

PRESENTATIONS

How to Give the Same Talk to Different Audiences

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If you're asked to speak at a conference or event, it's likely because you've demonstrated expertise in your particular subject. To provide a great experience for attendees, you generally want to focus on the topic the organizers have requested – the “greatest hits” that you're known for. But you'll run into trouble if you give the same speech verbatim every time: your material will resonate much better with some audiences than others, and some may have heard your remarks before and get bored with the exact repetition.

So how can you strike the right balance and effectively deliver a similar talk to different audiences? As a professional speaker who delivers between 30-50 paid keynotes per year, here are three strategies I've discovered that can help you craft a successful talk that resonates with diverse attendees.

First, it can be helpful to envision the sections of your speech as “modules” that you can shift and reshuffle as needed. When I was working as a high-level communications staffer on a presidential campaign, I realized that the candidate I worked for had standard “bits” that he'd use in his stump speeches — essentially, paragraph-long monologues about certain topics, like making higher education more affordable or his plans for Medicare reform.

Over time, he became exceptionally comfortable with these well-rehearsed modules, and could fall back on them when he was giving a speech or responding to questions. But he'd also reshuffle them frequently to suit the needs of the audience — and to ensure he didn't get bored with his own material, even though he was giving up to six talks a day. Thinking of your speech not as one undifferentiated whole, but instead as 12-15 segments of a few minutes apiece, can enable you to envision new ways to swap out or reorder your talk to better suit the circumstances.

Second, it's important to have a thorough understanding of your audience in advance of the talk. This can easily be accomplished via email or a quick phone conversation with the organizer. You'll want to find out relevant demographic and psychographic information, so you can choose the modules that most directly apply to attendees' life situation. It's worth finding out whether there is a typical age or gender for the attendees (for instance, if it's an event for female executives, or for recruits straight out of college), and any commonalities in geography, functional role, industry, etc.

For instance, [when I'm speaking](#) in a certain city, I'll often highlight people I've featured in my books who are from that area, so that attendees can easily connect with the examples. Similarly, if you're addressing a group of newly promoted managers, you can make a point of emphasizing stories about people in that situation, or who have recently reinvented themselves or changed jobs in general.

Finally, another crucial element in modifying your talk for different audiences is clarifying your client's desired outcome. Conference organizers are not hiring you to fill a 60-minute slot; there are plenty of cheaper ways to do that. Instead, they're typically seeking a specific outcome, such as helping their employees learn to become more entrepreneurial or ensuring that senior leaders are conversant with artificial intelligence trends. With those goals in mind, you can choose which modules from your standard presentation to include, and whether you need to develop bespoke material to augment it.

For instance, one pharmaceutical company that booked me for a keynote last year wanted me to incorporate elements of a [talk on innovation](#) that I frequently give. However, they also wanted me to emphasize the importance of collaboration, because they knew that in their corporate culture, new ideas wouldn't thrive without cooperation across functional areas. As a result, I drew heavily on my

standard talk, but also created some additional new material especially suited to their situation, and the talk was a success.

When you're invited to give a speech, you have to deliver a relatively standard message honed through your years of knowledge and expertise, while also modifying it just enough to make it relevant to that particular audience. By following these strategies, you can strike an appropriate balance and deliver uniquely valuable information to your listeners.

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