

Building Rapport with Your Audience—The “Like” Link

By Dianna Booher

Connections create credibility. To put it simply, people are much more apt to believe you if they like you.

Haven't you observed speakers who had great messages but who lost your respect because of their arrogance? On the other hand, how about those poor ramblers who had tremendous difficulty organizing their thoughts and feelings but whose words moved you because you liked them personally?

Think how much of any President's success can be attributed to personal popularity. Consider your favorite local news anchors or sports broadcasters. How much of their success can be attributed to viewer opinions such as, “He seems like a nice guy” or “She comes across as warm and intelligent”?

Personality traits and the attitudes of presenters either attract or repel audiences.

Be Genuine

Audiences want to know that what they see is what they will get. A few months ago I heard a speaker at a convention make several offers to address participants' questions and concerns after the session. He seemed genuinely interested in making himself available to anyone in the audience. However, when someone approached him with a question a few hours later, his brusque manner let the audience member know that he did not have time to “waste.” The speaker's hypocrisy and lack of warmth glared like a neon sign.

Audiences sense concern and genuineness. They typically do not warm up to speakers who hide behind a “facts only” presentation—one that is formal, emotionless, or indifferent. In general, be willing to share who you are with your audience and to laugh at your weaknesses, your mistakes, and your humanity.

Show Enthusiasm for Your Topic

Don't be afraid to show enthusiasm for your subject. “I'm excited about being here today” says good things to an audience. It generally means that you are confident, you have something of value to say, and you are prepared to state your case clearly. Boredom is contagious. Audiences get it from presenters who resist being “too emotional” about their ideas and the outcome of their presentation. Even the most mundane topic can be interesting to an audience if you show a little creativity and curiosity.

Do not equate enthusiasm with hysteria, however. Do not intimidate your audience by forcing them to raise their hands if they will contribute at least \$X to your cause, bring a friend to next week's meeting, or stop letting their spouse beat them at poker. How much enthusiasm is too much? You have to be the judge. Let genuineness be your guide. If you are emotional because you really feel conviction about what you are saying, then you are

on solid ground. When you feel that you are faking it, it is time to back off and cool down.

Sprinkle Humility Among the Expertise

This characteristic confuses many beginning presenters. On the one hand, audiences want the presenter to be knowledgeable about the subject. On the other hand, they do not want a presenter to be arrogant about his or her expertise. You have to determine for yourself the proper balance between expertise (which establishes credibility) and humility (which makes you likable rather than arrogant).

On occasion, you *will* have to sell the audience on your competence to speak on a given subject. When you do, select experiences, ideas, and illustrations that convey your range of expertise without sounding either egotistical or falsely modest.

Keep in mind that there are ways to show humility other than an overly modest presentation of credentials. You can acknowledge your audience's expertise with a statement such as, "Frankly, I'm a little puzzled about speaking in front of a group such as yours. Many of you have as much or more experience with [the topic] than I do. I'm hoping to share a different perspective on [the topic] for your consideration." And be sure to credit your information sources and any ideas borrowed from others.

In short, a presenter's success rests on three things: likableness, conviction, and competence.

Meet People Individually Before You Begin Your Presentation

Introducing yourself to various people in the group and asking about their expectations for the meeting or session or their interest in the topic or role in the project you may be addressing builds rapport for several reasons: It says that you are aware of their individual presence and do not just view them as a group—that you care about their individual concerns or interests. Chitchat gives you a chance to find a common bond—a mutual acquaintance, viewpoint, interest, history, or goal. Finally, they come to see you as a "regular" person—someone like themselves, someone they can believe.

Refer to People by Name During Your Presentation

Another advantage to arriving early to meet and greet audience members is that you'll learn valuable information that will help you customize your remarks. Engage them in a little chitchat about what they are hoping to learn or hear during your talk, what their role in the organization is, what key projects they are working on, or what mutual friends or colleagues you may have.

A specific reference by name—particularly, if you can add some further comment about what the person said, did, or believe—is like a personal pat on the back in front of a

group. And when any single person in the group receives praise, the entire group generally feels the stroke. However, the reference does not necessarily need to be praise. “Geri, didn’t you tell me you’d worked at Universal yourself a few years ago? So, of course, you know also that the culture there is . . .” is an audience-involving technique that says to the group “That speaker obviously isn’t on automatic pilot. He or she is aware of us as individuals who’ll need to live with this merger.”

Forget the Old Adage “Never Thank an Audience”

Years ago, the conventional wisdom was that presenters should never thank an audience at the conclusion of a presentation. In fact, drama and speech professors insisted, “The audience should thank you, the speaker.” Of course, thanking an audience is appropriate. You may want to thank them for their invitation, for the platform or forum, for listening, for their hospitality, for their participation in any interactivity, or for considering their response to any action you are proposing. A genuine, heart-felt “thank you” always builds rapport with a group.

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For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.