



2. Your Presentation Environment

(Field of Play)

"A smart man makes a mistake, learns from it, and never makes that mistake again. But a wise man finds a smart man and learns from him how to avoid the mistake altogether."
–Roy H. Williams

What Would You Do?

I was working at a high-tech start-up company, and they sent me to San Jose to present to about a hundred prospective investors.

This was my very first presentation to potential investors, and it was a pivotal time for the company. They needed investment. We worked hard on the presentation slides and had a special, slick, animated one in the middle—the money shot—that showed a data flow cycle central to the business model and therefore, to the company.

I was standing at the lectern about halfway through the slideshow, setting up the money shot. When I looked down to advance the slides, I noticed my laptop was slightly askew. At first, I left it that way, but for some inexplicable reason, while I was talking, I decided to shift it slightly so it would be flush with the edge of the surface. In the process, I somehow pressed a button on the side of the laptop I didn't even know was there, and it started to shut down, but before doing so, displayed a much too personal photo of my wife on my desktop. The experience ultimately left me standing at the lectern in front of a blank screen. It was one of those “Oh, crap!” moments when you know you've started a chain of events you can't stop, that left me feeling like I was being publicly disrobed, standing naked in front of the audience.

—Mike Evans, Owner/CEO, Create-a-Mattress

Every so often, a presentation suffers a moment of crisis. Something unexpected happens that's conspicuous enough to break everyone's concentration and attract everyone's focus, challenging the speaker to address it and regroup before the whole program unravels.

What commonly causes moments like these? What type of crisis is so inherently disruptive that its very appearance would initiate such angst?

Many people assume the worst crises involve a speaker's inability to remember or deliver content. But in my experience, when a presentation truly runs off the rails, the most common culprit is something few speakers ever consider before they're standing in the middle of it: your playing field, the physical presentation environment in which you speak. Like Mike's laptop shutting down and sharing a personal photo along the way, environmental problems usually involve an embarrassing logistical surprise, technical malfunction, or sudden disruption in the speaker's presentation room, tools, timing, stage, lighting, or audio.



SPARKY SAYS

When a presentation runs off the rails, the most common culprit is the physical presentation environment in which you speak.

Because environmental problems catch you by surprise, play out in full view of your audience, and defy quick, discrete fixes, they tend to throw you far off your game. You can't mask your disorientation the first time you stand on stage, lose your bearings in the blinding spotlight, and hear your amplified voice bouncing off the walls. You can't fake the technical expertise needed to resuscitate your laptop when it unexpectedly freezes. You can't conjure your handouts out of thin air when you realize they're back at your office. And you can't make the traffic jam that threatens your on-time start magically dissipate.

Without preparing for these possibilities, you leave yourself exposed and vulnerable to them. When one appears, it can render you helpless, sapping away your confidence and momentum in seconds. All this drama plays out right in front of a roomful of potential loyal fans who tend to remember your crisis long after they've forgotten your content.

But don't run for the exit just yet. I've checked, and nowhere is it written that an environmental challenge must inevitably spiral into tragedy. Just as golfers check wind speed and direction before a key drive to improve their accuracy, you can dramatically reduce the likelihood of environmental problems derailing your presentation by scouting a few key elements of your surroundings before you speak. You can even move beyond mere disaster prevention and recovery, and learn to use your environment to help you outfox your opponents and win loyal fans.

This chapter will help you do that. First we'll consider the true impact of presentation mishaps and how they reverberate well beyond your pitch. Next we'll examine six key factors of your presentation environment:

1. Geographic location
2. Venue and room
3. Audio and microphones
4. Ambient lighting and spotlights
5. Slides and live online demos
6. Program logistics

For each factor, you'll learn common Rookie Mistakes to avoid, valuable Key Research to do in advance, and easy Most Valuable Presenter (MVP) Strategies to apply. Finally, we'll revisit Mike's story, see how he handled his moment of crisis and what we can learn from it. Along the way, you'll read other true stories about the environmental problems other speakers (like me!) have faced and see how we handled them.

But wait, why should you bother securing your presentation environment? After all, what's a little slideshow malfunction between friends?

Assessing Your Environmental Impact

Athletes are lucky; their environments are predictable. Football players know that on any given Sunday, regardless of venue or opponent, their playing area will be one hundred yards long, their game clock will spot them four, fifteen-minute quarters of play, and they'll get four downs to advance ten yards on every possession. Moreover, if the coach's headset malfunctions or the defensive coordinator forgets his clipboard, the quarterback never gets blamed.

Doesn't that all sound luxurious? Most presenters enjoy no such predictability. Each venue, event, and program in which you speak features its own design, goals, people, rules, and time frames. Each audience you face carries its own unique assortment of dynamics, attitudes, and expectations. Each production crew that supports you brings its own command hierarchy, equipment, and operating style. Thus, each presentation you deliver becomes another lesson in adaptation.

What if you don't adapt and an environmental disaster ensues? These moments often leave an oversized imprint on your audience's memory. They see your speaking environment (fairly or not) as a predictable, manageable ecosystem. Your difficulty keeping it in balance paints a first impression of incompetence, one that's tough to erase once it appears. Why is that?

