



Setting the Room: The Speaker's Toolbox

By Michael McGauley

Recently, I gave a workshop at the District 60 Spring Conference on "Setting the Room to Win." The gist of my message was that knowledgeable and skilled preparation makes the difference between an adequate presentation and a truly excellent one. Every speaker needs to take the time to do serious prep-work on the space where they will be presenting, to ensure that they and their room are working together to drive the message home. Is the right microphone available? Are you aware of the seating layout? What about staging? Is there a riser? Is there a lectern? And, perhaps most importantly, are you prepared enough to make modifications to your presentation if necessary? What follows are a few tips to help you to be better prepared for setting up your room.

Of course, each presentation is unique, and, as such, only you, the speaker, can know just what preparations will be the most effective for your presentation. But the basic tools of any speaker are largely the same. In a sense, "preparing the room" for your presentation is a lot like carrying a speaker's toolbox with you into your engagement. When you understand how to use your tools, you will not only enhance your own presentation, but you will also make the jobs of event planners and organizers a lot easier, ensuring repeat business for you in the future.

Let's start with a look at some of the common visual aids of the typical presenter.

Visual Aids

Flip Charts are a low-tech stand-by that often work well in small groups. They are

easy to prepare in advance and often come free with the rental of the space, especially in boardroom settings. We have all seen, since grade school, the technique of removing individual pages from the pad and posting them around the room. This helps to keep the listener on track with your train of thought.

Of course, Flip Charts have their drawbacks. Visibility is always a problem with flip charts, in large or busy rooms. I would consider another option in the case of presentations for more than 30 people.

Whiteboards also come free in most meeting rooms, and are quick and easy to use, with the added bonus that many of them have shutters that close to save and to hide information when necessary. However, I personally find the surface area to be too small and I don't like having to spend time erasing old information in the middle of a presentation in order to write new stuff down. I also don't like to turn my back to an audience in order to write on these things. Like flip carts, white boards don't work for large rooms.

Overhead Projectors, although technological dinosaurs, are still useful for the right situation. Certainly, they are an inexpensive way to present ideas to a larger group, and are still provided by many hotels and convention centers. And, they are a great back-up should your LCD projector fail. However, in the digital age, these old-fashioned projections don't look altogether professional anymore, and are sometimes awkward to use. Bulbs burn out easily, and the non-permanent markers smear, while the permanent markers are difficult to correct in case of an error on your transparencies. And I don't like the bright light you get when you change from one transparency to another.

LCD presentations (like *PowerPoint*) are all the rage these days, and for good reason. They look smart and professional, they can be interactive and you can even animate them. They are lightweight, easy

to read, and easy to modify. They have remote capacity, which gives you freedom of movement, and, best of all, they are a lot of fun.

Unfortunately, LCD equipment is not standard equipment in hotels, so you are going to have to bring your own gear. This can be pricey, and the learning curve, especially for those of us who were not brought up on computers, is steep and time consuming. If you don't already own the right equipment, you will find it a challenge to obtain rental gear. You would be better off just shelling out for the expense of owning, or make due with the alternatives. What ever you decide to do, don't go into a presentation without a back up. Also, beware of what some speakers refer to as "PowerPoint bingo." That's when people are paying attention more to your fancy graphics display than the content of your talk. It is very easy to go over the top with animations and graphic gimmickry when constructing an LCD presentation.

Videos can add a lot. Those moving pictures on the screen are a powerful way to deliver a message. They have a high impact with little effort on your part. Mixing video in with other presentation tools makes for some great variety and will keep peoples minds focused. However, the average TV screen is not very big, and sound distorts when the volume is too high. Thus they are not very effective in a big room, so use something else when you are in front of a large group. Once again remember to have a back up. VCR's eat tape, and mistakes can be embarrassing.

Now that you are aware of your visual aids, let's look at **seating**.

Continued on page 2



Speaker's Tools (continued)

Seating

Whenever possible, you should take steps to see that you have at your disposal the best seating arrangement for your listeners.

