

15^{1/2} Ideas

to Make Your
Presentation Go From
Boring to Bravo

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No one wants to be boring. And no one wants to listen to a boring presentation. Yet boring speeches happen all the time. With over 17 million meetings held on a daily basis in corporate America, some kind of speech is given to kick off every single meeting, and then there are usually one or more presentations on the agenda. Conservatively, that's over a billion presentations a month!

While 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, today's audiences are demanding more engagement and interaction. Their lives are full of instant updates and streaming news sent straight to their cell phones. They are expecting you to bring specific knowledge they can't get anywhere else and deliver it in an entertaining way.

Unfortunately, most people rely on a few tried (yet true) techniques to engage an audience and rarely stumble outside their comfort zone. If you truly want to connect with your audience, you can choose to make your presentations more engaging and interactive.

In the ChangeThis Manifesto, I share 15½ of the simplest techniques to take your presentations from boring to bravo—so engaging that your audience will be inspired to take action.

1. It's Not About You.

Even though there are a bazillion meetings in North America, we have all been in the exact same kind of meeting: The presenter is sharing boatloads of information about the topic—far too much for you to care about, no less understand. Your eyelids begin to droop and sleepy time is close at hand.

Rather than spew forth everything you know about your topic, do a different kind of research. Find out who will be in the audience. Try to understand their hopes, fears, interests and, most importantly, why they will even bother to come to your presentation. Then tailor your speech to connect your comments with what they care about. Not the ones you think they should care about. This is a subtle distinction with dramatic implications. If you do not address something that helps make their lives better or will improve the lives of people they care about, you will be boring. Guaranteed.

→ 2. Engage Early.

Your presentation starts the moment the meeting is announced, with your name on the agenda. Pick up the phone and interview a few participants, email a simple survey, open discussion in a blog post, post a question to a group on LinkedIn or Facebook, start a unique wiki about your presentation, etc. There are a ton of technologies out there to enable you to start the conversation before your presentation even begins. And, the side benefit is that you are doing research on the audience (see #1)!

Here's what I mean by engaging early. When Don Tapscott, author of the bestseller *Wikinomics*, was the keynote speaker at Meeting Professionals International (MPI), he reached out to the MPI registrants. According to CEO Bruce MacMillan, "he blogged with them, invited questions before the event, and built them right into his presentation. In essence, he built the presentation around the interests of his audience even before they got there. The audience felt like they were personally involved. They felt like they could see their fingerprints all over the content he delivered. And so they got more out of it. ... It was personal, and the people who were in the audience felt that they had collaborated and created something remarkable."

→ 3. Be Relevant.

A world-renowned organizational anthropologist was giving an interesting presentation I was attending when, with one slide, she lost all credibility. She displayed a visual of a whale leaping up out of the water to eat from a human hand, and used it as a real-life example to make a point. Most of us knew this slide was urban legend material lifted off the Internet and was, in fact, not true. Although I quietly sat there, I couldn't accept another word she said. What else was she showing us that was not true? Several people got up and left.

Today's audiences are exceptionally savvy. They are expecting up-to-date, cutting edge information they can't get elsewhere. They are expecting more than a regurgitated book report or sensationalized statistics. They can get that on the Internet. If they can read it elsewhere or download the same information, why should they make an effort to come listen to you?

If you do not address something that helps make their lives better or will improve the lives of people they care about, you will be boring.

→ 4. You Are the Number One Visual

In the early days of staged performances when there was no electricity, the light on the performer was cast by burning chalky lime in pots at the front of the stage. When performing downstage close to the pots, you were considered to be in the “limelight.”

While we have electricity these days to power the lights, sound systems and multimedia projectors, never forget that the audience is coming to hear you. YOU are the number one visual in any presentation. While you are in the limelight, your connection to the audience, your energy, and your message are more important than any other visuals you may use.

→ 4.5. Get Out From Behind the Lectern

Most presenters stand behind a lectern if it is in the room. Don't do it! Although a handy place to put your notes, the lectern creates a physical barrier between you and your audience. Stand to the side of it, or put your talking points on one sheet of paper.

You can't connect with your audience if you are standing behind a lectern, table, chair, or other physical obstacle between you and your audience. I recently witnessed a corporate Vice President pull a chair in front of him, creating a subliminal barricade between him and the audience. Awkward, as he was professing he wanted the group's input! Did he get their comments and suggestions? No, he did not. Not until he sat down, and then it took a while to jump-start the group into a meaningful conversation.

