

INTRODUCTION

Bill, the curmudgeonly vice president of manufacturing, had just finished a speech to culminate a three-day facilitation skills workshop. Looking around me at the participants' faces, I could see that they were not impressed. Their course evaluations lambasted his presentation.

It was my duty as the instructor to tell Bill the bad news, especially since he was scheduled to deliver the same presentation the following month. As I showed him the evaluations, Bill looked shocked. "I told them what they needed to know and what I expected them to do with this investment we made in their professional development. What more do you want?"

"The content of your presentation was first-rate, Bill," I agreed. "But the evaluations clearly state that you didn't engage them. Your presentation was a one-way data dump of all the stuff *you* wanted to tell *them*. They didn't want a monologue. They wanted a dialogue with you. They wanted you to talk about what *they* care about."

Bill stammered, "I can see your point, but you gave me only thirty minutes, and I had to cover more information than I had time for. I don't have time to do those stupid, turn-to-your-neighbor kind of activities." Then he crossed his arms in defiance.

Unfortunately, Bill's technique is not atypical of many executives, managers, and salespeople in the workplace. They stand and deliver content to an audience that is vastly different from a few years ago. Today's audiences want more than a talking head. They want to be engaged and involved as you share the content of your presentation.

You, the presenter, may ignore this shift, but it will be at your own peril. Or, you may read on to learn precisely *how* audiences are different and *what is getting in your way* to keep you from being more engaging and interactive.

TODAY'S AUDIENCES ARE DIFFERENT

When I began my professional speaking career more than fifteen years ago, more than 90 percent of the people in the audience were Baby Boomers (those born

between 1945 and 1960). The rest were the Silent Traditionalists (born between 1922 and 1944). As a whole, that group was attentive, polite, and respectful. Even if people didn't agree with me, they would passively listen and ask a question or two at the end.

Boomers are now giving way to the younger generations: Generation X (those born between 1961 and 1980) has ascended to midmanagement and fills half of the seats in the audience; Generation Y (born between 1981 and 2001) is coming into the workforce; the Millennials (born after 2002) are sneaking into the back row.

For the first time in history, four generations are working together in one of the most dynamic of times. Conditioned by their experiences at home, in school, and watching cable television, and with their comfort level with ever-changing technology, Gen X and Gen Y members *expect* to be involved, and they are dragging Baby Boomers and Traditionalists along with them.

SCHOOL. Younger generations have grown up with a wider variety of opportunities to engage in their learning. They use computers and access the Internet in their classrooms, they work on team-based projects, they rotate classes and have different teachers, and they have lots of hands-on experiences.

TELEVISION. The media's impact has created generations that struggle to focus for long periods. Starting with *Sesame Street*, the younger generations are used to a variety of vignettes to stimulate their interest. Commercials break up the show every six to eight minutes. Add the multitude of media options at their fingertips, and they are less tolerant of limited programming options. If they don't like what they see, they flip to another channel. So, it should be no surprise that if you don't grab their attention in the first minutes, they will tune you out as well.

GOOGLE. Once upon a time, knowledge was power, to be conveyed in the spoken or written word. Since the 1990s, knowledge is a keystroke away on Google or Wikipedia. Your audience's lives are full of instant updates and news on their cell phones. These younger generations expect speakers to bring specific knowledge about who they are as a group and to be able to convey their expertise in an engaging way—far beyond what they can download off the Internet. Because the world is changing so dramatically, Gen Xers and Yers want to know that you have kept up with your content and with the way

they want to take in information. If you stand in front of a lectern and read your notes (even if they are brilliant), you are dead on arrival.

WE'RE ALL SPECIAL. As children, Boomers were raised to be seen and not heard. The younger generations, on the other hand, have been raised in Mr. Rogers's neighborhood, where everyone is seen as *special*. Every kid on the soccer team got a trophy—even if they didn't play! As a result, each and every person in your audience wants to feel special and connected to you.

COMPETITION. You are competing not only with movies whose producers spent \$100 million on special effects but also a plethora of presentations accessible on YouTube.com. Why should a younger audience listen to you? It is certainly not because of the artistic quality of your PowerPoint slides or handouts (otherwise, you would be a graphic artist). Your differentiator will be in how you engage and involve them in the presentation.


