

How to Avoid Three Common Conference Presentation Pitfalls

By Catherine Stover

What makes a great conference presentation great? What prevents some presentations from succeeding?

We asked Ken Alford, Ph.D., a former *Teaching Professor* conference chair who has presented at many conferences, to reflect on common conference pitfalls and strategies for preventing them.

Pitfall #1: Nonstop lecturing with little or no time for questions

Nobody likes it, Alford says, when the presenter expects the audience to be passive during the whole session and then doesn't allow enough time for questions.

And so how do you structure a presentation with the right amount of interaction with the audience?

The key, Alford says, is to be guided by your learning goals. Find activities that help people in the audience learn something they can use. Try to make everything in your presentation take your audience closer to the goals you're trying to reach.

People who attend the *Teaching Professor* conference want to learn something that will help them reach students in new ways. Everything that you do in your presentation should lead to that.

And how do you know if your presentation is the right length?

Practice it at your home campus, Alford says. And plan to be flexible, because you can give the same presentation to different groups and find that each audience reacts differently and needs more time on some things and less on others. For example, don't assume that you have to show all your slides. If, in the interest in time, you decide to skip some, don't just advance through them quickly. Instead, enter the slide number and hit enter, so that you can jump right to the slide you want to show.

Pitfall #2: Overly enthusiastic attendees who want to dominate the discussion

It's great to have a topic that resonates with a lot of people, Alford says. The problem is when some passionate people risk taking the presentation off track by talking too much.

Alford, who is a retired colonel in the United States Army, notes that there is an old army saying: "When in charge, be in charge." The presenter has to keep control. Don't let attendees start holding conversations out loud in front of the audience.

How do you bring the audience back to the topic?

An easy way is to simply advance the slides. Say, "That's a great topic, and I hope we can continue that at lunch."

Another idea: Ask a good question. One type of question that often works well is “In your experience, what works best?” And then select someone else to talk.

Another suggestion that works well with large groups is to say, “We’re going to implement a policy that says that if you ask a question, you have to wait until three or four (or however many) other people have spoken before you get another turn to speak.”

Pitfall #3: Reading the slides

It’s deadly when the presenter reads the slides, because the audience becomes passive.

It’s much better, Alford says, to put less information on the slides. The audience is there for a live presentation, not a reading. If you have a lot of technical information, put it in your handouts.

At a conference, just like in the classroom, you need to mix it up. Try to interact with the audience within the first ten minutes—even if it’s just a quick poll. Try to start with something that’s going to be a little unexpected, a little bit different, or fun. Start with a bang, if you can.

Let them know your agenda. You don’t want them to be in the dark on what you are trying to do. Be transparent, and then stick to your plan. Don’t say that you’ll cover four topics, but then only get to two. That just causes frustration for everyone there.

Look for active learning strategies that work for you and for your topic. There are many places to find ideas. Experiment until you find something that works.

And finally, have fun. Pick a topic that you enjoy and that you find interesting.

Chances are, your audience will too.

Ken L. Alford, Ph.D., will present a plenary presentation at the 2014 Teaching Professor conference in Boston titled “‘Here We Are Now, Entertain Us.’ Strategies for Teaching Unprepared Students.” He is an associate professor at Brigham Young University. Catherine Stover is the managing editor at Magna Publications.