

Games That Enliven Presentations

by Gary Michael, PhD

(excerpted from *Get In Bed With Your Audience And Satisfy Them EVERY Time*, copyright 2000)

Why Play Games?

Audience involvement adds vitality to any presentation, even a brief one. Mark Twain said, "No sinner was ever saved after the first twenty minutes of a sermon." What I think he meant that twenty minutes is the attention span of most people. Shifting gears every twenty minutes makes it easier for your audience to stay tuned. At least one respected authority, Robert Pike, recommends involving people every eight minutes. Pace changes generate energy. The best way to involve an audience is to give them something to do. Games and exercises keep people interested. Activities also generate information, reinforce learning, increase energy, improve retention, promote discussion, and help people to bond.

Some of my favorites are:

1. Partner Introduction

Have everyone find a partner, preferably someone they didn't know when they came in. Allow a minute each for them to interview each other, then introduce their partner to the whole group, if it's not more than ten or twelve people, or to other members of a smaller group. This exercise is useful as an "ice-breaker," something to loosen folks up, get them talking to each other. I never feel that there's any ice to break, and use the exercise as a foil for the next introduction exercise.

2. Dataless Partner Introduction

Introduce a partner after only a thirty second interview without reference to job, marital status, age, number of children, or leisure activity. The idea is to present your personal impression of your partner in a convincing way, to share your feeling about the person. I like to use the exercise near or at the end of a program, after participants have already gotten to know each other. Questions that elicit information that helps to formulate the introduction are: What do you love most? Fear most? If you could be any animal, what would you choose? Any car? Any dessert?

There's no need to tell the audience what any of those choices are. It's more fun to infer what you like from the response and improvise on it. For example, if your partner, Glenda, says she'd like to be a dolphin, you might say: "Glenda is a very social person with a love of play. She likes people and feels comfortable in different environments, especially those in which she can be active. She is very loyal to her family and also welcomes contact with strangers that reciprocate her friendliness."

What you say is less important than how you say it. The intro isn't supposed to be a complete psychological profile, just a passionate presentation of something you believe to be true about your partner. I find it works better if, after explaining it, I give a demonstration.

A variation is what Harvey Mackay calls the Two-Minute Drill. Partners take two minutes each to tell each other the things they think most important about themselves--hopes, dreams, goals, frustrations. Since this exercise doesn't include introductions to the whole group, it takes much less time. Like all pairs exercises, it gets 100 percent participation. There's nowhere to hide.

3. The Story of Something on Your Body

Tell a partner about something on or in your body--a piece of clothing, jewelry, scar, tattoo, hip replacement (I have one!). Take only a minute or two. Some of these stories may be worth sharing with the rest of the audience. One of the best I've heard was that of a woman named Ann about her earrings. When she was nineteen, her fiance jilted her for another woman. Twenty year later, after Ann had married and later divorced another man, someone knocked on her door. She opened it and there stood her former fiance, a bouquet in one hand, a small box in the other. "Ann," he said, "I made a terrible mistake when I broke our engagement. Please take me back and be my wife."

"Come in and let's talk," said Ann. Two weeks later they got married. Ann wears the earrings, which were in the little box, wherever she goes.

4. Anecdote or Challenge Exchange

Tell a partner something good that happened to you in the last week. Or tell about a challenge you're facing, why it's a challenge, and your strategy for dealing with it. The exercise takes very little time. I find the game useful to show people how they can start or keep a conversation going after the customary exchange of names.

5. Three Things in Common

This game encourages people to open up with each other. I've found it especially effective with singles groups. It takes a while to play, even with a small audience, but the energy it generates and the laughs it produces are well worth it.

Find a partner and take five minutes to discover the three most interesting things you have in common. Sun signs, job similarities (unless the jobs are very unusual), and recreational activities are not interesting. Go for things very few people would have in common, like an exotic, out-of-the-way place you've both been or the fact that as kids you both raised snakes. When the partners have gotten their three things (two things for groups of three people), I have them announce their commonalities and write them on a flip chart. Then the whole group votes on the winners, to whom I give prizes. In one group the winners were two women who found they'd both been pregnant in Beaumont, Texas. In another, it was a man and woman who had both wet their pants in 4th grade classes.

An important benefit of the game is that it is an object lesson in active listening. With prizes at stake, people really pay attention to what their partner is saying, lean forward and ask questions. That, I tell them, is the best way to listen to anyone--fully focused on what he or she is saying.

6. Observation Exercise

Again with a partner, take ten seconds to look at each other. Then turn your backs to each other and make a slight change in your appearance--put a ring on a different finger, loosen your tie, ruffle your hair, remove a necklace. See if your partner notices the change. This quickie exercise has little educational value, but can add a little fun to a stretch break.

