

The Art of Attraction: Developing Authentic Platform Presence

by Izzy Gesell , MEd, CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) © 2014

Among the many hats a speaker wears is one that reads “Energy Manager.” We know, as do the planners who hire us, that the attendees at a program experience one of two energy flow states.

At just about any moment, they're either being energized or they are being drained of their liveliness.

Whether or not the participants remain alert and interested depends on many things, not the least of which is how we understand and direct the flow of their energy, particularly that energy which flows between the audience and ourselves up on the platform. When we say we “connect” with our audience, we are referring to the energy stream flowing between them and us. The quality of this connection with the speaker determines the level of our own success, because the state these attendees find themselves in often determines the level of success the meeting achieves. When the audience is charged by our presence and the attention is directed toward us, we are where we want to be and they are where we want them! This is what is meant by “holding the audience’s attention.”

Understanding the Energy in a Room

The energy level of the audience defines the emotional state of the group in the same way lighting sets the tone in a theater production, where changing lights indicate a shift in mood. In the theater, the illumination fills in the holes and occupies the spaces between characters, events and sets. During a speech in front of an audience, which consists of sets of human relationships (between us and the audience, among the audience members themselves, and between the audience members and the people that are on their minds), the energy illuminates the dynamics of the group. Energy is what fills in the psychic space linking the people who are present in the room.

So it stands to reason that the way we orchestrate the energy in a room essentially has the effect of working like a thermostat, controlling the emotional climate among the attendees. We wouldn't let the room get too hot or too cold because we need to keep the participants alert and interested in order to make the meeting successful from the point of view of the

meeting organizer. Our platform poise serves a purpose similar to that of a thermostat. We are managing many different relationships and people to make a program successful. In essence, we are directing the audience without them knowing it.

The Value of “Authenticity”

The proficiency in developing the ability to “hold the audience” comes from developing that ubiquitous NSA buzzword: authenticity. Common wisdom at Workshops, Conventions and chapter meetings holds that if you are authentic, the audience will be interested in you. Indeed, authenticity is like a dose of caffeine for the attention span. Being authentic on the platform has the effect of holding the audience’s attention as surely as a magician’s hands do as he weaves the set-up story before the trick. With a magician as with a speaker, we use laser-like intensity to try and find something we know we won’t see. We don’t see how it’s done; yet we enjoy it anyway.

Therefore, it makes sense that many a hard-earned speaker dollar is spent on becoming authentic. But what exactly are we buying? After all, being “authentic” means being true to one’s own personality, spirit or character. Is that something we need to purchase? Isn’t our source of genuineness always within us? Developing authenticity is a matter of understanding what make us real on the platform. We can break authenticity down into three elements. We can then nurture the three elements that help make us real, the three fundamental aspects of authenticity that make us attractive to the audience: vulnerability, presence and spontaneity.

The Three Essentials of Attraction

** Vulnerability*

When I was studying comedy writing and performance at the New School in New York City, I struggled to muster the courage necessary to manifest the “stand-up” part of stand-up comedy. I was writing well but remained terrified of getting up on stage to present my material. One evening I asked the teacher to reveal the secret to me. “How do I overcome my fear of getting up on stage?” I inquired of George Q. Lewis, the magical man who had written for Red Skelton and Bob Hope and who was now teaching the class. He put his Styrofoam cup of coffee down, looked me in the eye and said, “You don’t overcome your fear. You bring it up on stage with you. That’s what people are interested in.”

He understood that audiences want to know how we’ve dealt with the problems in our lives and what we have to teach them. No comedian comes out and says “Good evening! My life is great, things are smooth, and the

trust fund check always arrives on time. Can you relate?" Comedians come out and speak rather to the fears and frustrations they encounter: politics, relationships, self-esteem, etc. The audience nods and says to itself, "Yeah, me too. What did you do about it?"

He showed me that audiences relate to the struggles in life. They are there for guidance as well as laughter. They relate to us through the challenges we have encountered. We relate to them through storytelling. I believe the magic of storytelling lies in the fact that when we tell our own story we are sharing an individual experience. Yet, as we tell it and it travels from our lips to the ears, hearts and minds of our audiences, the story transforms from being one person's experience to one that contains a universal truth. Many in the audience can relate to that universal truth. We start out sharing our vulnerability and end up discovering a source of our strength. They are both the same.

