

5 Methods to Becoming Memorable (2006)

By Jim Endicott

I have an important question for you. Ready? Here goes. . .Thinking back over the last few years, what presenter(s) stand out most in your mind?

This question may not be as benign as it may appear. Stop reading for a second. Take your hand off your mouse and think about the question for a moment. . .

Sadly, most people can count on just a few fingers the presenters that were truly memorable. When you think about it, that's a pretty lousy state of affairs. Not because so many presenters are really that bad, I think it has more to do with that many presenters not being memorably good. The majority seem to fall into some ubiquitous neutral grey mist where they become part of the hoard of average presenters presenting average-looking PowerPoint in an average kind of way.

Before you throw yourself off of a bridge, I want to let you know there is hope for us all. Hope that comes in the form of paying attention to just a couple of important principles.

Over the years my psychologist buddy, Dr. Scott Lee, has been a great resource for me to help understand what moves us from the average to the memorable. It's not that deep we didn't have some sort of an idea, it's just that he spent a lot of years in school and the equivalent of a moderate sized mortgage to give those things an actual name. I want to give you five ideas for being more memorable for the long haul.

Participation

It's the difference between us watching a football game and being handed the football and sent off to the field to run the next play. Audiences are perfectly willing to be spectators if we allow them to be but deep down in their hearts they really want to be participants. They desperately want presenters to take a breath and ask them what they think. They want to be enticed to share their collective experiences with the group – to become a part of the presentation experience, not be simply an observer. But it entails giving up something most presenters are reluctant to relinquish, even for a moment - control.

Participation can be as simple as asking the audience to share their personal stories on a theme. It can also take the form of props. In one seminar, I wanted to get the point across of how hard it was for audiences to juggle all the points presenters want to throw at them. To illustrate, I began to hit beach balls into the audience and asked them to keep them up in the air. Frankly, I didn't count on the chaos created as water glasses got knocked over but the point seemed to stick. Two years later, I had someone tell me that he remembered the exercise but more importantly, remembered the point I was making. What are you willing to risk to get your audiences involved? How creative can you be to make a point stick?

Vaccination

I often see good presentation messages get undone because of some underlying understanding that some audience members share. Maybe it was a promise that was not kept by the presenter in the past, the product launch that was late or a project implementation that was flawed. Audiences don't forget these things quickly and occasionally a presenter will stumble into this dangerous minefield. Whether through ignorance or arrogance, the result is often the same. The presenter thinks the presentation went reasonably well until they get to the Q&A and are bludgeoned by a number of audience members. Even fellow audience members who were unaware of the past, are discounting an otherwise solid message. The answer lies in being aware and "vaccinating" our audiences early on to an underlying issue.

Have you seen the commercial on TV that starts out like this, "How can a bottle of diet pills be worth \$139.95?" Honest, that's the very first thing they say! The reason is that they know if they

can get that obstacle on the table from the outset, they have 55 more seconds to make their case. If they played out that little detail at the end, they would never sell a single bottle.

For presenters, it requires an element of humility. “Last year I stood here at this event and told you we would roll out a product that would change your world. Frankly, we missed our target, but I’m here today to tell you why it was well worth the wait.” Defuse major issues early on so you can be heard. It takes courage but you will be memorable for all the right reasons.

Attribution

Audiences are not typically a very homogenous group. They come with different expectations, titles and views of the world. They also come with different ways of “filtering” our messages. (It’s a wonder sometimes that we get anything through to them.) Attribution is a way of giving a diverse audience a single, collective identity. Everyone of them would like to believe they are with others who are like-minded. And when they find this common ground, it will deepen the level of engagement with your message.

Here’s what that may look like. “I appreciate the fact that you have taken time out of your busy day today. I know you had other choices for workshops but I sense that you all have a keen understanding of the stakes related to your presentations today. You’re aware that your capacity to advance in your company can often hinge on the skills you have to communicate well in your organization. I suspect this is why most of you are here today.”

Whether that was their motivation or not, heads begin to nod and we see a common identity begin to emerge. By allowing them some “participation” time in the beginning, many will validate for themselves and others in the room the attributes you’ve just given to them. “Yea, our company has been losing some major opportunities but we were the best company for the job. We need to do something differently.” And the stories would go on.

Visualization

You’ve heard some people say that they are visual thinkers. What they mean is that words alone just don’t convey meaningful messages. They are big picture thinkers and need a bigger context for understanding your solution or idea. If this were Scott, he may have them sit back in their chairs and close their eyes for a 5-minute visualization experience. I’ve seen him do this masterfully where he had an audience of 300 visualize the ‘perfect presentation day.’ It was a powerful experience and for many, the first time they had ever “seen” themselves as more than marginal presenters.

In your typical business presentation, having your audience close their eyes could be the kiss of death, but the principle is sound. Here’s what it might look like for one company.

“Before we start today’s presentation, imagine calling a customer service number and there was no “press this” or “press that” instructions. A real human being greeted you pleasantly and asked you about the problems you were having. After you finished your explanation, you didn’t get passed off a half dozen times but they stayed on the line as they brought other people on to help resolve your issue while troubleshooting resources showed up in your email. That’s the kind of world our software solution creates.”

We don’t go far enough in helping our audiences see past the present. We stay too much in the land of ‘what is’ and too little time helping them see ‘what could be’.

Repetition

Maybe you’ve heard that for people to remember a message, they need to hear it 8 to 12 times. Psychologists now are telling us that may not be true. They reference a study where 600 undergraduate students participated in a study where they were asked to draw the face of a penny. Over a lifetime, they had probably seen one hundreds of thousands of times but less than 5% could draw the basic elements in their correct locations. They surmise that repetitions alone

are pointless. (Husbands, how many times have your wives said, I've told him a thousand times that...") The key is in how those messages are encoded for later retrieval. That is the magic of how we are remembered.

Just data

Shallowest learning and recall potential - near zero recall.

Data + meaning of data

Improved slightly but still stored in left brain, short-term memory typically

Data + meaning + sensory hook

Smell, touch or seeing enhances (props, video, tactile, physical interaction)

Learning now also encoded on right side of the brain improving message retention significantly.

Data + meaning + sensory + emotion

Integrating all of the above plus adding an element that connects with the emotion (ie. personal meaningful story)

Now, message retention is maximized and recall easily accommodated.

The right kind of repetition during our presentations is a way of creating a well-trodden path to the information so the way is remembered later on. For example, if there are three major topics in your 60-minute presentation, you may want to do a brief summary of key points at the end of each section. (Psychologists call this "over learning") Don't wait until the very end, the path will already be growing cold. If there was a graphical image that related to those points, place the very same image next to the line of summary text. This gives your audience a sensory hook that is the equivalent of a road sign that points the way back. Underscore previously made points (adding meaning). Conclude your presentation and summarize with the same point and with the same images and close with a story to tie in the emotional component.

If your challenge is that there are too many points to frequently summarize...
I think you already know the answer to that problem.

The world doesn't need any more average presenters. Our audiences are simply too busy and their time too valuable. I started with a question and I'll conclude with one.

Are we memorable or forgettable? Can we afford the effort, planning and creativity to be exceptional?

The truth is we can't afford not to be exceptional these days. So, what are you doing to be different?

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