7. Six Person Introduction

This is the single best way I know to energize an audience in which more people don't already know each other than do. If the audience has been sitting for a while, listening to announcements or another speaker, I find an excuse to use it. Give people ninety seconds to stand up and introduce themselves to six others they haven't already met. The time limit means they have to keep moving, looking for new introducees. In one group, a man climbed on his chair to get a better view of who was around him. People started coming to him. It added to the semichaotic, manic energy in the room. When you call time at the end of ninety seconds, you'll see that everyone in the room is smiling.

If you want to glean some educational value from the exercise, ask the audience which of them noticed the eye color of the people they introduced themselves to. Who remembered the most names? Who had a tactile memory of the grips? How many were aware of the firmness of their own grip? This can be an introduction of things to do when you meet people: Look them in the eye, focus on their names, maintain a firm but not hurtful grip for a few seconds, stand up straight, SMILE.

8. Body Language Game

With a partner find a topic on which you agree and one about which you disagree. Any topic will do--the best place to live, the wisdom of welfare reform, the ideal pet. First discuss the topic on which you agree while one partner does things to undermine the rapport, like turning his back, interrupting, not giving eye contact, using words like "but," "must," and "you'll have to." Next discuss the topic about which you disagree. One partner models the body language of the other, gives eye contact, paraphrases what his partner said then says "and" to preface his own contribution to the discussion.

Then compare the rapport levels in the two conversations. Everyone with whom I've ever played the game reports that an agreeable disagreement produces far better vibrations than a disagreeable agreement. The purpose of the game is to sensitize us to the importance of body language and word choices for establishing and maintaining rapport with anyone with whom we communicate.

9. Eye Contact Exercise

Sit facing a partner with your knees not more than four inches apart. Put your hands on your knees. Give each other sixty seconds of eye contact--without any words, gestures or specific facial expressions, such as smiles. The exercise tests one's comfort level with eye contact.

Blinking is fine; this is not a contest to see who blinks first. It's an opportunity simply to hang out with a partner.

I often make it easier for people by telling them first to note the other person's eye color, then to send them a positive thought. This takes the attention away from one's own nervousness or discomfort and puts it on the partner. As with all exercises, I then debrief the audience, ask if someone will share with the group how it felt, what the experience was like, if any insight emerged. A frequent -- and altogether welcome -- response is: After doing that I think I'll have a much easier time giving people eye contact when I talk to them.

10. Story Telling Game

Divide people into groups of four or five. In turn let each tell a personal anecdote of about two minutes. It's important that it be personal, not a joke or story about someone else. Have other members of the small group keep their hands up until the speaker has given each at least five seconds of continuous, sustained eye contact. Two seconds now, three seconds later doesn't get the hand down.

The game, which is technically an exercise, encourages both eye contact and sharing of oneself. Each group needs a timekeeper to signal people when two minutes has elapsed and a monitor to see that one story follows another directly without discussion of the stories. It's hard enough to get groups to finish within five minutes of each other without such discussion. With discussion, things get way out of synch.

If time permits, I like the participants to tell each other what topic the story might make a good introduction to. My very favorite way to begin a presentation is with a personal story. To turn the exercise into a game, have each group choose its favorite story. Those stories get repeated to the whole audience and then popular vote determines a winner.

11. Problem Solving Exercise

Again in a small group, each person states a problem he or she has around an issue relevant to the program's focus. For example, in a communication seminar, someone might say, "I don't know how to handle people who interrupt me all the time." In turn, every other member of the group suggests a technique for dealing with interrupters.

12. Teach Your Partner (or Group)

The best way to learn something is to teach it. We easily forget what we hear and read; we remember what we do. Give partners or members of small groups (four people max) an opportunity to instruct each other in specific points you've made. For example, in a seminar on selling, you've stressed the importance of initiative, imagination, and information. Let each person in a group of three take one of these ideas, define it, and give at least two examples of how it can be implemented. It's fine that they may simply repeat what you've given them. In doing so they are internalizing your message. Some will expand on what you presented, think of other examples, maybe even call upon the other group members to come up with fresh applications of your principles. And that's just what you want--audience involvement.

13. Follow Up Pledge

This isn't a separate exercise but rather something that can be added to any exercise that calls for participants to learn a new technique or implement a plan. The previous exercise (#12) would be ideal for a follow-up pledge. Partners agree to call each other in one week and inquire about the results garnered by putting the technique or plan into action. Knowing that someone will ask you what you've done with what you learned is a powerful incentive to use the new ideas NOW.