Soon, these younger generations will be the largest part of your audience, and they don't want to be lectured to. Out of respect, they will pretend to listen quietly, zone out, and surreptitiously pull out their BlackBerries or iPhones to check e-mail or tweet others to comment on how boring you are.

Interestingly enough, this behavior isn't isolated to just Gens X and Y. Baby Boomers are just as willing to pull out their BlackBerries if you don't engage them in a meaningful way. Rather than remind them to put their cell phones away or on vibrate, why not embrace the cell phone as a way to engage the audience? It's much easier to join 'em than to fight 'em! (See more in chapter 6.)

DIVERSITY. Audiences today represent a more diverse cultural workforce than ever before. This presents speakers with more of a challenge to communicate effectively across all kinds of borders, including cultural, ethnic, sexual, religious, and gender differences. Regardless of their packaging, your audiences are expecting you to recognize, understand, and respect their unique perspectives and contributions.

ADULT LEARNING STYLES. We know that adults learn better when exposed to visual, aural, and kinesthetic experiences. They learn, retain, and embrace new information more willingly when they participate in the learning. People learn best when their fingerprints are all over it. Your challenge is to help them imprint their learning so they can apply it to their lives.

TECHNOLOGY. Your audiences are expecting up-to-date, cutting-edge information they can't get elsewhere. They are expecting more than a regurgitated book report; they can get that on the Internet. Your presentation must also capture the human dimension of caring, connecting, and having a conversation—even if you are using the latest and greatest meeting technologies.

Keep in mind, these new technologies are evolving as fast as I type this sentence! Because these technologies simply enable a presenter to reach out to others—especially those not physically present in the room—I opted *not* to put specific online resources in this book. When you see this icon , you can go to my website, www.BoringToBravo.com, to find links to the most up-to-date resources on the Internet. In the meantime, it is your responsibility to stay current on what is available and look for ways to ultimately engage and involve your audiences, either face-to-face (F2F) or remotely. And, as much as we like our new toys, the simple fact is, if you can't engage F2F, you will definitely have an even harder time connecting with remote locations using technology.

Throw all these factors together and you have a stark reality: In the world of F2F presentations, you don't have a choice. You *must* reach out, connect with the participants, and have meaningful conversations with them in order to be heard, to be remembered, and to inspire them to action.

UNDERSTANDING THE UNDER-30 CROWD

Eric Chester, CSP, CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame

Younger people think in DVD mode, not VCR mode. So they don't read the paper from front to back, and they don't take notes from top to bottom. They've been exposed to unlimited choices, they know they can do things in a way that best suits them and get good results, and they expect that the speakers who address them are aware of that. The most recent generation has educated and influenced the older generations like never before. Having been exposed to technology through their kids, and thus conditioned to absorb information in new ways, a greater number of older people now think in a nonlinear fashion.

WHY WE DON'T ENGAGE

If audiences are demanding more engagement, why aren't more presenters more engaging and interactive? Over the years, I have heard several excuses as to why speakers neither engage nor involve their audiences:

- I don't have time.
- It's too hard.
- I'll lose control.
- No one will participate.
- Not everyone is physically in the same room.
- I can't interact in a keynote.
- I could look really stupid up there.
- I already interact!

How many of these excuses have you used? I have heard them all from managers, salespeople, and even professional speakers I have worked with. You have a choice; you can let one or more of these excuses get in the way *or* you can move beyond these objections. This book will give you lots of creative and energizing ways to overcome your fears, engage and involve the audience, and go from boring to bravo!

TOO MUCH TIME. I need more time than I have been allotted, and my outline is already crammed with information. Besides, audience activities will take precious time away from my actual delivery time.

Yes, full-blown “turn to your partner” activities take more time, but you have a wide range of *other* techniques to choose from that can also engage your audience. Depending on which ones you select, you may actually save time and cover similar material while accomplishing a better result because the participants have connected with you on a deeper level. Remember Bill? This was his main issue, but he did get over it once he learned how.

NO TIME TO PLAN. In the hectic corporate workplace, I don't have extra time to think about how to add more engaging activities to my presentation.

Yes, you do. To pepper your presentation with interaction techniques takes just as much time to plan as it does to prepare any well-prepared speech.

