

## Presenting to an international audience?

Europeans like detail and documentation, Asians don't like a lot of gestures

By **BRADFORD W. AGRY**

**T**he increased globalization of business has required that executives be effective presenters in a number of different cultures. Many managers perform quite well in their own countries, but neglect to account for the cultural differences of the audience when planning presentations.

"Successful presenters are able to adapt to the specific cultural and business needs of their particular audiences," comments **Merna Skinner** of **Exec-Comm**, a New York communications training and consulting firm. She continues, "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 are often bottom-line oriented. Typically, they wish to be both informed and entertained. Speakers may often be interrupted with questions and there is lots of audience-speaker interaction. Europeans like to detail with lots of supporting documentation. They prefer to listen to an entire presentation before posing questions. Asians, in contrast, are unimpressed with gestures and may find them distracting. They are happiest hearing presentations delivered in a visually neutral way.

To ensure you connect with your audience, Skinner recommends asking the following questions when developing your presentation.

◆ **Who are the decision makers?** In many cultures, especially Asian, the people who make the final decisions are typically not present at formal presentations. In this and similar cases, you must connect equally with all members of the audience and not expect quick decisions. If senior people are present, 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 does my audience expect?** Doing your homework includes knowing how much information your audience needs to hear. Typically, you are on track if you share only two 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 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. Europeans prefer more time to assimilate information. When in doubt, use silence to your advantage by taking a break, checking for audience comprehension and then continuing.

◆ **How should I interact?** How much you physically interact with your audience depends on that culture's definition of suitable audience distance. Americans are used to seeing speakers go into audiences and ask impromptu questions. British audiences would be appalled by such informality. This same sensitivity applies to how close you stand to someone. People in Latin countries have no problem touching and standing close, while 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 countries, yellow has negative connotations. When in doubt, use emotionally neutral colors.

◆ **How shall I respond to their questions?** Make sure you fully understand the question. Even if a translator is present, always rephrase questions. This will ensure you understand the questions and also buy time so you can formulate in-depth and precise answers. Make sure that you have sufficiently answered their question and then tactfully move the discussion forward. 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 image is appropriate everywhere, but avoid word plays, puns or humorous stories with a punch line. ■

### Last minute tips

No matter where in the world you present, Merna Skinner of **Exec-Comm** recommends that you always remember:

- ◆ Do not make any assumptions concerning your audience. Do your research and find out for sure.
- ◆ If in doubt, check with your host and contact him or her well before you make the presentation.
- ◆ If possible, deliver a practice run-through for final feedback before your actual presentation is scheduled to take place. ■