14. Blind Date

One partner wears a blindfold and lets the other guide him or her around and even out of the room. The guide's job is to make the blind date feel safe, provide discoveries (new or unusual tactile and auditory experiences), and take care of the person. Obviously, the guide has to be fully present and attuned to the blindfolded partner. That's part of the beauty of the exercise. The blindfolded partner's job is to trust the guide and do whatever he or she asks. This exercise has immediate relevance to programs in team building, leadership, self-awareness, sensitivity, and the like. It helps strangers who will work together on a project in or out of the workshop to bond. I finish the exercise by having the participants thank each other. Be sure to bring enough blindfolds!

15. Trust Fall

In a group of six-eight, form a circle with one person standing in the center. Those standing in the circle stand close together and hold hands. The person in the middle shuts his eyes, either crosses his arms or locks his hands in front of him, and lets himself fall backward or to either side. The people in the circle catch him. Everyone takes a turn in the center. The exercise works well for the same kind of programs Blind Date does. I don't recommend it for captive audiences or people who are dressed up and may resent getting their clothes wrinkled. If every applicant for a management position had to pass this trust test, we'd have a happier work force. My feeling is that if a person doesn't trust other people to catch his fall of a few feet, he can't be trusted to lead a company, college, or military unit.

16. Two Minute Back Rub

If your audience is seated in rows, ask them to stand and face the same direction, toward one side of the room or the other. When you say "Begin," each person gives the person in front of him a two minute back and shoulder massage. After two minutes, people reverse direction and rub someone else. The exercise works fine with partners, though a line rub is a bit less threatening to the touch wary. This is far more fun than a stretch break. I recommend using it only after you've had some less kinesthetic exercise that's served to acquaint people with their neighbors. Be sure to announce that no one is required to participate, so the touch phobic in your midst won't feel pressured to do something outside their comfort zone.

17. Three Important Points

An excellent activity for early arrivals while you wait for last-minute arrivals is to have small groups decide three or four things they'd like to get from the program. It not only gives folks an activity, it gets them thinking about the program content. It also works well at the end of an extended program, seminar, or class. In that case, you ask the groups to list the three most important things they learned and their reasons for choosing these over others. This helps to reinforce ideas. Ask for the results, perhaps even write them on a flip chart.

18. Self Disclosure

One of the best get-acquainted games going is to have participants write the last word to seven statements:

When I was little I wanted to be _____.

Now I am _____.

Something I'd like to do better is _____.

My major source of grief is _____.

Something I do well is _____.

My major source of joy is _____.

Right now I feel _____.

Divide into small groups and have each person share his or her response to the first statement. Go around the group again for each succeeding statement. This method of going around the group for every statement is far superior to letting people go through all their statements at once. It keeps interest up, creates a little suspense as the statements become more revelatory, provides more opportunity to reinforce names, and goes a long way in getting people to bond. Because the exercise takes more time than most, it's most practical as an opener for longer programs or classes.

19. Different Values Demonstration

Different people have different moral frames of reference. While we all agree that values such as integrity, loyalty and honesty are good ones, we often find such values in conflict in a specific situation. Then we are forced to make difficult decisions about what is "right." Understanding how others analyze an ethically ambiguous situation is important to our appreciation of them as human beings. Any program on leadership, communication, team building, or other interpersonal content can benefit from an exercise that gives participants a chance to share firmly held beliefs and how they apply them to a specific ethical problem.

Describe a dilemma. Here's an example I used in college philosophy classes. Dick and Jane have been married for sixteen years and have two children. He provides well for his family but has become increasingly involved in his work, so much in fact that he has long ignored his wife's emotional and physical needs. She has called this to his attention repeatedly but to no avail. Of these three alternatives for Jane -- divorce, affair, grin and bear it -- which is the least bad and why?

Divide into groups of four for discussion. Take twenty to thirty minutes. One group member is the secretary and takes notes. Another is

the reporter who will share the group's "conclusion" with the larger group. Someone else is the captain and encourages all members to participate. The fourth person is the analyst. He or she asks questions of the others to clarify their reasoning. The reasons are more important than the conclusion. Part of the group report can be about what additional information might have led to a different conclusion.

No matter how many classes I've given this problem to, one thing never changes: People disagree. Even people who chose the same "solution" did so for different reasons. Many claimed that the exercise gave them a better understanding of themselves and others.

20. Who Goes First

This is not a game as such, just a way for a group to have fun figuring out who will be first to do whatever the assigned activity is. Just announce that the first person will be any of the following:

- Who was born closest (or farthest) from where you now are?
- Whose birthday is closest to today?
- Who has the biggest feet?
- Who has the longest hair?
- Who is the oldest (or youngest)?
- Who is the anything else you can think of?

