

Get me talking about one of my passions and I can bore you to tears in minutes. But that doesn't mean I won't ramble on for hours! Whether you're in a one-on-one meeting, presenting to the board of directors, or addressing a large audience, how do you decide how much to say when sharing your expertise?

Know Why You're There

Unless you're the one who called the meeting and set the agenda, it's a safe bet the organizer invited you to provide some information or perspective that the audience lacks and needs. It's your responsibility to find out – preferably ahead of time – exactly what need you're expected to meet. Clarity sets you up for success. Making assumptions sets you up for failure. Rarely is an audience satisfied just by you rambling on to demonstrate the breadth of your knowledge.

The more diverse your audience, the more difficult it is to meet their expectations. You may have to prioritize which needs are most important to meet and accept that not everyone will be completely satisfied. In that situation it may be helpful to state your purpose up front, acknowledging what you won't be addressing, and possibly offering other opportunities or resources to address unmet needs.

Take Your Audience Where They Want (Need) to Go

This isn't about what you like to talk about. It's not about sharing the nifty new thing you just learned. It is about knowing how to deliver value to your audience. Consider the diagram in *Figure 1*. The triangle represents the universe of everything there is to know about your topic. Here's what happens if your content falls into each color zone:

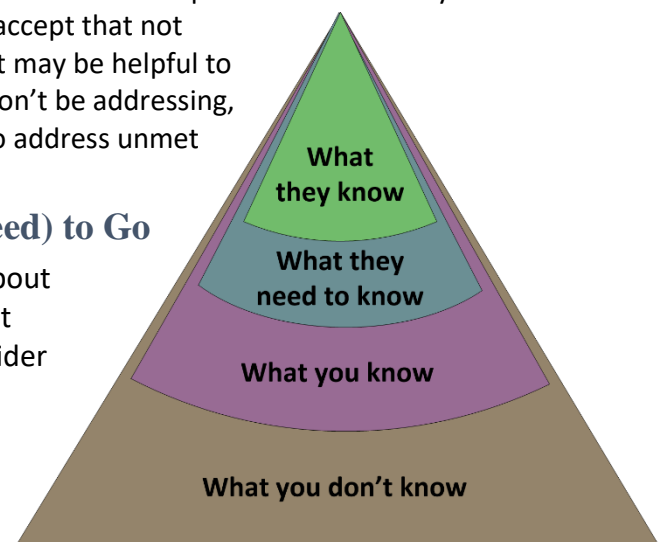


Figure 1

- **What they know** – If your presentation stays in this area, they will be bored, and you will not have delivered anything of value. It is helpful to start here to help them connect with your topic, but your goal is to move them beyond the green.
- **What they need to know** – This is obviously the sweet spot. If you move them from the green and well into the blue, your presentation was a success!
- **What you know** – This is the danger zone! This is what you love to talk about, but if it doesn't meet their need you'll be talking past them and they will be either bored or confused.
- **What you don't know** – I shouldn't need to warn you to stay away from the brown zone. But consider this trap: If you've successfully engaged your audience, they'll probably be interested enough to ask questions when you've finished. *Their questions will tend to be one level below what you presented.* If you present in the blue zone, they may ask questions in the purple zone and you're on safe ground. If you present in the purple zone, where will their questions be? *In the brown zone!* So you'll be forced to the dreaded, "I don't know", or "I'll have to get back to you" responses.

Successful presentations start with focusing on your audience's needs rather than your own.