Theatre Seating is great for keynotes or presentations where it is the audience's singular job to listen. They have an aura about them that makes your listeners feel like they are in store for a very important message. The size of theatre-seating venues, especially the so called "soft-seaters," is a big "plus," as they allow you to maximize your room capacity. Unfortunately, when the venue prepares a room in advance, they usually align the chairs too close together, and, quite often, they will align the chairs one directly in front of another, making it difficult for people to get an unobstructed view of your presentation. They also tend to leave an aisle down the middle of the space, with your listeners broken into two separate blocks. This presents some challenges for you as a speaker. Not only are your listeners crowded and uncomfortable, with a poor view of you, but your lectern is often aligned favoring one side of the room over the other, or facing down an empty corridor, directing your energy into blank space.

If you can reset the room, offset the chairs so the audience can see even from the back. Make spaces between the chairs so people feel less crowded. Fill in the hallway down the middle in favor of side aisles, which still allow traffic to flow in and out of the room. Always make sure that your staging is positioned opposite from the main doors. This ensures that, if certain people need to exit during the presentation, they don't intrude on the view of others.

If you cannot modify the room, make sure that you take in account the audiences discomfort. You may wish to provide more breaks, or have your audience move around if they feel cramped. Make sure your displays are extra large enough so they can be seen everywhere in the room.

Classroom Seating has some wonderful benefits. It allows you as the speaker to interact with the audience, and lets the audience provide feedback. Listeners have a writing surface and thus a place to take notes. This is important for training sessions with a lot of written exercises. However, those very same writing surfaces can sometimes create a physical blockage between you and the audience. Be aware of that block and come up with a way of getting around it, if necessary.

Keep in mind that classroom settings have limited seating capacity. On average, they fit about 30 people comfortably. Sometimes less. Make sure you know your room capacity in relation to how many listeners you are expecting for your event before going in.

If the room has been set up for you in a hotel or conference center, typically they will, once again, over-stuff the seating capacity, this time making it difficult for people to get at their tables or writing surfaces. If you can, arrange the seats yourself if you see that there might be a problem. Your listeners will appreciate it, and show their appreciation with greater attention levels.

If you cannot reset the room, make sure you adjust the timing of your presentation so the audience can get comfortable, and schedule lots of breaks or activities that get them moving around.

U-Shaped Seating is great for training sessions where you wish to interact face-to-face with the audience. It often comes with effective writing surfaces, and the arrangement allows you to get right out into the audience, and even get intimate with them. If you are looking for lots of audience interaction, this format is great, as everyone can see each other. However, this same intimacy encourages cross-talk. Be prepared for interruptions and table talking. Be aware, also, that U-shaped seating really only works with a maximum of 30 participants.

"Half-Rounds" Seating is great for a keynote, or for training sessions, as this

seating arrangement is very flexible. Everyone in your audience can see you, because the tables are usually offset. The each listener can "spread out" at their respective tables, so they tend not to feel crowded, with lots of room for note taking. Half-rounds are great for training sessions with break-out group work, and it's easy for you as the trainer to mingle in among tables, and oversee what each group is doing. The only real drawback is that renting the room can be pricey, as you need to use larger rooms to make this format work for a significantly sized group.

"Rounds" Seating works well for training sessions that rely on a lot of group work. For a larger group, 8 to 10 rounds are optimal. Any more and you might be stretched a little thin as a trainer. Keep in mind that you need to move easily around the room, giving each table the attention they deserve. However, Round Seating is not meant to facilitate a lot of one-on-one with the trainer. It works best when you hand out the paperwork at the beginning of the session and the participants help each other as a group at each individual table. While you want to encourage your participants to work together, you also run the risk of there being a lot of distractions and off-topic digressions.

Boardroom Seating is great for small groups no more than 15 to 20 people. It is good for brain storming sessions, or think tanks where everyone can see everyone, and pass information across the table easily. Boardroom seating is also great for situation where these will be multiple presentations made by several members at the table.

