

Getting Audiences to Tune in

“Often, you’ve got to be flexible and roll with it.” (Eric Litwin)

“Sometimes, I just stare at them until they stop talking.” (Bruce Coville)

“I never let them cough. They wouldn’t dare.” (Ethel Barrymore)

Today, in our iPhone, always-connected world, it takes great skill to get and keep an audience’s attention to know when to ignore disruptive behavior, and when it needs to be addressed to ensure others have a quality experience.

Authors I interviewed said the relationship with an audience is complex. They said you learn over time when to speak out, what can be headed off in advance, what can be dealt with on the fly, and what’s realistic to expect from different types of groups.

This is not a new challenge. In Ancient Greece staff patrolled theater aisles to keep rowdies under control; Romans hissed bad actors off the stage; and Elizabethan audiences would talk back to the actors during a performance. Today, we compete with technologies that allow multitasking in almost any situation – whether it’s looking something up on Google, texting, or photographing and videotaping, people are caught up in their own world with their own notion of rules about how audience members should behave.

“The reality today is people are extremely connected, it’s like a second layer of skin,” says Peter Reynolds, www.peterhreynolds.com, who recognizes this comes with the territory. His decision was to include a slide in his presentation saying, “Please feel free to text and check Facebook status,” with the hope that they’ll do this in response to something he’s saying.”

Eric Litwin, www.ericlitwin.com, who gives 200-300 presentations a year, has information on his website for teachers suggesting that they “sit near their students and actively observe them. He also asks that they don’t bring paperwork or talk during the performance.” He explains that this is a group experience and part of the educational goals for the program is to help kids learn performance etiquette and have a meaningful cultural arts experience.

Eric reflects that giving a great performance is like casting a spell. Over the last ten years, etiquette changes have made this more difficult. One solution is to keep his audience involved throughout the entire program, For example, for family shows he asks parents to turn off all modern electronics and to put their kids on their lap. He then will have them participate along with their children in the songs and stories.

Litwin points out everything is much more public these days, and that you can easily find yourself recorded and on YouTube, even if you’ve asked not to be videotaped. So it’s important to be careful about what you say and do. Eric works closely with his hosts in advance. He also uses chairs to create a performance area if there wasn’t one there already.

Eric feels the key to successful performances today are clear and loving communication of expectations with your host and audiences and continual audience involvement.

Bruce Coville, www.brucecoville.com, who presents to adults and young audiences that can range from early readers through teen, says, "It's as though every venue has its own culture." He agrees that adults need to set the tone. He adds that the event coordinator's role is very important particularly when there's an autographing, where they help manage the line. "I can't do that when I'm trying to focus on each person who comes up to give them personal attention while I sign."

Each group is different, and Coville often has the challenge of talking to a mixed age range at a time. "I've learned to adjust my presentation – so I might be more informational with an adult group, but use a lot of humor and theatricality with kids. It also depends on the place and circumstance – there are many where it's okay for kids to laugh, but others where it's clear it's not. I've given talks where I've had to pull back on the humor because kids were acting up; and places where I had to stop my presentation until adults got the message and stopped talking. When it's a kid sometimes, I'll just stand next to them until he or she stops being disruptive."

Tactics for engaging the audience and handling disruption will differ depending on the venue and the make-up of the audience. It's particularly important when working in an open environment like a book festival or multi-program event where people can move between presentations, to be prepared with verbal, audio or visual cues that can recapture attention, re-energize the room, and remind them of what you need to happen to make it a good experience. You can use humor; add an element of surprise; get people working together; provide an activity; introduce music, movement or video; or incorporate social media polling and audience participation tools like PollEverywhere to get people involved in real time. The key is to make them part of your process. 3:4/12