

What to Know When You're Speaking to an International Audience

What works in one culture doesn't always work in another. Follow these tips to make your presentation a success.

If the world were a village of 1,000 people, it would include: 584 Asians, 124 Africans, 95 Europeans, 84 Latin Americans, 52 North Americans, six Australians and New Zealanders, and 55 people from the former Soviet republics.* They would speak more than 200 languages and reflect an astounding mix of different cultures. Now imagine giving a presentation to that group of 1,000 people.

Fortunately, the typical international audience is a lot less international than the one described above. Nonetheless, there are things every presenter should consider when speaking to any international audience.

What works here doesn't always work there.

First and most obviously, be aware that what works in the U.S. doesn't necessarily work in other cultures.

Pay attention especially to how people in different countries prefer to receive information. Many Europeans historically have preferred to receive information in detail, with lots of supporting documentation (although there are some signs that may be changing.) They want to hear speakers build to a point in their presentation. Japanese audiences follow a similar pattern. That's especially true among business audiences in those countries, where senior managers are more likely to hold technical degrees. American and Canadian audiences, on the other hand, tend to prefer a faster pace. They tend to be more bottom-line oriented. They want speakers to speak from a point, rather than build step-by-step towards a point.

If your presentation calls for certain actions to be taken by your listeners, be sure what you're asking for is realistic. A given timetable may be realistic in a culture that's exact, precise, and oriented towards immediate action. It may not be realistic in another culture that's more consensus-oriented and more relaxed, especially about time.

Be careful when selecting visuals. Colors carry different suggestions and meanings in different cultures. In some Latin American countries, for example, yellow has strongly negative connotations. In Japan, white symbolizes death.

Know what to expect with questions. It's practically inconceivable for Americans and Canadians not to ask questions. In most Asian cultures, on the other hand, audiences are more likely to greet a presentation with silence or just a few questions.

Take extra care to fully understand the question. Especially where language barriers may exist, always repeat the question. Don't hesitate to rephrase the question. That will help to assure the question's real meaning, and it will buy more time for your answer.

As to body language, follow the same rules that you would when addressing an American audience. However, be sensitive to how different audiences react to gestures. In some Asian cultures, for example, audiences find too many sweeping, rapid gestures distracting, if not downright disconcerting.

Choose your language carefully.

Although English is spoken widely around the world, you should nonetheless take extra care to use simple, neutral language. Avoid complexities or "insider" language or buzz words that are more familiar to Americans. American presenters, for example, like to use sports terms. There are more than 400 baseball expressions in everyday language. Britons have some 250 expressions that derive from their own popular sports. These may work with American and British audiences, respectively, but almost never in another culture.

Remember too that many English words have different meaning when translated to another culture. They can have a completely unintended result ranging from the extremely comical to the extremely disastrous. As just one of many examples, "mad" usually means angry in the U.S. It means "insane" to a British audience.

If you're using an example to illustrate a point, you're better off citing an example from nature. Such examples are readily understood by all audiences.

Protocol is extremely important. So, for example, know the accepted way of acknowledging your hosts and the other key people in your audience.

If you're going to greet your listeners in their language, make sure you know how to speak it. And, again, be sure your choice of language has your intended meaning.

Should you use a script?

This brings up the question of whether to use a script. While not recommended for American audiences, using a script can help with international audiences. It can keep you focused on precise language, which can be especially important if you're addressing a technical audience. A script can also be used as a handout to your listeners after you speak, as an aid. If you do use a script, you can still depart from it now and then. But if you do extemporize, stay within the immediate context of your script.

Slow down—and don't crack wise.

Adjust the pace of your delivery to reflect what the audience is accustomed to. While North and South Americans prefer a faster pace, Europeans and Asians typically prefer more time to process information. In any case, do slow down a bit, and try to build comfort with the use of pauses. Your audience will thank you for it.

Use humor very judiciously with an international audience. In many—if not most—cultures, there's a far greater risk that your humor will not be understood at all. And worse, in some cultures—even with your best intentions—it can be found offensive. Humor rarely works the same way from culture to culture. So proceed with caution. For an in-depth look at using humor in presentations, see our article, [*A Funny Thing Happened on my Way to This Meeting.*](#)

What to expect from your audience.

Audiences around the world respond outwardly to presentations in different ways.

In Japan, for example, it's common to show concentration and attentiveness by nodding the head up and down slightly—and even closing the eyes occasionally. This doesn't necessarily mean you're putting your audience to sleep.

As a rule, applause is a universal sign of approval. Still, there are exceptions to the rule. In

many parts of Germany and Austria, for example, listeners seated around a table may signal their approval by knocking on the table instead of applauding. In the U.S., if you've really wowed 'em, you might even get a few whistles. But if you hear whistles in some European countries, watch out: it's a sure sign of disapproval. In some countries, like Australia, no one ever gets a standing ovation.

If you wave goodbye when you've finished your presentation, you'll get a different response depending on where you are. In some parts of Latin America and Europe, a wave goodbye tells your audience to stay put, there's more to come.

Good advice, as always: be prepared.

As part of your audience analysis, you'll need to learn about your audience's culture.

Question the meeting organizers; they should certainly be able to help you. Question as well anyone you know who may have addressed similar audiences.

Focus on possible areas of sensitivity—anything you suspect can be misinterpreted or be found insulting or offensive.

Check out reference books, travel guides, and Web sites that serve foreign travelers. The U.S. State Department Web site (www.state.gov) is an excellent source. You may need to use all or some combination of these sources to get a clear insight into the culture or cultures of those audiences you'll be addressing.

Before you present, set aside time to meet with local colleagues or acquaintances, perhaps over dinner. Ask questions. That can be especially helpful, and in all likelihood, they'll appreciate your interest. Better still if you can arrange a test-run before someone who's going to be in your audience. Remember: we're playing in a global arena. Be prepared to play well!

** From a profile compiled by the late Donella Meadows, author, journalist, conservationist and distinguished Dartmouth College Professor.*

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