

Optical Engineering

SPIDigitalLibrary.org/oe

Remember Who Your Audience Is

Ronald G. Driggers



Remember Who Your Audience Is

Alfred Hitchcock once said, “Always make your audience suffer as much as possible.” He has made me suffer many times in my life, including the first, second, and third time I watched *Psycho*. More importantly, we have all suffered many times at the hands of presenters, where the presenter does not consider who their audience is or what their audience wants. Part of this suffering stems from presenters being “me”-centric and presenting what they themselves *want* to present. The other part is presenters just not knowing who their audience is and what their audience wants or needs.

In the past week, I have been to three very different events. The first was the Military Sensing Symposium where a large number of imaging experts came to provide their latest component technology and their latest system concepts. This symposium was comprised of a series of 20-minute papers full of a large amount of technical information, presented to an audience who, more times than not, was interested in all of the information. I presented my first technical paper in four years at the symposium on the topic of how small an infrared detector should be before the small size is no longer useful. One of my associates told me afterwards that I tried to cover way too much information in too little time. I think he was right

and I attribute this result partially to the time away from presenting technical papers (I think you can get out of practice).

The second event was a review of a particular technology program that was conducted during the conference, but in the evening from 6 to 8 p.m. It was attended by senior government officials who were the “stakeholders” of the program, but were not the scientists and engineers who were actually working the details of the program. The information was much higher level with a smattering of “results” and plans and budgets and program performance. The audience was comprised of mainly senior executives in the military who want to hear the bottom line, are not interested in all the details, and want to feel assured that the program is providing good progress, within schedule, and under budget. One of the briefers went into a little too much detail, and very close to 8 p.m., one of the lead executives asked in a frank manner “Are we done yet?” It made the point, and the briefer quickly hit the high points and moved through the material quickly.

At the last event, I was involved with the selection of the Congressional Fellows for OSA and SPIE. In the interview, there was a simulation of a congressman, a legislative director, a press secretary, and staff. The interviewee was put on the spot and asked to quickly (within one minute) summarize a technical point of view in layman’s terms to the congressman before he left for an important vote. During the whole simulation, the congressman looked at his watch and was impatient with the answer. It was a 60-sec blurt of information that was supposed to be supportive, direct, concise, positive, and could not offend the congressman’s constituency. It involved quick thinking, reducing science terms to layman’s terms, and understanding the political nature of the input.

Alfred Hitchcock also said, “Drama is life with the dull bits cut out.” Good drama is a presenter who knows his or her audience and provides them with what they want and need. These presentations can be very interesting and informative. On the other hand, bad drama can occur when there is a mismatch, and while some of this drama is interesting, it is almost never fun.

Ronald G. Driggers
Editor