If it is a really important speech, you *must* invest the time to infuse your presentation with a variety of engaging and interactive techniques. Chapter 15 is completely devoted to a simple process to make your presentation more engaging and interactive.

IT'S TOO HARD. Can't I just tell people what to do? That seems a lot easier.

Yes, it is easier because you don't know any better. Despite the generation of the presenter, we continue to stand and deliver our presentations simply because it is easier to do. Although they intuitively know better, even Gen X and Gen Y speakers will occasionally fall back to a lecture style or use one or two traditional techniques—especially when the pressure is on. It will always be easier to recite information (one way) than it is to make an engaging speech (two way) that connects with your audience—unless you have the skills to engage and interact with the audience. This book will give you options to choose from so that involving the audience becomes easier for you.

LOSING CONTROL. Audience involvement is risky. I just don't know what the participants will do. How can I keep it focused? And, if some odd-ball objects, how do I recover?

Those presenters who are solidly grounded in their content will have an easier time letting go. They have confidence in their material, knowing that no matter what comes their way, they will be able to react and respond gracefully and appropriately. If you tend to be inflexible, you probably won't be able to let go completely, but there are still some low-risk techniques you can use without losing control.

PARTICIPANT RELUCTANCE. What if I ask for participation, but no one wants to participate?

Audiences will not respond well if your attempts to involve them are lame. You can't just indiscriminately ask for a show of hands or ask the audience to turn to the person next to them to achieve interactivity. You also can't do something that has no connection to the larger message. To do so is contrived and gimmicky. That is why you need to carefully select the techniques you are going to use. The audience will respond well to you when you show how much you care about them. When you make an effort to connect with them, there will *always* be someone in the crowd who wants to participate with you.

NOT F2F. I can't arrange for participation because everyone isn't physically in the room. The presentation is broadcast to one or more different sites.

This is a great excuse that holds zero water. You absolutely *can* engage and involve smaller audiences in geographically dispersed locations—as long as you *plan* for it. But it won't work if you don't even think about the remote locations or if you try to do it off the cuff. There are simple things you can do to include these remote locations and participants. It is not about the technology; it is all about the planning. Remember that other people are present with you, and you can use the technology to support their involvement.

NOT FOR KEYNOTES. I'm giving a keynote, and you just don't do interaction in a keynote.

Says who? True, the traditional keynote is more didactic, and it is typically given within sixty minutes at either the beginning or the end of a conference about a single, key theme. Who says you can't be engaging and participative, though? Today's audiences are changing. They want to be connected and involved in the program. The least you can do is incorporate a few of these techniques. Mind you, not all of them may work for you or for your audience, but many of them will. The techniques I describe in chapters 12 and 13 might be too risky for you, but I have also seen large group activities and facilitation done with aplomb. Last time I checked, there weren't any keynote police standing at the door, so give it a try.

EMBARRASSED. Since I don't know what they will do (or not do), I could be really humiliated if the activity blows up in my face.

You're right. During a high-risk activity, you could be embarrassed if you haven't thought it through or practiced it once or twice with your friends or colleagues. Keep in mind, however, that most audiences *want you to succeed*. They don't want you to be embarrassed because then they get embarrassed for you! So, if something misfires, look at it as part of the process. You shift to plan B and keep moving on.

STUCK IN A RUT. What are you talking about? I engage the audience all of the time!

Some presenters see no need to change because their traditional approach to speaking has brought them success for years. Even if you think you are already engaging your audiences enough, you may be relying on just

a few tried-and-true techniques that work for you. This book will provide a veritable cornucopia of techniques to add variety to your presentations.

Regardless of the excuse, your ability to involve the audience in a more active way requires a different skill set that many presenters have not yet mastered. They may want to, but they don't know how. Although learning how will be challenging, overcoming the obstacles to incorporating interactive techniques in your presentations is well worth the effort.

BORING TO BRAVO

No one wants to be boring. But a stand-and-deliver style of presenting just doesn't work well with today's audiences. This book will give you options. Rather than relying on the one or two techniques you seem to always use, you have in your hands a wide-ranging smorgasbord of techniques you can use *today* to make your current presentations more engaging and interactive. I warn you, though. This is *not* a basic presentation skills book. I have made two assumptions about readers of this book: one, that you have given a speech before, and two, that you have read one or two basic presentation skills books before. If not, check out the recommended resources section at the back of this book. 🔍

Unlike a basic presentation skills book, *Boring to Bravo* will give you practical tools and techniques to engage the audience as well as interact with them.