You can also ask for someone in each group to volunteer for a very important task. Invite the volunteers to stand. When all have stood, instruct them to put their hand on someone else's shoulder. Then say, "You have just chosen the group leader. Thank you; you may now sit down." (For this and some of the other ideas that appear here, I am indebted to Robert Pike, a mastermind of training technique.)

21. Contribute the Criteria (For a Successful Seminar)

Early in the program ask audience members to say what issues or problems relevant to your topic they want help with. Write their responses on a flip chart. Make sure you address each of their concerns and cross it off the chart when you do. This helps participants to feel that they set the criteria for success and got from the program what they wanted.

22. Attention Clap

Here's a way to use the audience's energy to refocus their attention after any kind of partner or group exercise. Instead of calling -- sometimes calling and calling -- for everyone's attention, simply say in a voice no louder than needed to be heard by those nearest you, "If you can hear me, clap once." Some people will clap at your verbal and physical (you clap too!) cue. That one clap will get everyone else's attention. If it doesn't, just say, "If you can hear me, clap twice." The double clap always brings everyone together. Even with big, talkative groups, you'll probably never have to resort to a third clap. And if you do, it will still prove quicker and more fun than pleading for silence so you can continue the program. This device works so well you'll feel as though you just pulled a live rabbit out of an empty hat.

23. Create the Captions

Pass out cartoons or just newspaper photos from which you've removed the captions. Unusual images with action work best. Ask people in small groups to think of captions that fit the images. The game suits program subjects like teamwork, cooperation, and creativity.

You can also project the images before the whole group and let people volunteer captions. People will try to prove themselves more outrageous than the rest. Maybe something about the darkened room releases inhibitions. Dale Irwin, the most creative humorist I know, uses projected images and audience participation to demonstrate the role of imagination in humor. He showed an audience I was part of a slide of two burly men in kilts wrestling in the mud. Someone said, "I'll teach you to call my bagpipe puny!" Dale laughed so hard he couldn't push the button for the next slide.

24. Point-Counter Point

Divide the room in half. State a thesis for which anyone can think of supporting and opposing arguments. For example, "No speech can be effective without humor" or "A poor communicator will never make a good leader." Ask people on one side of the room to defend the statement, those on the other to attack it. Let each side have two minutes of discussion in pairs to formulate their thoughts. Then call on people from each side in turn to stand and present an argument. The contrary opinions will elicit enthusiasm and new ways of looking at an issue.

25. Three Truths and a Lie

As if we didn't have enough get-acquainted games here already, here's one more. In small groups of four or five, each person writes on a piece of paper or flip-chart three things about him or herself that are true, and one which is not. The other people then decide which statement is the lie. The truths reveal interesting things about the participants. Guessing the lie makes a game of it.

26. End With a Bang

To finish a seminar on a high, loud note, have an uninflated party balloon at each person's place. Tell the audience you'd like to finish the program with a bang. Then ask the people blow up their balloons and on the count of three break them.

Game Guides

Give people who arrive early a meaningful activity. Not only does it engage their attention, it rewards them for having come on time. That's far preferable to making the prompt people wait for the latecomers. An easy activity is to have them list what they think are the top five or ten anything. For example: the world's five highest mountains (Everest, K2, Kangchenjunga, Lhotse, Makalu); the five longest rivers (Nile, Amazon, Yangtze, Mississippi, Yenisey); five largest oceans (Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Arctic, Arabian Sea). If you can find a category that bears some relation to the content of your presentation, so much the better. A good

place to look for the information is Russell Ash's THE TOP 10 OF EVERYTHING.

With any small group activity you can anticipate that not all groups will finish at the same time. To meet this difficulty, ask the group leader to signal you when his or her group has completed the task. Walk over and give an additional task, preferably one that in some way extends the initial assignment. Or you can have people give themselves a new challenge. This will save you running around the room asking who's finished and who not.

After most games, I like to debrief the audience. People are eager to share their thoughts and feelings about the activity with the whole group. The debriefing serves to extend the activity. It allows people who didn't quite complete the assignment in the allotted time a chance to finish their thoughts. It also reunites the audience. One way to debrief is to ask what people experienced, what they think the experience means, and how they intend to use it.

Best of all, debriefing lets everyone hear some stupendous statements. After Game 9 above, a gentleman volunteered, "I had more trouble sustaining five seconds of eye contact with people I've long known than those I'd just met. That made me realize that I don't often look at my wife when I talk to her. So when I get home I'm going to make sure she gets her five seconds." The room burst into laughter and applause.

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