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Presentations Newsletter

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When Your Presentation Encounters Hostility

If an audience appears to be hostile or agitated, you need to act fast, says Dr. Gary Genard, president of Public Speaking International, who offers training on presentation and speaking skills worldwide.

"First, you should have seen this coming," he says. "Don't be like a deer in the headlights. Prepare yourself by knowing the political climate, how much to share, who will be in the room, and how they like to receive information. Know your audience's need and expectations, otherwise you'll be flying blind."

If you understand your industry, your clients, their cultural biases, and their needs, you should be able to deal with anger, resistance, or hostility with confidence, he says. Genard provides these seven tips for overcoming resistance:

1. **Understand the type of resistance you're facing.** "The more information we have at our fingertips to counter the resistance, the more accurate we'll be in the action we take. Is the resistance institutional? Fact-driven or cultural? Is it a flaw in your logic or an ego-trip for the questioner? In other words, you should be alert to what's coming your way and respond honestly. Look below the surface; look for subtext – the real action beyond the scene. Does the audience need an emotion validated? If they do, show them you understand."

2. **Listen for emotions.** "Even in an emotional storm, there may be subtle differences as to what you are hearing and what you can respond to," says Genard. "Emotions, not your message, may be making your audience hostile toward you. You may represent a point of view or a company to them; therefore, you provide a convenient target for the audience to attempt to redress a recent problem or vent after decades of resentment and anger. You don't have to change your message; instead, deal with the audience's emotional response."

3. **Recast erroneous assumptions.** "The more serious the assumption, the faster it must be countered," says Genard, saying that you may even interrupt (politely, of course) the erroneous statement. Why? Because the more time that goes by before the error is countered or corrected, it starts to set like cement."

4. **Welcome unclear or fuzzy arguments.** "If an argument is unclear or fuzzy enough, it's a gift to you," says Genard. "You can go anywhere you want with it. It's your golden opportunity to express your critical messages all over again in a different way."

5. **Go low-key and conversational.** "The more someone rants and raves at you, the quieter you should become," says Genard. Why? Because everyone else in the room will quickly realize that the person ranting is out of line. They will see the contrast immediately between the raving person and the considerate, soft-spoken, and reasonable person (you).

6. **Be aware of your tone.** "Watch how are you saying what you are saying," says Genard. "The best arguments in the world will fail if they sound defensive or angry. Audiences will remember a presentation's tone far longer than they will recall the facts and statistics."

7. **Disagree neutrally.** "There will be many opportunities for you to demonstrate your rapier wit and responses when you are faced with skepticism and hostility. Resist every one of them, for the reasons given above," says Genard.

In summary, Genard says to think in terms of shaping the issue. "In other words, frame your message in ways that work to your advantage," he says.

More information on these tips can also be found in Genard's book, *How to Give a Speech: Easy to Learn Skills For More Successful & Profitable Presentations, Speeches, Meetings, Sales, and More!* (Cedar & Maitland Press, 2007).

Gary Genard, Ph.D., is founder and president of Public Speaking International, a training firm specializing in public speaking and presentation skills. You can reach PSI at (866) 643-2095, www.publicspeakinginternational.com, or at gary@pubspeak.com