

*Those that come to see me do me honor;
and those that stay away, do me a favor.*

— Louis Moran

2 Know Your Audience

AFTER READING THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

- *Develop a profile of your audience*
- *Determine the number of participants attending your presentation*
- *Determine why individuals are attending your presentation*



Audience Profile

“Know your audience.” To many engineers this phrase suggests an in-depth review or background research of those who will be attending their presentation. As a result, many presenters just skip over this step, thinking that either it isn’t needed or there isn’t enough time to do what is necessary to get to know their intended audience. Most of the time you will be

making a presentation to an audience that you know very well, such as co-workers or employees within your organization. Whatever the situation, it is important that you give some thought to analyzing the audience. Once you know your audience, you will be better able to communicate your message to them. All of us have attended presentations where the presenter talked over our heads, covered material that we already understood, or just did not relate the presentation topic to our needs or interests very well. Why did this happen? Generally, the reason centers on the presenter not having taken the necessary time to analyze the audience.

When you are asked to give a presentation, it is generally to a group



MURPHY'S PRESENTATION LAW #3:

Failure to analyze your audience will guarantee a room full of people who don't know what you are talking about.

of individuals who have many common characteristics and interests. Your audience might be made up of project managers, supervisors, or mechanical engineers. For example, if a presentation is given on "Polymer Process Engineering for Mechanical Engineers," the audience is likely to be made up of mechanical engineers who are working in the plastics, coatings, composites, elastomeric, and other related industries. To be an effective presenter, you must take these common audience characteristics into consideration. Consider these questions when analyzing your audience.

- ***What is the experience and educational background of the audience?*** If this information is not known, the focus and format of the presentation may be inappropriate. For example, the engineer called in to discuss changes in chemical plant and petroleum refinery piping may be doomed to failure if he or she assumes the audi-

ence is fairly sophisticated in the subject, when in reality the audience has very limited knowledge of piping codes as they relate to design, materials, and fabrication in these types of facilities. If the presenter knew a little more about the background of the audience, he or she could include appropriate and relevant background information in the presentation.

- **What is the gender or cultural mix of the audience?** Will you be addressing predominantly males, females, or both? Knowing this information about your audience will help you tailor your stories, examples, or experiences. Whatever the situation, it is always a good idea to avoid sex-biased language. For example, some presenters are apt to refer to all engineers as "he," a bias that may alienate a portion of the audience. The cultural make-up of your audience is also an important consideration. It can affect examples, stories, or even the pace of your instruction. For example, the use of humor may not be very effective if members of your audience cannot relate to the story or the punch line.
- **What is the average age of your audience?** More mature audiences generally will question the presenter or take issue with points



being made, whereas less mature audiences may have a tendency to accept more readily what is being said. If you are older than your audience, plan to go lightly on the "war stories," or nostalgia. Watch the use of statements such as "Back in my day..." or "When I started in this business, things were different...."

These types of statements are generally tuned out by younger audiences. On the other hand, if you are younger than most members of the

audience, avoid using popular jargon that may turn off more mature audiences. Be careful when using words or expressions that may stereotype both yourself and your audience.

You are now ready to gather information about those who will be attending your presentation.



ANALYZING YOUR AUDIENCE #1

In Chapter 1 you selected your topic and created a title for your presentation. The next step is to analyze your audience. This worksheet and the ensuing ones in this chapter provide you with that opportunity. Analyze your audience by answering the following questions.

Presentation Title: _____

- 1. What is the experience and educational background of the audience?**
- 2. What is the gender and/or cultural mix of the audience?**
- 3. What is the average age of your audience?**

• *What are the job-related responsibilities of your audience?*

This is critical information, since knowing the responsibilities of members of your audience influences the points you will want to stress, as well as the illustrations and examples you will use. Many of us have attended presentations in which some excellent points were made, but which would have been much more effective if the examples had more closely related to our job duties. In other words, put yourself in the shoes of those attending your presentation.

Assume you have been asked to give a presentation about the upcoming redesign of an assembly line. Modifications to equipment will require that the line be shut down for several weeks. It is likely that you would plan different presentations for each of the following groups:

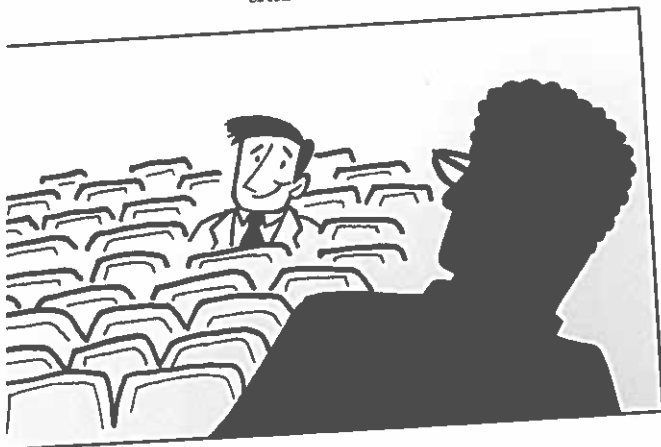
- Design engineers
- Assembly line operators
- Engineering technicians
- Union leaders
- Maintenance and repair technicians
- University students

If you are not familiar with those attending your presentation and cannot collect the necessary information in advance, you should plan to collect this data during the introductions of your participants. Techniques for

collecting this information at the beginning of your presentation are outlined in **Chapter 7**.