→ 5. Use PowerPoint With a Purpose

PowerPoint slides are an effective tool to complement your speech. Your slides should visually punctuate one of your points, tell a story, or create a mental link for the participant to grasp a concept. If it doesn't serve your audience, here's a simple idea: Blank the screen either by inserting a black slide or hitting the button on your remote. All eyes should be on you (see #4), not on a slide that is no longer pertinent.

Never turn your back on the audience to speak to your slides; it breaks the fragile connection you have with the audience. Your slideshow is not a crutch for you to remember which point you are on either. If you must, look to see what the next slide is, then turn to the audience and talk about the slide. Don't summarize the slide (boring!); don't read us the slide (even more boring!). Talk about what the slide means to the audience. You'll have a conversation going in no time!

YOU are the number one visual in any presentation.

→ 6. Is it a Slide or is it a Slideument?

Many presenters cram their slides with detailed information – not so much for the presentation, but for the “what if” factor. “What if” the audience wants more information? “What if” a detailed question comes up? “What if” they need to access that information later?

For some bizarre reason, this detailed information worms its way into your slide presentation, becoming a “slideument” – a combination of slides with supporting documentation.

(Note: Big thanks to Garr Reynolds of Presentation Zen fame for coining this new word).

While it is easy enough to print the “handout” option on PowerPoint, I don’t recommend you print the slides out verbatim as your handout or takeaway. Keep the two objectives distinctly separate:

Your handout or takeaway should contain all the detailed information enquiring minds want to know. *Your slideshow*, on the other hand, is the visual representation for your presentation.

They can come from the same file but “hide” different pages depending on whether you are printing your handout or displaying your presentation.

→ 7. Know Your Speech.

A CEO recently gave a presentation to a group of CFOs about the critical skills every CFO needs to have. The information was impressive: data collected from over 75 CEOs about what’s important to the audience’s success. The CEO prefaced his comments by saying, “I want this to be a conversation.”

In his head, he was thinking “conversation.” In his heart, he was thinking, “I don’t want to lose control.” He then proceeded to share slide after slide without creating any space for interaction. He could have asked an intriguing question and then suffered the silence until he received a reply. He could have animated the slide to show the question first and let the group speculate on the answers. He could have taken a poll of the group and compared the CFO answers to the CEO answers.

He could have... but didn’t. The result? It was boring. Great information, but duller than dirt. This CEO simply didn’t want to lose control. And it’s not like he’s a control freak either.

He just didn’t think through how he was going to talk about his topic. Sure, he had interesting slides, but you need more than interesting slides to engage and involve the audience.

You need to know your speech with and without your slides. This seems pretty obvious but I continue to be amazed at how many people just “wing it.”

Yes, you should have an outline with your key points, memorable phrases and stories, key actions to make the speech amazing in the eyes of the audience, and a call to action at the end.

Yes, you should practice your speech until you are sufficiently comfortable with the opening, the closing, the stories, and the actions you will take to involve the audience.

No, I am NOT talking about rote memorization. Although there is a time and place for you to memorize your speech, most presentations in the workplace do not need to be memorized.

However, in order to pull this off, you need to prepare. Be as much of an expert on the topic as you can possibly be. Immerse yourself in the content. Be relevant (see #2). Think through how you are going to encourage participation. Be fluent so you can bend like a willow when the audience does interact with you or when the unexpected happens, which according to my good friend Murphy, it will.

8. Have a Mini-Conversation.

Whether you are speaking to a few people or to a packed auditorium, present your information in a conversational style rather than a stilted “this is how presenters present” style. Most of us are pretty engaging when we speak one-on-one or to a small group of close friends. So why not take that comfortable, casual style with you onto the stage or to the front of the room? Your local television news anchors and reporters have a more conversational tone and so can you.

As you begin your talk, think mini-conversations rather than a stand-and-deliver speech. Look at a friendly face in the audience and stay with that person for a sentence or two or until you

complete a thought. Allow yourself enough time to connect with that person—typically three to five seconds. Then move to someone else in the room, distributing your mini-conversations smoothly and deliberately throughout the room, without being too predictable as to where you will go next!

Remember to reach into the rafters, the cheap seats, and the fringes of the audience—when you pull them into the conversation, it pulls in everyone in between!

→ 9. Ask Engaging Questions

One of the most powerful ways you can connect with your audience and begin a conversation is by asking an engaging question—and then be silent. Wait for the answer. If you suffer the silence for one or two seconds and look like you are expecting a response, someone will answer you!

Many speakers get nervous and answer their own question (otherwise known as a “rhetorical” question), which severely limits interaction. They might ask a series of rhetorical questions where they don’t get, and weren’t expecting, a response. Then, when they poll the audience (a show of hands, please), they wonder why people don’t raise their hands!

