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.

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.
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

- 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:
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.

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.

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 his incompetence.

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

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In his July 2004 The Profession column in Computer titled “In Defense of PowerPoint,” my colleague Neville

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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.

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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.

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