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Up Front With the SOA Staff Fellow

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I wrote in my column last issue about an upcoming “Influence Training for Actuaries” seminar that was offered at the Society of Actuaries (SOA) Annual Meeting & Exhibit. Since that time, the event occurred, and as I expected, it was fantastic. And as I had hoped, I got to meet several of you there.

The experience once again reinforced the notion that, generally speaking, we as actuaries could benefit from developing our soft skills, particularly with respect to communication. Andrew Sykes did an amazing job at the Influence Training for Actuaries seminar teaching us about the art of storytelling. I’d like to take this opportunity to pass along another few concepts for your consideration as you prepare for your next presentation.

SESSION FORMAT

With the SOA’s Health Meeting only a few months away, I know many of you are developing sessions to present in Phoenix. More often than not, that process looks something like this:

1. Choose a topic.
2. Recruit speakers.
3. Assign subtopics to each speaker.
4. Separately prepare mini-slide decks for each subtopic.
5. Combine the minidecks into one megadeck.
6. Take turns reading through slides during the session itself.

This format is referred to as a panel discussion, and there are times when it is the most effective format. But I think it is often simply the default. Session presenters prepare in this way because they didn’t really consider anything else.

Instead of following that process, I’d challenge you to try something more like this:

1. Choose a topic.
2. **Determine the best session format.**
3. Decide next steps based on the format chosen.
4. Recruit speakers.
5. Present your session at the SOA Health Meeting.
6. Rejoice at how awesome it was.

You’re probably thinking, what other types of session formats are there? I’m so glad you asked. You might consider an interactive forum, where an active moderator “interviews” the various panelists. There may be some slides, but much of it feels more spontaneous than that, even though the questions are often given thoughtful consideration in advance. Questions from the audience are mixed in along with questions prepared in advance by the moderator. Note that this format is particularly useful if you have recruited a VIP to be one of your presenters, as this requires virtually no prep on the part of the presenters outside of perhaps giving some thought to the questions being prepared by the moderator.

Don’t just do what has always been done. Think about what you can do to be impactful.

Another format to consider is a buzz group. This is a format in which session attendees are broken into groups that meet at round tables—maybe 8–10 people per table. Topics are assigned to each table, as is a table moderator, and the discussion flows from there. Each table typically reports out to the full group after a predetermined amount of time. Usually there is time for one table rotation as well so that each attendee gets to participate at two tables on separate topics. (If you select this format, make sure to notify SOA meeting planners about the necessary room setup, as the room will need to be equipped with round tables and easels with flip charts.)

There are many other session formats that could work, as well: moderated debates, mock trials, “Shark Tank”-style competitions, and so on. Be creative!

Audience Engagement

Maybe a panel discussion truly is the best format. If so, please consider ways to engage your audience. Did you know that the SOA’s new meeting app allows for polling at *every* session if desired? Find ways to incorporate live polling into your session so that your audience feels like a part of the action throughout the presentation.

Another way to make a session more engaging is to ask the audience questions. But don’t just ask, “So, how many of you already know about topic X?” Instead, be thoughtful about the questions you ask. Try to avoid simple yes/no questions and instead ask audience members to share opinions or stories from their experience. You must be careful not to stray into anti-trust territory here, but if done well, this type of audience engagement can help attendees connect with others in the room and raise the energy level of a session.

The Visual Component

On the topic of your slides, it is often true that “less is more.” This pertains not just to presentations at SOA meetings but also those back in your workplace. At times, more detail on a slide can be helpful, particularly if you anticipate the slides being used as a handout after the fact. But generally speaking, your slides should accompany your spoken word, not be seen as a suitable replacement for it. I’d encourage more graphics and less text. Give the audience a reason to listen to you rather than just read from the slide!

NOT HOW, BUT RATHER, SO WHAT?

Moving away from presentations at industry meetings, there are many other settings in which an actuary will be asked to present information. Whether we’re presenting to senior leaders within our own company or to important clients, we as actuaries tend to want to spend time talking about “how.” That is, how we were able to do the amazing work we just did! I mean, not just anyone can do stochastic modeling, or perform cash flow testing or any of the other awesome feats of actuarial strength that we can do. So let’s walk them through it, step by step.

Of course, you probably already realize that this is typically a poor strategy. Most likely your audience is very glad that you are paid to do that work so that they don’t have to think about it themselves. Rather, they want to know, “So what?” “What does your work mean to me?” “What strategic decisions need to be

made based on this analysis?” Tailor your communication with them accordingly. Detailed descriptions may be worth including in an appendix, but focus the meat of your time with your audience on what they are there to hear: What does this mean for me and my company?

PARTING THOUGHTS

The ideas I’ve shared may not apply in every situation. I’m sure there are examples of times when a panel discussion is best, slides with lots of words on them are essential, and you better believe my audience needs to hear exactly how I did all of that amazing work! And besides, the ideas I’ve shared are largely my opinions; you are welcome to your own.

But at the very least, I hope this gets you thinking. Next time you have a chance to communicate with an audience, whether it’s at an SOA meeting or at your place of employment, be thoughtful about how you approach the task. Don’t just do what has always been done. Think about what you can do to be impactful. Maximize your effectiveness and consider what will make your audience feel like their time is being used wisely. I promise it will be worth the effort. ■



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