How to Engage Your Audience: Making Your Session Interactive

After three days, the percentage of learning adults retain is...

- 10% of what we read
- 20% of what we hear
- 30% of what we see
- 50% of what we see and hear
- 70% of what we say
- 90% of what we say as we do

How can you maximize the percentage learned in your session?

Adult learners gain more when they are actively involved than when they are passively listening to a lecture. The challenge for many speakers is: how can we incorporate this active involvement? Here are some interactive techniques so you can maximize learning in your session.

- **An exercise:** Provide a realistic situation for participants to analyze and then use for practice.
- **Personal stories or examples from studies:** Share your own stories. These stories will help connect participants to your topic. Three months later, they likely won’t remember the Plan language you cited – but they may remember your personal story about how your jurisdiction works with it.
- **Ask the audience for an example:** Ask the audience to share a specific example from their personal experience of something you are discussing. (If you have a lot of volunteers, feel free to limit the number of responses. Indicate you appreciate everyone’s interest in this issue, and unfortunately you need to move on to cover all the session’s material.)
- **Case study:** Talk through a specific example of a situation to illustrate a point. For example, instead of theoretically indicating requirements for an applicant, create a fictitious applicant and describe what he has to do.
- **Demonstration:** Show participants the steps for completing a task, instead of only talking theoretically about the steps.
- **Role plays:** Give participants a hypothetical scenario and have participants play out the scenario in pairs to practice the skill.
- **Small group discussions:** Split the room up to discuss a key issue. This conversation will help participants recall what they already know or have experienced that relates to the new ideas. These discussions may be followed by large group debrief. During the debrief, engage the whole room by asking questions such as “How many of you have also seen that situation?”
- **Partner share:** Have participants discuss their responses or opinions with just one other attendee instead of small groups.
- **Facilitated brainstorming**: Encourage imaginative and spontaneous idea sharing for a question.

- **Written responses**: Provide a question and ask them to write their answers. As this information does not have to be shared, it is low-risk for attendees hesitant or shy to share.

- **Reading**: Provide time for quiet reflection time, which is helpful when participants need to process new information.

- **Action plans**: Ask participants to indicate how they will apply new information. What changes will they make upon return to the office? Attendees may do this through written responses, partner share, or a few volunteers sharing their responses with the entire group.

- **Capture participants’ input**: Use a flipchart to track responses.

- **Discussion among presenters**: If the session is a panel format, consider ways the panel can interact within itself and how the audience can engage directly with the panel. If the session has two co-presenters, plan for back-and-forth during the session.

- **Show of Hands**: Do a quick poll of the audience on key questions. For example, “Who has experienced this?” You may use questions which establish the experience level of the attendees.

- **Review**: Review the content at the end of the session by asking and answering some review questions.

- **Resources**: Provide additional resources for participants to use afterward. You may provide your own handouts or refer to other existing websites or other resources.

- **Volunteer engagement**: Ask a volunteer to serve as a scribe, read a passage, or remind you of a “parking lot” issue to cover at the end of the session. “Parking lot” issues are topics raised in a discussion, which are best addressed later or in another context.

- **Accountability planning**: Have attendees write down what they plan to do as a result of what they learned. They could discuss their decision with a partner, exchange business cards, and then promise to follow up with each other one month afterwards. This will both further follow-through and networking. Alternatively, they could write it down on a card which is sent to them after the conference.

- **Q&A**: In addition to all of the above, don’t forget to leave time for Q&A. Afraid an overwhelming and uncomfortable silence might be the first reaction to your call for questions? Be prepared to encourage participation by first saying “One of the questions that is frequently asked...” to get the ball rolling. In addition to reserving time at the end, you may take questions during established points earlier in the session. Feel free to take only one or two questions at these times, indicating you need to finish the rest of the content before taking additional questions.

> "Hmm... Does this mean I can’t include any straight presentation?"

Of course not! Just remember that the average adult attention span is about 20 minutes. Therefore, a presentation works best when limited to times of 20 minutes or less. Ask yourself what can be done to break up or change between sections. For example, you might want to structure your session so that it is broken into three 15-minute sections with structured interaction with your audience between sections.