doesn't know what she's doing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EYE CONTACT

In his July 2004 The Profession column in *Computer* titled "In Defense of PowerPoint," my colleague Neville Holmes took considerable exception to those who would say the worldwide pandemic of bad presentations can be traced to a PowerPoint disease germ.

Holmes and Weissman agree on the importance of eye contact. In his training, Weissman says "speak only to eyes," never to generalized empty space over the heads of the audience members.

The first thing prospective presenters need to do is to figure out what they are trying to say.

If you've never tried this before, it can feel a bit strange; but once you get used to it, it works extremely well. It slows down your presentation (which usually is the right direction), it reinforces your subliminal contextual grasp (you're communicating with humans, not Delivering a Mega-Talk to Your Peers Who Might Eat You Alive Afterwards), and it gives you immediate feedback on how you're coming across (so you can adjust in real time if necessary).

Again, watch entertainers: When speaking on stage, they look directly at somebody in the audience. Entertainers move their gaze around, but there's no doubt about who they're trying to reach at any given moment.

Incidentally, a slightly spooky aspect of Weissman's training is that he role-models his ideas. This means that if there are four people in your training session, 25 percent of the time he's looking directly at you. Don't let your attention wander, don't glance down at your watch, and think about that what-I-had-for-dinner memory question some other time.

MAKING PRESENTATIONS MORE INTERESTING

Weissman has a great deal of advice for how to make your PowerPoint presentation more interesting and effective. Graphics are good and go on the left side of the slide. Bullets are good, but no more than four, and no more than four words per bullet. Builds—sequences of slides that are slight modifications of their predecessors—are great.

It's not enough to just make a few salient points per slide; if the talk has been properly constructed, there's a flow to it, and the presenter's job is to keep that flow moving. The relationship of each slide to the previous ones must be clear, as well as the reason why each slide has been included in the first place.

Background colors and font colors matter, for the same reason that your shirt shouldn't violently conflict with your pants—don't give the audience yet more reasons to miss the points you're trying to make.

Weissman has one more piece of advice that musicians, comedians, and performers of all stripes will instantly recognize: Practice! When he has a new presentation to give, Weissman says he does trial deliveries of that talk constantly for a few days. He delivers the talk while driving his car, while brushing his teeth, and in front of any practice audience he can cajole into sitting still for it.

Just as with a musical performance, the more you practice the performance, the smoother it becomes, and the better the audience will respond to it.

THE WORST TALKS I'VE EVER SEEN

The worst presentation I've ever had the misfortune to witness was in an undergraduate EE class in which the erstwhile professor had so little command of the material that he literally had the class open the textbooks to page *N*, and proceeded to read the book aloud to us for the entire class period. His appalled audience knew less about the subject when he was finished reading than when he started, but they knew a lot more about him and his incompetence.

In a category of their own are those engineering meetings where somebody

has done an interesting experiment and collected some data that looks useful but has no idea what to do with it. What a letdown to carefully follow the experiment's methodology, painstakingly work through the data, and then discover the presenter has no idea of what it all means. He was not, in fact, leading you toward an interesting conclusion but was simply fumbling around, hoping *you* could make something out of it.

There's a place for creative collaboration, even before you have a position you want to argue for, but make sure the audience knows that is what your talk is about so they will listen with the intent to contribute, and they won't be annoyed by the lack of a punchline.

Presenting is a tricky business. We're all expert audience members, having done it so many times, but that doesn't translate into our being expert presenters, any more than intensive listening to Yo-Yo Ma will make us expert cellists. Presenting is a skill, essential to engineering and to the final quality of whatever we design.

Watch the comedy channel on TV, read Weissman's book, and practice, practice, practice. If you do, you'll still be a great presenter long after you can't remember what it was you came to talk about. I think. ■

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