What is the difference? When you *engage* an audience member, you attract his interest and attention. He shifts from being an attendee to being a listener. When you *interact* with an audience member, you have an effect on her. There is reciprocity between the speaker and the audience. She shifts from being a listener to being a co-participant *with* you.

Where does the engagement leave off and the interaction begin? Seems like a fine point, doesn't it? You can be entertaining and full of life and energy; we would call that being "engaging." Yes, you, the presenter are engaging *to* the audience. An interaction occurs when there is an exchange *between* the presenter and the audience. It can be something as innocuous as an acknowledgment that a person in your audience is smiling at you in knowing appreciation. Or a simple answer to a question. You, the presenter, are involving and interacting *with* the audience.

What makes an engaging speaker more interactive? You *care* about what the audience is thinking and feeling. You make small choices throughout the presentation to continue as planned or to adapt to meet their needs. If you didn't care, you wouldn't be canvassing the room to see if they are with you or not.

Engagement and interaction, then, go hand in hand—and it all depends on your mind-set. To be an interactive presenter, you have to genuinely understand the *audience's* world and *their* needs. You must

- Care about the audience;
- Connect with each member of the audience as an individual participant;
- Converse with your audience; and
- Collaborate with the participants.

In chapter 1, I discuss in greater detail the importance of having this mind-set.

Chapters 2–14 describe the smorgasbord of techniques you can use to engage and involve the audience, not only during your presentation but also before and after. The techniques listed are not the *definitive* list, but they are, nevertheless, a treasure trove of possibilities to use during any kind of presentation, no matter how formal or informal, and no matter how long—whether just a few minutes, or an hour, or an entire day. Will you use them all in the same presentation? No, I hope not!

As you read through this book the first time, you will identify a few techniques you rely on all of the time. Good for you! There's nothing like a little reinforcement that you are on the right path.

Whether you are a new presenter or a seasoned professional, everyone needs to add a little variety to the mix. Depending on your personality, you can try out a new and unfamiliar technique in a low-risk presentation, or even among some friends. See what works and what doesn't. Then, as you practice, you will adapt the technique to suit your own style and your audience's style. Your success in using these techniques is limited only by your forethought and creativity.

Chapter 15 describes a process by which you can quickly sprinkle these new techniques into your presentation or deliberately insert them at critical moments in your speech. You will want to keep this book handy as a reference tool to inspire new techniques of your own and to help you create engaging and interactive presentations.

I have assigned a “risk rating” to each technique, which gauges how risky the technique is, from low risk (▲) to highly risky (▲▲▲▲▲). Depending on your risk tolerance, or if you don’t know the audience very well, start out with a low-risk technique; as participants begin to trust you, you can select other techniques with a higher risk rating.

Chapter 16 focuses on improving your presentation skills. I assure you, fewer than 20 percent of presenters actually go through the rigor of continuously improving their platform skills. Look at the table of contents in most books on presentation skills and you’ll see they barely mention how to increase your expertise and eloquence on the platform. This final chapter lets you bring all of your insights together to create a plan to improve your presentations.

This book is structured to give you a little help in that regard. At the end of each chapter you’ll find a recap that uses a different technique to highlight the main points in that chapter. Additionally, there is space for you to write your own reflections: What should you continue doing? Start doing? Stop doing? Since you have made the investment of money and time in purchasing and reading this book, I encourage you to continue the learning journey and fill out the chapter recaps as you read.

So, are you ready to start your journey from boring to bravo? I am delighted that you have joined me. Read chapter 1 and then feel free to skip around within chapters 2 through 14. When you feel that you have a good command of the techniques, read chapters 15 and 16.

From this point forward, I promise that you will never watch TV, listen to the radio, or read a magazine article without jotting down a technique or commenting on how the presenter is engaging or interacting with his or her audiences. It’s habit forming! And when you see something of note, make a comment on my blog at www.BoringToBravo.com or drop me an e-mail at Kristin@BoringToBravo.com. Let me know how your next presentation goes as you make it more engaging and interactive!