Microphones

When it is time to **select your microphone**, be aware of your



Speaker's Tools (continued)

options. Typically, you will encounter three basic styles. The first is the mic on a stand, which is sometimes mounted inside a podium, but is mostly found in a mic-clip on a floor-stand. Wireless versions of this sort of microphone are becoming more popular, so be sure you know if you have the option to pluck the mic out of the clip and walk around with it. If you have an option, choose the freestanding microphone if you plan to let others speak at your presentation, or if you need to do a lot of reading. Freestanding mics allow you to keep your hands free for gestures and moving paper. When using the freestanding mic, you will need to develop some sensitivities to how they work, much like a singer does at a musical performance.

Any good singer will tell you that mic-handling skills are a valuable asset. Learn to get comfortable with the mike so that your voice levels are consistent and effective, never too loud or too soft. It is important not to move in too close or too far away. Mic handling skills are the sign of a truly professional speaker, and they instill confidence in your listeners, so practice your mike handling whenever you get the opportunity.

A sure sign of the rank amateur speaker is someone who walks to the microphone, bangs it or leans close into it and says, "Is this thing on?" The audience knows this thing is on. They don't need to do a sound check while they wait for you to be prepared. Check your sound ahead of time. Amateurs go on stage without checking their sound levels. You should never let this happen to you.

One more thing about freestanding mikes: there are two different kinds of stands. One is the *straight stand*, which is just the one bar running from the base on the floor to the clip on top. The other is called a *boom stand*. Boom stands have an elbow in them about halfway up from the floor. They are necessary in many situations, as when, for example, there is no mike mounted in your lectern. With a straight stand, you will have to lean into the mic, which looks awkward and is very ineffective. If you are at an engagement where there is a soundperson and you need a boom stand, don't be afraid

to ask for it.

Concerning handheld microphones, be they hardwired or wireless, your mic handling skills are even more important. As a rule of thumb, hold your mic about four to six inches from your face and speak normally. If you raise your voice for an effect make sure you yell off microphone. This will allow the audience to get your meaning without being blown out of their seats. Before you give your talk, if you intend to be walking around on the stage, make sure you know where you can walk, and how far. If you get too close to the speakers you will get feedback. Feedback is distracting and indicates, once again, amateurishness in the speaker. It shows that you did not do your homework prior to the event. When you learn to handle your mic like a pro, you will discover that a handheld mic allows for certain effects that are less effective on a free-standing mic. But make sure you practice prior to the event.

The next most common type of microphone you will find is, of course, the *Lavaliere* or lapel microphone. This typically has a battery pack that will clip on to your belt. Ladies, make sure you wear an outfit that has something for this to clip on to. I have heard more than one horror story from women, who have had the battery pack slide down the back of inside of their pantyhose in the middle of a presentation.

From the battery pack runs a wire that leads to the microphone that clips on to your lapel, often you will need to string that wire under your clothes. You should arrive early and come prepared with proper clothing to get yourself set up.

As I alluded to earlier, you should, whenever possible, get to a presentation early enough to confer with your soundperson. He or she just might be able to help you select the microphone that feels the most comfortable for you.

(For more information on

microphones and mic handling, I strongly recommend that you read Peter Urs Benders Book- *The Secret of Power Presentations*.)

Conclusion

Making the most out of your visual aids, seating arrangements and microphones will help you to create a powerful and winning presentation. Awareness of how to "set up" your room, and the tools you have at your disposal will help you when you do not have the luxury of a wide selection of equipment. Knowledge, awareness and the skill that comes with practice will make you adaptable in a pinch. Together they give you what you need to quickly modify your presentation to get the maximum from the set up you are forced to work with. Your audience will hear your presentation and will likely have no idea that much of its' power comes from you being prepared in advance. In this sense, being a great speaker is a lot like being a magician, in that much of the magic comes from what the audience never gets to see.

Michael McGauley, B.A., DTM, is a motivational speaker, seminar leader and personal coach. He is the President and founder of The Dream Builders Inc., a company that delivers workshops and seminars across North America with the mission to help companies and individuals in their quest for excellence.

For additional articles or to book Michael for your next event,

*visit www.thedreambuildersinc.com,
email mike@thedreambuildersinc.com, or
call 1-866-878-8289*