• *Do any members of your audience have special needs?*

Knowing this will enable you to meet the unique learning needs of everyone in attendance. For example, if some members of your



audience have visual impairments, consider using illustrations and font sizes on projected images that are a little larger than those normally employed. Individuals with hearing impairments will be better able to hear you if you use a microphone. If there will be participants with physical disabilities in your audience, then special arrangements will need to be made to make certain that the meeting room, conference area, or classroom is accessible to them and that the seating requirements are satisfactory.

- ***Are there any issues or topics that should be avoided when addressing this audience?*** When you are planning your presentation, make an effort to find out whether any issues directly or indirectly related to the topic should be avoided. For example, a specialist on techniques for performance testing of power plant equipment might inadvertently mention the difficulties that another facility was having in translating raw test data, only to discover that the facility in question is owned by the same company. Other sensitive areas might include union/management relations, required attendance at presentations, and financial and salary issues.
- ***Can any members of your audience serve as special resources?*** It is always a pleasant and comforting feeling to know that there are particular individuals in your audience on whom you might call to support the points or examples you are making. Such individuals may be valuable in establishing better ownership and acceptance of your points by the audience. For example, you know that a well-respected manufacturing engineering consultant, with experience in quality standards, is going to attend your presentation on "European Quality Standards." You might call upon this person for needed clarification of new quality assurance requirements as they relate to product exports. If at all possible, talk with such special resource people in advance of your presentation.



You are now ready to gather more information about those who will be attending your presentation.

ANALYZING YOUR AUDIENCE #2

Analyze your audience by answering the following questions.

Presentation Title: _____

- 1. What are the job-related responsibilities of your audience?**
- 2. Do any members of your audience have special needs? If so, what are they, and what can you do to address their needs?**
- 3. Are there any issues or topics that you should avoid when addressing this audience?**
- 4. Can any members of your audience serve as special resources? What kinds of assistance can they provide? How do you contact them?**

Number of Participants

The number of participants in your audience will have a dramatic impact on your presentation. This impact will affect you as well as the participants. For many presenters, the number of participants in the audience is directly linked to their level of concern and apprehension. Many presenters are not as effective with larger, more formal groups. A presentation that works well in a smaller, less formal group of ten or twelve may not work as well with a group of one hundred. Also, some types of supportive media used for a large group are likely to differ from a small group's, as is the amount of time allocated for questions and discussion. See **Chapter 3** for information related to setting up the facilities for various types and sizes of audiences.

The number of participants in the audience also has an impact on the audience itself. Most individuals act differently in an audience of one hundred than they do in an audience of twelve. Generally, as the number of people in the audience increases, the amount of questioning and interaction decreases. Some individuals who might think nothing of speaking out in a small group may be extremely quiet in a larger audience. Knowing the number of participants is essential in delivering an effective technical presentation.

Why Are Individuals Attending Your Presentation?

Getting the answer to this question is not always easy, but it is important information to consider when planning an effective technical presentation. Are the participants there because they want to be there? Have they been singled out as needing additional information? Is someone a last-minute replacement? Are participants being required to attend? Did they have any input in selecting you or the topic? Knowing the answers to these questions is important because the reasons for attending have a great deal to do with the level of motivation and the nature of the audi-

ence's perceptions. As the presenter, you will need to gain audience support and reduce any anxiety that audience members may have developed in response to having been required or coerced to attend.

AUDIENCE CHARACTERISTICS

| The Friendly Audience | The Unfriendly Audience |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive facial expressions • Smiling • Eye contact • Interacting • Asking relevant questions • Sitting up straight • Nodding their heads (in encouragement or agreement) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Folded arms • Slouching down in their chairs • Poor eye contact or staring • Little or no participation • Negative facial expressions • Sitting in the back of the room • Asking questions or making comments to get you off the topic |

From the title of your presentation, the audience will usually have some idea about the topic. Regardless of the nature of your presentation, your audience will have formed various perceptions in advance. These might be doubt, skepticism, concern, uncertainty, need, interest, or understanding, among others. Whether these perceptions are correct or incorrect, your task is to get your message across to your audience.

Presenters who create positive perceptions develop opportunities and positive outcomes. As a result, you must have some feel for the perceptions of your audience. Never under any circumstances underestimate your audience. They will read your intentions in the first 60 seconds of your presentation. They will know whether you are genuinely interested in them and the message you are about to deliver. It is your job to project positive perceptions in advance, through an accurate description or background announcement of your presentation. Imagine the feelings of an audience

expecting to hear more about the company's new product lines, only to be informed of impending cutbacks due to the changes!

To help you get a better understanding about why individuals are attending your presentation, ask friends, colleagues, associates, and the person arranging for your presentation for their input. Any insights so gained can be instrumental in assisting you to get to know your audience, but equally as valuable, they will help you determine the expectations that your audience might have.

If it is not possible to determine in advance why participants are attending your presentation, then you have no other choice but to do a quick audience assessment at the beginning of your presentation. You can include an informal audience assessment as part of the introductory activities by asking questions such as "Why are you attending this presentation?" or "What it is that you hope to get out of this presentation?" The responses to these questions can be listed on a flip chart and posted about the room for future reference. Also, both assessment questions can serve to generate interaction between you and your audience. Of course, the effective presenter will quickly point out those parts of the presentation that match individual interests, as well as make on-the-spot adjustments to the presentation content in order to better accommodate the needs of the audience.

You have the responsibility of finding out why individuals are attending your presentation. Do an analysis of your audience so that you can design your presentation with them in mind. See **Chapter 7** for more information related to doing an audience assessment at the beginning of your presentation.