** Presence*

Our presence is what attracts the audience to us. It is the magnet that pulls their attention towards us, that quality of poise and effectiveness that enables a performer to achieve a close relationship with an audience. The energy in the room is fueled by our presence. If we are to be considered an "attraction," it is our presence that makes us so.

A means to developing presence is learning to be in the moment, to "be in the here and now." Wonderful opportunities to develop this quality offer themselves to me whenever I am at an NSA gathering. As I'm talking to a friend or new acquaintance in the hallway of the hotel, I see out of the corner of my eye someone else I am dying to speak to. Each time I resist the urge to let my attention drift from the person I'm speaking to, I enhance my presence. Each time I refocus my awareness to the one I am with, I bring myself to the present.

There is no greater gift I can give myself or my audience than my presence. If you need basic "presence" training, I encourage you to enroll in an improv theater class.

As you develop your presence, you gain the benefit of "gravitas." NSA member and communication expert Karen Cortell Reisman considers "gravitas" to be a vital element of a successful keynote speech. What is it?

Simply defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, gravitas is the "condition of wakefulness, steadiness and equanimity derived from disciplined practice of presence." It is the environment in which our magic is spun.

* *Spontaneity*

We demonstrate the elements of poise and effectiveness to our audiences in what we do and how we react to unexpected situations. When we are on the platform, standing in front of our audiences, we are in a leadership position, both actually and metaphorically. They look to us very intently during situations that are unexpected in either their timing or impact. What are they looking for? They want to see how we respond spontaneously. Spontaneity is a skill that enhances presence and, as paradoxical as it seems, spontaneity can be practiced. In fact, in order to become spontaneous, you must practice spontaneity.

Blocks to spontaneity occur when thinking takes the place of acting from natural feeling. Spontaneous responses never seem contrived or manipulated. They seem natural because they are unaffected. You can't worry about what people are going to think. You know very well that people are going to think what they want to, based on their own perceptions of the truth. You may as well act from your own heart, soul and experience. If you are going to go down, you may as well go down with your own truth.

Radio Announcer is a game I find useful to practice spontaneity. It can be played while you are driving, walking, typing at your computer or even sitting somewhere with nothing to do, like at an airport after your flight has been cancelled and you have a four-hour layover.

Begin to objectively describe, out loud, whatever is coming into your field of awareness. No thoughts, no judgments, no explanations. Allow for as much stream of consciousness reporting as possible. Here is a transcript of part one of my experiences playing the game while driving on an Interstate.

"I'm just passing mile marker 114. There is a red car coming up on my left. I can't tell what it is but it's going faster than I am. It's passing me now. It's an SUV of some kind. Connecticut plates. The Constitution State. Blue plate. A little bit of ice is still hanging from the rocks on the sides of the road. Sun is shining, blue sky. Truck has flashers blinking going up the hill. I'm passing him. The woman in the car next to me is wearing a green hat and sunglasses. I like this song on the radio. There is a CD on the floor...." You get the idea. Play this game for about two to three minutes at a time.

The Whole is Greater Than the Parts

Though the success of our speeches may be judged by the reaction of the audiences we appear in front of, the success of our careers is judged by the reaction of our buyers, those meeting planners who hire us. So one of the speaker's key tasks is to keep the participants engaged enough at the right

times to make the meeting successful from the point of view of the meeting organizer. You and I know that audiences hunger to get themselves involved as we look for new ways to keep them focused and interested. And we also know that the stakes keep getting higher as meetings become more costly, workloads become more burdensome and time becomes more precious. By considering the energy flow in the meeting environment, you can help attendees focus and retain what they need to hold on to! By investing in yourself and uncovering your authenticity you will help yourself discover your own true success, effectiveness and happiness.

Look at authenticity and you see that it is our vulnerability which invites the audience to connect with us, it is our presence that delivers them to us and it is our spontaneity that makes them feel comfortable once we are together. Look at authenticity and you understand why it is such a powerful trait for us not only as speakers but also as human beings in relationship with others. All our relationships are strengthened, especially the one with ourselves.

Izzy Gesell is a keynote speaker, facilitator, author and coach. More articles and information can be found at www.izzyg.com.