Most audiences get confused. Do you want an answer or not? If you want an answer, pause and listen for the answer. If you are going to poll the audience, ask the question and model the behavior you are looking for. For example, “Who here...” and while you are asking the question, raise your hand high in the air. This sends a clear signal that you are expecting those people who will say “yes” to raise their hand with you. Moreover, you are the one person in the room who can see all the results and enquiring minds want to know. Share the results in the form of a statistic: “That looks like thirty folks, so that’s 10 percent of the group.” Or, if you want to make it a tad bit funny, be more precise, even though it is obviously a best guesstimate: “27 folks agree, and that is 13.3 percent of the group.”

→ 10. Tell the Story

Once upon a time, I was facilitating a strategic planning session sponsored by two senior executives. Each of the two executives opened the session in two distinct ways: Executive #1 went to the front of the room and thanked the participants for coming. He said he was excited about the work we were going to do. Ho hum. Nice, but boring. Executive #2 went to the front of the room and started with a story about driving his car... to work? To their biggest client's office? To the beach? To Disneyland? He immediately engaged the participants by creating an analogy between his drive and the group's strategic planning efforts. The audience was much more interested in his remarks. They were different, they were personal, and they could see themselves driving to Disneyland!

Since the dawn of man, we have gathered around the fire, rapturously listening to stories that define what is important to the clan. Today's audiences are not too different from our ancestors. When listeners hear a well-told story, they take a journey with you, correlating their own experiences with yours. Your story becomes their story or it reminds them of a similar story from their own lives. This is called a "Me Too Moment." Your stories help you build a connection to your audience. It could be a story about yourself or someone you know. If you don't have enough stories of your own, you can certainly "borrow" a story as long as you cite the source and ask their permission if at all possible. Please, do NOT brag about your accomplishments, lift a story off the Internet, or repackage a borrowed story to sound like it happened to you.

But here's the weird part: After one of your presentations, a participant will share her "Me Too Moment," which is a vastly different story from your own and with a different meaning altogether! I used to think these people just didn't get the point until I realized that they got the point they needed to get. And that's what so great about stories: each audience member can derive their own unique takeaway from the exact same story! Your audience may not remember exactly what you said during your presentation but they will remember your stories.

→ 11. Embrace Technology

Newsflash: You no longer have to stand in the dark. Any multimedia projector packing at least 2500 lumens has enough candlepower to project a visible image in a brightly lit room. You should know this by now, but oddly, many people still stand in the dark while the PowerPoint plays on.

If your eyes glazed over at the mention of lumens, then hold on to your seat because the Luddite in you isn't going to like this: You should know the capabilities of every type of technology in the room. At the very least, you should know how to turn the projector on/off, sync up your computer, and advance your slides using a remote control.

For example, if 90% of your audience has cell phones (common enough these days), then let the audience know how they can use their cell phones to respond to a poll or feed questions to you. If you are brave, project the feed onto a screen behind you (this is called a "twitterfall." Ain't that cute?) so all can participate in the "back channel" discussion—the conversation going on in the room while you are speaking.

Can't make it to the meeting due to a volcanic dust cloud covering European airspace? Skype it in, but only if you are extremely comfortable using the technology.

Warning: Kristin's personal technology pet peeve: Use a Microphone.

If you are presenting to more than 100 people, do us all a favor and use an arcane technology called a microphone. Lavalier or handheld? No one really cares. Use a microphone. Even if you think you have a loud, booming voice. Use a microphone. It is not about your voice, it is about the audience's ability to hear you. So put away your pride and speak into a microphone.

Better yet, learn a little something about microphones. How to turn them on. How to turn them off before you go to the restroom. How your mouth needs to be relatively close to the microphone

to be heard. And how to fish the little wire down your shirt so it doesn't distract the audience by flopping all around.

While I'm on my micro-rant, please be nice to the A/V people. Okay, be nice to ALL people, but especially the A/V people. Find out their first name and use it. Say thank you every once in a while. Do your sound check with them. Wander around the room while you do a sound check. Note the "hot spots" (too much feedback) with masking tape on the floor – and don't walk into the hot spots! Then make sure the A/V person takes a piece of masking tape and notes your sound level on the mixer board and then writes your name next to it. If there are multiple people on the program, you will sound perfect!

Of course, don't use any kind of technology just for the "cool factor." Make it purposeful, and do lots and lots of practice runs before you do it for "real." Murphy's law still rules: Whatever can go wrong will go wrong, especially during your presentation!

