

How to Keep a Pain in Your Neck From
Derailing Your Presentation

U p t u r n
POINTING AT DIRECTION

Hostile Audiences



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The Psychology of a Hostile Audience

It seems that there is always somebody who feels it's their right to cause trouble—especially when you're trying to make a presentation or close a deal. While they may exhibit their feelings differently, their goal is the same. By tearing you down, they feel better—at least for a while. Focus groups are a great tool for listening to people you care about and are especially valuable for three reasons.

How they think (and what it means)...

- **I don't agree with you** (and I'm worked up enough to be disruptive).
- **I've been stewing about this problem for a while** (so by the time I see you, I'll be boiling).
- **Give me attention** (positive or negative—I'm not getting enough of it elsewhere).
- **I'll take control** (because it will make me feel stronger).
- **I want to feel better** (because I feel inferior right now).
- **I'm stressed out** (so I'm going to put you down).
- **I like to manipulate people** (because it's fun).
- **I don't let people get close to me** (because it's a sign of weakness).
- **I never seem to reach my goals** (because they are unrealistic).

What they do...

- **Look for opportunities** to disrupt your meeting or presentation.
- **Ask fake questions.** They state their opinions as questions.
- **Take personal shots** at you.
- **Attempt to embarrass** you in front of your peers, boss or other important audiences.
- **Try to take control** of your meeting.
- **Get other people fired up** and angry with you.
- **Try to put themselves in the limelight** by putting you down.
- **Ask ridiculous questions** they know you aren't prepared to answer.
- **Attempt to change your meetings agenda** to suit their own purposes.

20 Tips for Handling a Hostile Audience

- 1. Steal their thunder by handling their objection before it is brought up.** If you think an objection will be raised during or after your meeting is completed, work the objection into your presentation and answer it before the question and answer session.
- 2. If an objection is brought up, listen to it carefully.** What is the person objecting to? Part of your plan? You as a person? Something else?
- 3. Ask questions to clarify the objection.** Are the words that they are using clear to you? What do they mean by the words they are using? Not only will this give you time to think, it may clarify the question so it is simpler to answer.
- 4. Compliment the objector.** Tell the objector that he or she has a good point. Agree with them and move on or say that it doesn't apply in this situation.
- 5. Throw back the objection.** Ask for the reasoning behind the objection. Why does the objector think this way? Get on the offensive, not the defensive side.
- 6. Smile.** By smiling, you will show that you are calm and not fearful.
- 7. Answer the objection with evidence.** If you can, go back to part of your presentation and rephrase what you presented. Show how you tried to account for the objection earlier. Or present new facts to back up your point of view.
- 8. Think of something funny to say, if appropriate.** The right humor can diffuse tense situations. Be careful. Don't insult the person making the objection.
- 9. Attack the objection, not the person making the objection.**
- 10. If you don't have an answer, don't make something up or quote something inaccurately.** This is exactly what your hostile audience wants you to do.

- 11. In particularly hostile situations, decrease your eye-contact with the person making the objection.** Instead, answer questions to the rest of the group.

- 12. Don't answer questions that are not relevant to the content of your meeting or presentation.** Suggest that you could meet after the presentation to discuss those issues or that you have not completed your thinking on those issues since they are outside of your immediate presentation.

- 13. If you can, bring or find friends in the audience and take easy questions from them.**

- 14. Watch out for double-barreled questions.** For example, "Do you favor or oppose...?"
Review your options:
 - Adopt one of the two options presented.
 - Reject both options without offering a substitute.
 - Ignore (or reject) both options and present a third alternative.

- 15. Watch out for questions about your statements versus your actions.** For example, "Is there good reason to believe you will not do what you said you would do?" Review your options:
 - Reaffirm that you will do what you promised.
 - State that you will not do as you promised because the circumstances have changed.
 - Deny that you ever made a promise.
 - Ignore the consistency question and restate your purpose.

16. Watch out for questions that try to entrap you. For example, "Will you do what you said you would do, and if you keep promise 'A,' how is that consistent with promise 'B,' which you also made?" Review your options:

- Affirm that you will keep promise "A" and deny the premise that promise "A" is inconsistent with promise "B."
- Deny the questioner's premise that you made either promise "A" or "B."
- State that circumstances have changed so that you will not keep one of the two promises.
- Ignore the consistency question and rephrase your presentation purpose.

17. Don't repeat negative or inflammatory language. Use your own words to answer a question. Don't repeat any words from the person asking the question that might compromise your credibility.

18. Always tell the truth. Once your hostile audience catches you in a lie, it's very difficult to regain control and credibility.

19. Use body language to your advantage. Try these techniques:

- Arrange the seating so that you are on the same side of the table or at a 45 degree angle from the person you are trying to persuade. It's a lot tougher to fight with someone who is seated next to you than who is seated across the table from you.
- Don't put your hands on your hips or point at your audience.
- Keep an open body posture. Try not to fold your arms, frown or roll your eyes.
- Watch the tone of your voice. Avoid sarcasm.

20. Finish smartly. Have some appropriate closing remarks, stories or examples. Don't forget to restate your key points and decisions from the meeting.