



## From Where I Sit: Notes from the AMCA Technical Advisor *by Joe Conlon*

### FROM WHERE I SIT...

I've grown (temporarily) weary of writing about legislative and regulatory issues and I'm sure that you may have grown (temporarily – I hope) weary of reading about them. So, let's change gears a bit.

In my 27 years as a medical entomologist I've attended a great many professional conferences as either a presenter or attendee. Having made over 170 formal presentations during this period I would hope that I've learned a thing or two about effective presentation methods.

*But, then again . . .*

As luck would have it I had the great good fortune of being mentored in public speaking by Dr. Andy Beck, head of the Training Department at the U.S. Navy Disease Vector Ecology and Control Center in Jacksonville, Florida. Dr. Beck is far and away the most effective speaker I have ever seen. His presentations were always concise, informative and invariably entertaining. This didn't occur by chance, but came about as a result of immense innate talent tempered by hard work and a firm grasp of speaker/audience dynamics. I had always thought of myself as a reasonably effective instructor, but a critique gently offered by Dr. Beck as part of an annual evaluation gave me new perspective

as a public speaker. His advice, which I have since taken to heart, was to avoid telling my audience all that I know, instead telling them what they need to know. This presupposes having a clear set of objectives or messages in mind that you wish to impart to the audience. When you think about it, this should form the cornerstone of any public speaking, but particularly in presentations at professional conferences.

With this in mind, allow me to make a few observations about the "do's" and "don'ts" of presenting. This isn't meant to be encyclopedic, for I'm certainly no expert, but merely reflects what I've seen over the years. And we must realize that a speaker's message is usually more important than the manner in which it is presented. Yet, to be sure, all of us need to review these tips from time to time and incorporate some of our own, as well. It never ceases to amaze me how speakers, who have attended myriad talks over many years, continue to make the very same mistakes they recognize in other speakers.

### COMMUNICATION IS ABOUT PEOPLE

It requires planning, practice and some measure of theatrical skill, plus the audience's perception of the speaker's genuineness to ensure that the message remains long after the presentation. This is especially true if the audience is

not entirely familiar with the subject. Studies have shown that up to 90% of your message transmittal may depend upon how you look and sound when you speak. Thus, you cannot count on the manifest worth of your data or message alone to make the imprint on the audience that you desire.

### KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Cater your talk to the education level and interests of those in attendance. Avoid use of jargon whenever possible. Remember that you are there to communicate, not impress. Keep it simple.

### PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Practice your talk (in front of a mirror or some significant other) to ensure that it fits within the time provided. Having been a moderator of many symposia, I have always resented being put in the position of either having to cut a presenter short or cutting into another's time or break period due to a speaker trying to stuff a 45 minute presentation into a 10 minute time slot. Additionally, take into account the time needed for your introduction by the moderator and your own opening remarks. These can take anywhere from 2-5 minutes.

### AVOID "BELLS AND WHISTLES"

Do not make the medium the

message. PowerPoint sounds and animations may seem cute at first, but they can overpower the information and become extremely distracting. Let your message speak for itself if it's worthy of being heard.

#### MAKE YOUR SLIDES EASY TO SEE

Use large, easily readable fonts. Take particular care to use highly contrasting colors. Avoid colors such as light reds and yellows, which color-sensitive folks might not be able to see from the back of the room. We've all seen presentations that look wonderful on a computer screen, but whose color scheme fails to faithfully translate when projected. Avoid busy backgrounds that may compromise effective font contrast.

#### USE VOICE MODULATION

No one enjoys a monotone presentation, particularly after lunch. Speak up. If you are to engage the audience and truly communicate, you need to grab and maintain their interest. Expect your audience to show the same level of interest that you display.

#### KEEP YOUR SLIDES SIMPLE

Avoid "busy" slides. Presenters will often say, "I know this slide is a bit busy, but..." Why are you using it then? We are all often tempted to place 30 years worth of work onto a single slide, particularly when it can be cut and pasted from a published table or figure. Don't do it. Complicated tables can be viewed at length and absorbed when in a journal – but not during a timed presentation. Use no more than three bullets and no more than 7-9 words per bullet if you want to be understood. Limit slides to 8-10 lines.

