



Jim Endicott

How many audience can avert Y2K presentation boredom

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One of the blessings of this month is that it marks the end of prognosticators' endless speculation on Y2K. Whatever happens to our computers in the wee hours of Jan. 1, at least we'll

know what it was — next month. In the meantime, whether you're on the "global meltdown" side or in the "just a minor inconvenience" camp, we have a few more weeks to wonder what will be different when the clocks change over to 2000.

Personally, I feel as though I can weather whatever Y2K throws at me. Getting hypothermia because your computer-controlled electricity is out (to take just one of the naysayers' disaster stories) can't be nearly as bad as sitting through a truly terrible presentation, bored out of your skull, with no means of escape. I'd rather freeze to death than be bored to death any day. What I propose to do this month is to provide some much-needed support for

listeners, not presenters, bearing in mind that most of us presenters do a fair amount of audience duty as well. So if you've ever found yourself stranded in a conference room with a deadly-dull presenter, here are some survival skills you can really use.

Fix your gaze

Women who have been through childbirth know that you can ease discomfort, to a certain extent, by concentrating on a focal point while you control your breathing. Panting in the middle of a presentation might be disruptive, but you can still try a modified version of Lamaze next time you're trapped in Deadsville. If your presenter is showing monotonous slides, finding a focal point is easy: Pick a place on the screen, fix your gaze and paste an interested expression on your face. The fact that you're not actually looking at the presenter doesn't matter, since the presenter is probably not

looking at you — if he or she were doing so, you wouldn't be nearly as bored. It's pretty tough to ignore a speaker's eyes when they make contact with yours, even if only for a few seconds; it actually feels as though they're directing the message to you personally.

If you're sitting in the front row, though, you may find the speaker looking at you — and *snickering*. This might well mean they're using that tried-and-true method of overcoming fear: "Imagine the audience in their underwear." If you sense this is the case, turnabout is fair play. I recommend you envision the presenter, male or female, in a clown costume. The grin on your face might give the flailing presenter some much-needed encouragement.

A big problem with the fixed-gaze approach, however, comes when a presenter's slides actually are meaningful graphic images, ones that catch your attention instead of sending you off into space. If the presenter happens to be using the seven-second rule, making sure you can scan what's on the screen and get the gist of it quickly, or if he or she is breaking down a complex subject into information nuggets, you might find yourself drawn into the talk against your better judgment.

For example, savvy speakers might recreate four columns of financial information into a process flow diagram that they break down and animate in sequence as they explain it. Maybe





they've even tried the CUSTOM ANIMATION options in PowerPoint, which let them WIPE RIGHT on a mouse click, introducing the data only when the previous information has been explained. But if interesting and unpredictable things keep happening on the screen, you as an audience member no longer have a problem, right?

Catch up on your computer work

If you're fortunate enough to be sitting near the back of the room, the simple solution to tuning out the drone is to whip open your laptop and get caught up on your e-mail. Or on the latest computer-solitaire game (turning off the sound first, of course).

I would suggest glancing up from time to time, however. As presenters become aware of losing audience members to this or similar diversions, the really good ones will start to close the distance. They'll step down from the podium, move among the audience members, and occasionally gesture toward the less-engaged (such as you). With every step in your direction, it becomes more and more difficult to ignore the presenter. It might even get you to close your laptop and pay attention. Just when you thought you were finally going to beat last month's score!

Pretend you're taking notes

It gives us presenters a great feeling to look over an audience of diligent note-takers. It's a compliment, really. So poise your pencil over the page and look into your lap. From there it's only a short step to closing your eyes — how can the presenter tell the difference? We can't, you know. Just make sure that, when you doze off, you keep your pencil up and don't do what a lot of people do during their little catnaps: nod your head abruptly, breathe erratically, or, in the absolute worse case, start snoring. Then it's not such a compliment anymore. When you fall asleep, it doesn't matter how hot the graphics are onscreen, or how good a delivery the presenter's giving you. The only thing you see is the inside of your eyelids.

A good presenter, though, knows how to wake up a sleepy audience with sensory-based content. Anyone can put a slide on a screen, but sound and video create deeper connections with listeners. Cheesy sound effects won't do it, however. Proven dream-disruptors are voice-overs from industry experts, recorded testimonials from customers, or sounds from on the job. One recent customer of mine, in creating a sales presentation for elevator-maintenance contracts, recorded the mechanical sounds of elevators moving and used them during slide transitions. Similarly, a 30-second digital video clip of a manufacturing process, or of an enthusiastic customer exclaiming how great the company is, makes it downright impossible not to look up at the screen. Unfair tactics, I know, for the audience member who simply doesn't want to be there in the first place — but they work.

Get ready, get set...

How prepared you are for Y2K probably reflects the depth of your fear. Likewise for us presenters:

The more fear we have of you, the audience, tuning us out, the more likely it is we'll seek out resources to help us counteract your boredom. With some extra effort in the year 2000, we can turn chronic fear of presenting into the confidence we need to succeed.

After all, the new millennium might or might not bring massive computer shutdown, but you can count on it bringing a ton of boring presentations. Let's all be ready — and make sure ours aren't among them. ■

