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Get Real! Presentation Lessons from TV's Survivor

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinction

This summer I became a Survivor TV show junkie. I didn't want to. I fought the urge for the first few episodes but I tuned in anyhow. Maybe it had to do with the fact that living out in the country we only get two channels - four if the wind is blowing from the north, and I was suffering from stimulus deprivation. After watching for those many weeks I'm convinced there are a few things we can learn about audiences and how we can create better presentations. Maybe I'm just scrambling for some greater redeeming value but there are some nuggets of wisdom we can learn if we're so bold as to peer into the American psyche. Here's what I learned.



Americans have a real hunger for what's "real"

I'm not going to attempt to define "real" in this context. The series was artificial but Americans tuned in by the millions because there was an element of unpredictable human drama.

Would Sue's scheming finally do her in?

Would Richard's planning ever pay off?

Would Kelly get the boot if she didn't keep winning immunity?

As we develop our presentations there are two basic approaches we frequently see. By far the most common is this: presenters create very canned content consisting of what turns out to be very predictable presentation elements delivered in a predictable fashion by a single presenter. This is the most common approach to presentation content and for good reason; it's the easiest and it introduces the fewest variables to try to manage. For most time-strapped presenters these days, it's not only one approach, it turns out to be the only viable approach they see. Easy and most practical, however, is rarely the best. Let me put Survivor in the context of this approach and see how tantalizing this TV Guide description might be to you.

"This week on Survivor, Richard, Rudy, Sue and Kelly continue to try to create alliances. (Richard played by Richard Crena, Rudy by Jack Lemon, Sue by Mimi Bobeck from the Drew Carey Show and finally, Calista Flockhart playing Kelly.) Kelly once again wins immunity while Rudy is still trying to come up with answers to questions from last weeks show. Other than that... more rice, bugs and overcooked fish."

Hardly a compelling storyline and the presentation equivalent is hardly a good reason for

audiences to want to engage your topic either. Here's what you can do to add a touch of realism back into your presentation content if you're willing to stretch yourselves a bit.

Be a little unpredictable if you dare

During the course of your presentation, introduce graphical elements that are a little non-standard. Perhaps a couple screen captures of a website. Have the browser graphic element stay the same at the top and using PowerPoint's animation menu introduce other screens from the web site on mouse-click. If you have some good quality video with CEO comments, industry experts or a tour of your facility or product lines, introduce 30-40 seconds of well-chosen digital video. Digitize a voice-over from an industry expert and embed the sound with the person's photo and animate in a text quote highlight. If you're all out of ideas, maybe it's time to bring in a professional presentation design group to introduce graphical elements that bring your content to life for your audience. It's clear that "same old – same old" is the last thing an audience wants to see. When they have a good idea of where you're headed, and how you're going to get there, it takes away all incentive for them to mentally participate.

Include "real" interaction with your audience

Take a detour from your prepared delivery and enlist your audience, at select times, as co-presenters. You've just included a touch of reality – them. Have places in your presentation where you might pose a question and solicit their live, real-time feedback. Often times in my seminars I'll include a screen saver of Dilbert presenting to his office staff. Of course, he's horrible but it makes this question possible. "You're a highly paid presentation consultant to Dilbert's company. What recommendations would you have to elevate the quality of his presentations?" The feedback from your audience is real. It can be funny. It can be poignant but the significant issue is that they are participating. Even in a sales presentation, pause and ask the question (verbally and on screen), "What are you looking for in a product partner relationship?" Their feedback will be invaluable. Preparation is important and you need to have a strong sense of where you'll go and where you won't during these interactions. The more you do it, the better sense you'll have for the possibilities. Bottom line, the audience will feel like your presentation is free to explore and more real when you include them.

Co-presenting introduces several unique perspectives

Co-presenting may not provide the standalone presenter with the ego gratification he/she may be looking for, but by involving a co-presenter, variations in the personalities and delivery styles can create a compelling tag team element to your presentation. Presenters can play off of one another's topics and introduce a refreshing change from the norm. Imagine if Survivor Island only had one person for thirteen weeks!

Be real with your audiences

One of the most interesting statistics that came out of the post-Survivor interviews is that the American viewing audience had actually selected Rudy as the one they wished had won the million dollars and the title. That's right, old, cantankerous, feisty and painfully-blunt Rudy. It's not that fifty million people necessarily shared his views on life and life styles but they appreciated his blunt honesty in a world that's calculated, canned and contrived. In a very strange way this aging war veteran became the hometown boy. As you're delivering your next presentation consider the lesson here. People (and audiences) appreciate honesty and candor. They appreciate responses that are not always crafted, massaged and read. This creates a strong case for why presenters should avoid reading (or the appearances of reciting)

presentation content. It just doesn't work and audiences cry out for less structure.

I understand that they will be shooting the Australian version of Survivor soon and it will probably be a bigger hit than the first one. Reality is pretty compelling stuff. The most reality many presentation audiences get is when a presenter's laptop locks up and they are treated to a few minutes of spontaneous human drama. Whether it's Real TV, Survivor or Big Brother, it's clear that there's a hunger for real human interaction. Stale, artificial experiences just don't cut it. Maybe it's time to take a new look at the presentation you've been delivering for the last year. You can hardly afford to be mentally banished from your next big presentation.

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