

It's A Hit In Peoria, But Will It Play In Prague?

By Merna Skinner
Exec-Comm

International Presentations

When can "yes" mean "no" and even "maybe"? When speaking to international audiences, the executive who doesn't understand this could be in a heap of trouble.

The increased globalization of business has required executives to be effective presenters in a number of different cultures. Many managers perform quite well in their own countries, but neglect to account for audience cultural differences when planning presentations. Often they focus on researching and developing content, neglecting to find out how people in different countries are most comfortable receiving information.

The successful presenter is able to adapt to the specific cultural and business needs of his or her particular audience. What works in the United States doesn't necessarily translate directly to the rest of the world.

American audiences thrive on a fast pace and often are impatient and bottom-line oriented. Typically, they wish to be both informed and entertained. Speakers often may be interrupted with questions and there's a lot of audience-speaker interaction. Europeans, on the other hand, like to see things in detail, with lots of supporting documentation. They prefer to listen to an entire presentation before posing questions. Asians, in contrast, are unimpressed with lots of gestures and may find them distracting. They are most

happy hearing presentations delivered in a visually neutral way.

To ensure you know your audience and ultimately connect with them, you need to ask the following questions when beginning to develop a presentation.

Who are the Decision Makers?

In many cultures, especially Asian ones, the most powerful people who make the final decisions are typically not present at formal presentations. In this, and similar cases, you need to connect equally with all members of the audience and not expect quick decisions. If senior people are present, you may want to direct most of your remarks to them, but remember to make eye contact with others in the room. Know also that "yes" among the British means "maybe" and that among Asians, if said immediately, probably means "no."

What are they expecting?

Although American audiences expect you to get your point quickly, such directness does not play out favorably in all cultures.

Including too much information, however, does not necessarily equal a winning presentation. Speakers often become so self-absorbed with researching topics that they fail to realize what the essentials are to move a project forward. Typically, you are on track if you

share only 2 percent of your knowledge with the audience. While many cultures respond well to lots of detail, resist the temptation to bog the listener down with extraneous data that could cloud your central message.

How should I deliver the presentation?

The pace that you give your presentation should be at a rate that is consistent with the culture. South Americans, for example, are usually energetic and passionate and like a fast clip. This varies tremendously from Europeans who prefer more time to assimilate information. When in doubt, use silence to your advantage by taking a break, checking for comprehension, and then continuing.

How should I interact with the audience?

How much you physically interact with your audience depends on the culture's definition of suitable audience distance. Americans are used to seeing speakers go into audiences and ask impromptu questions. More formal British audiences would be appalled by such informality. This same sensitivity should apply to how close you stand next to someone. People in Latin-American countries may have no problem with touching and standing close, while more formal Europeans may not appreciate such intimacy.

What kind of visuals should I use?

In selecting visuals, be aware that in certain cultures different colors have different meanings. For example, in Japan white symbolizes death. Similarly, in some Latin-American countries yellow has negative connotations. When in doubt, use emotionally neutral colors.

How shall I respond to their questions?

Particularly where language barriers may exist, make sure you fully understand questions from the audience. Even if a translator is present, always rephrase questions, which will buy you more time to formulate in-depth answers. Make sure that you have sufficiently answered each question and then tactfully move the discussion along. You will have to be flexible to accommodate some cultures, which allow more floor time per questioner than others.

Should I use humor?

Although the Irish expect a little light-hearted humor from their presenters, humor rarely translates well from culture to culture. Projecting a cordial nature is appropriate everywhere, but avoid wordplays, puns or humorous stories with a punch line.

No matter where in the world you present remember:

- Do not make any assumptions regarding your audiences.
- If you are in doubt, check with your host or contact beforehand.
- If possible, deliver a practice run-through for final feedback before your actual speaking engagement.



Merna Skinner is a partner at Exec-Comm, a New York communications training company. Her firm's Web site is www.exec-comm.com.