#### USE YOUR SLIDES AS A REFERENCE

Use your slides only as a reference. Use your slide bullets as topic headings upon which you can expand for the audience. Never, ever read your presentation or place your entire written text on the slides. A completely written presentation would more properly be handed out to the audience, to be viewed and digested at their leisure. If you read your presentation (either from written notes or from the slides themselves) do so with proper in-

flexion and speed to minimize the audience's perception that it is being read and to maximize the impact of the message. Additionally, do not read aloud to the audience verbatim what is on the slide. They can read – a lot faster than you can talk.

#### POINTS ON POINTERS

Avoid holding a laser pointer on the slide for extended periods. Briefly point to the object which you intend to discuss. The pointer will invariably begin to tremble on the screen after awhile and this may be very distracting to the audience. In addition, while pointing the laser at the slides you usually have your face away from the audience. Effective speakers keep their eyes scanning the audience while they are speaking as much as possible.

#### MAKE YOURSELF HEARD

Be aware of the position of the microphone. If you're speaking from a podium, be aware of your position with relation to the microphone pickup. This is another good reason to utilize your slides as an outline only, for then you

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can maximize your time facing the audience. The more you are forced to view the slides from the podium, the more likely you will be turned away (at least partially) from the microphone. Organizers can maximize opportunity for eye contact with the audience by placing the podium in a position from which the speaker can, without completely turning away, both face the audience and keep track of what is on the screen.

### Q & A 101

If asked a question, repeat it for the audience. Room acoustics generally make questions from the audience difficult to hear – particularly from those seated behind the questioner. Take the time to repeat the question into the microphone so that all can hear. Repeating the question (or paraphrasing it) also demonstrates that you understand what information is actually being sought.

### LISTEN UP, FOLKS

Audiences also need to cooperate in order for an appropriately planned and delivered paper to make its proper impact.

### PLEASE MOVE TO THE FRONT SEATS

It can be rather disconcerting for a speaker to look out upon the audience and find the first 3 rows empty, with the rear seats filled to overflowing with people appearing only marginally interested in the talk. Those who move to the front will be the people to whom the presenter tailors his/her talk and delivery.

### TURN OFF YOUR CELL PHONES

Good moderators generally ask audience members to kindly turn off their cell phones and pagers at the beginning of a symposium. Nonetheless, there are always the few who fail to cooperate. This is one of my pet peeves, for it is inexcusably rude to allow one's cell phone to ring during a presentation. Believe me, you're not that important. When I moderate, I'm always tempted to make a point of embarrassing any offender to the maximum extent allowable in polite company. I have also on occasion asked offenders to leave, for I have absolutely no sympathy for those who choose to ignore requests to show consideration for speakers and other audience members. Even worse are those who choose to actually answer the phone and carry on a conversation while seated in the audience.

### QUIET, PLEASE

Hold your conversations elsewhere. If you feel the need to converse with someone in the next seat, regardless of the subject, please take it outside of the room – not just to the back of the room. I find it difficult to listen attentively to a presentation when others seated in my vicinity are talking or arguing the entire time about something whether on or totally off-topic. Why sit in on a presentation if you are not only going to ignore it, but are actively preventing others from hearing it?

### MAKE YOUR QUESTIONS RELEVANT

If you require clarification of a minor point in the talk, wait and

get it from the speaker off-line, saving time for questions of major import. Never attempt to embarrass the speaker – it cheapens you in other's eyes. I remember having attended a symposium where a scientist of international renown loudly and viciously belittled a graduate student speaker. The arrogance of the individual was astounding – and, believe me, he lost a great deal of respect that day from all who attended.

Presenting before an audience can be both an exhilarating and humbling experience. It is always an honor to formally present before your professional peers and one should never take lightly the responsibility of making your message worth their while. The extraordinary amount of work that goes into producing and gathering data make it a profound shame when it becomes compromised by inept presentation or inconsiderate members of the audience. I have yet to deliver what I thought was a truly superlative talk. Knowing that, I continue to strive to improve my method of delivery so that my message makes a positive impression. Think about it. Would you honestly look forward to hearing one of your talks if you had not incorporated these concepts and principles?



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