→ 12. Involve the Audience

Bob Pike, a renowned champion of participant-centered training is often quoted as saying, "Never do for the audience what they can do for themselves." As you review your presentation, ask yourself whether you are doing something that an audience member can do just as easily.

When you ask an audience member to do something for you, she feels special. She morphs into a participant while sending a subliminal signal to the rest of the audience that you are reaching out for help, and they might be more willing to cooperate when you ask them to do something later. It can be something as simple as asking for help in setting up the room, being a timekeeper or recorder, or a "runner."

Those are the easy things you can do. Demonstrations, skits, competitions, and role-plays are more complex interactions that take more thought and deliberate consideration but have HUGE payoff because they are HUGELY memorable.

One of my most impressive interactions is a team-based psychological experiment I first read about in Harvard Management Update. I wanted to talk about it but thought it would be much more powerful as a demonstration. So I obtained the original study and developed a scenario with four participants to show the effects of freeloading on a team. I then practiced SEVERAL times with friends, family, and relative strangers off the street. Wildly popular. Wildly memorable. I didn't just dream it up during the middle of the presentation. These things take a bit of forethought. And patience. And are well worth the investment of time.

→ 13. Facilitate Rather Than Present.

A colleague of mine was asked to give a presentation. As he was doing his research (see #1), he discovered that the client wanted more than information delivered as a presentation; the client wanted the participants to identify the issues, wrestle them to the ground, and figure out how to apply the outcomes to their organization.

As you involve the audience even more, you may find your role transitioning from presenting information to facilitating discussions among the participants. What's the difference? The facilitator focuses on the process of the session (the how) rather than the content (what the topic is). A facilitator fundamentally believes that the knowledge is resident in the room rather than in the mind of the speaker on the stage. A process facilitator literally makes things easier for the audience by enabling them to fully participate and collaborate. In its highest form, facilitation expects the participants to drive the agenda and the facilitator to guide them to achieve their objective.

→ 14. Ask for the Order.

The end of your presentation is the crucial point where the cup meets the lip. You present a great speech, but if you haven't shifted the audience's perspective, increased their knowledge, or inspired them to do something differently, your words are for naught.

Your audience will not take action unless you ask them to. Don't assume they know what they should do as a result of your brilliantly crafted presentation. Salespeople are always encouraged to "ask for the order." You should make a similar request of your audience. What do you want them to do? Suggest a relatively easy action they could do when they get back to the office that day or the day after your presentation. Or be bold and make a more challenging request.

Presentation coach Nick Morgan says the only reason to give a speech is to change the world. And why not? Expect to change the world with your words! By making your presentation more engaging and interactive, you will connect with your audience so they can be inspired to action. And isn't that the point?

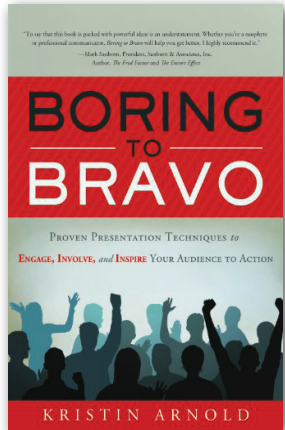
Your audience may not remember exactly
what you said during your presentation but
they will remember your stories.

→ 15. Be Deliberate.

So here's my request of you, dear readers. When you prepare your presentation, keep in mind:

1. Your presentation is about them, not about you.
2. Engage early, even before your presentation begins.
3. Be relevant and unique; more than what they can find on the Internet.
4. Remove any physical barriers between you and the audience.
5. Use PowerPoint to complement your presentation, not supplant it.
6. Create a handout or takeaway with all the detail enquiring minds want to know, which is different from your slideshow.
7. Know your speech, inside and out, so you can go with the conversational flow and deal with any obstacles.
8. Have a mini-conversation with the audience using your eyes.
9. Have a real conversation with the audience starting with engaging questions.
10. Tell a "Me Too" story.
11. Embrace the technology in the room but only if it enhances the participants' experience.
12. Involve the audience by letting them do as much for themselves as they can.
13. When appropriate, facilitate the conversation.
14. Ask for the order with a compelling call to action.
15. Deliberately think through how you are going to engage, involve, and inspire your audience to action.

All this happens because you aren't winging it. **When you prepare to be engaging and interactive, you are engaging and interactive.** 📄



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Kristin Arnold's [*Boring to Bravo*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As high stakes meeting facilitator and current President of the U.S. National Speakers Association, Kristin Arnold is on a crusade to make all presentations in the workplace more engaging, interactive, and collaborative.

Her book *Boring to Bravo*, has over 75 more tips and techniques to help make your presentations go from Boring to Bravo in no time!

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