Well, consider your own experience in the cheap seats. Have you ever witnessed a presenter in the throes of a technical problem that made you wince with discomfort? I bet the details are easy to recall; these moments tend to sear themselves into your memory. How did that experience affect what you thought, said, and did about that speaker's organization, cause, products, or services being promoted?

First, consider how it affected your rational, logical opinion. Did your faith in that speaker's ability to serve you as a customer grow or shrink? Were you more or less inclined to consider the speaker's products and services and organization as viable options in which to invest your precious time and money? Did you extrapolate from those moments to the speaker's entire way of being, assuming that being unable to pitch the products and services capably meant the company he or she represented couldn't deliver them capably either?

Now consider the emotional toll of your experience. Watching the chaos unfold second by second, did you become annoyed, frustrated, or even a bit angry? If so, it's understandable; after all, it's your time, too. When you commit to watching speakers present, you essentially make a deal to trade a block of your valuable time for their valuable information. You arrive with high expectations, ready to enjoy the experience, open to being persuaded, eager to cheer them to victory. Maybe you already counted yourself a cherished loyal fan, or maybe you're open to becoming one.

But when speakers aren't prepared to deliver the information they promised, fail to consider and prepare for all the things that might prevent them from serving you effectively, and respond unsuccessfully when something unexpected happens, they don't hold up their end of your deal. They don't come ready to play.

As a result they fumble the ball. And teams who fumble that fast rarely recover their momentum or the support of those in the stands. Not only don't they win that game, their mistake ripples outward through the ether, killing an immeasurable number of leads, sales, referrals, and serendipitous opportunities.

Environmental mishaps also tend to reverberate far beyond the moment and the room. You know from Chapter 1 that presentations are often your first point of exposure to potential customers; they shape that critical, permanent first impression of you. Should those potential customers choose to invest in you, they know you'll likely be thrown a curveball at some point over managing a feature, meeting a deadline, mitigating a personal dispute, or matching a price point. Consequently, your audience sees your response to adversity in your presentation today as a barometer for how you'll respond to adversity in serving them tomorrow. The more thrown you seem by the unexpected now, the less your audience will believe you can handle the unexpected later.



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To you as the speaker, these judgments might seem unfairly disproportionate to the crime. After all, you likely don't control your venue location, room configuration, Wi-Fi signal strength, starting time, audio clarity, and so on. You depend on the event's director, the crew's audio tech, the venue's IT expert, and others to make those tools work, and when they don't, you depend on them for a quick fix. Why should your audience pile the mistakes of others on your shoulders?

MVPs know the answer: because it's your show. Your audience members are there to see you, not the audio tech. They've given you their precious time and attention, and they trust in you to deliver what you promised. If things go well, you'll enjoy the credit, the sales, the loyal fans, and that cherished MVP label. If they don't, you'll own the blame and the fallout. Knowing that, the smart play is to take personal responsibility for every facet of your audience's experience and do everything in your power to minimize every potential disruption.

How would you shape that strategy into a speaking goal? Try this: your goal is to deliver a quality performance, start to finish, gig after gig, regardless of any disturbances in your presentation environment. Or, as Rudyard Kipling (kind of) said it, "If you can keep a cool head while all around you are losing theirs, you'll be a better speaker and convert more loyal fans." That doesn't mean making every performance flawless; it means doing what you can to reduce the risk of environmental mishaps and handling them quickly, casually, and professionally when they do arise.

How do you do that? Welcome to your official MVP Environmental Disaster Prevention List! This list addresses six environmental factors: location, venue and room, audio and microphones, ambient lighting and spotlights, online slides and live online demos, and program logistics. For each factor, it highlights the Rookie Mistakes speakers make that are most likely to occur, most disruptive to your presentation, and most easily prevented. Then it offers a Key Research question to investigate before you speak and shares best-practice MVP Strategies for using what you learn in your research to prevent Rookie Mistakes on your watch. You'll also enjoy a few tales of my own environmental tragedies and triumphs.

This list is not exhaustive. (I'd need another book for that!) It will, however, take you a long way toward preventing common speaking problems, recovering quickly when they happen, and even learning to use your environment to your advantage. Heeding it can mean the difference between soaring and sinking in your next speech. Enjoy!

Factor 1:

Location, Location, Location

Between 2003 and 2008 I served as master of ceremonies for a series of traveling shows produced by computer chip maker Advanced Micro Devices (AMD), called the Tech Tours. Each traveling show would visit up to twenty cities around the US and Canada and stage a six-hour educational seminar about AMD's newest desktop and server chips. Up to one thousand local system builders, who built and sold PCs in that area, would attend to learn about AMD's latest and greatest offerings. In total, we produced over one hundred seminars from Miami to Calgary to San Diego.

As the master of ceremonies on every tour, my duties for each seminar included: opening the show by riling up the crowd and delivering the "welcome" speech; interviewing AMD engineers and marketers on stage and walking them through their presentation slide decks; performing in silly interactive bits between presentations, like game shows and theatrical skits; facilitating the question-and-answer session; and running the prize drawing that closed every seminar.

During a 2004 show in a Vancouver hotel ballroom, I made a flub that still haunts me. While indulging in some unscripted banter with a friendly, relaxed audience of several hundred, I made a passing reference to the city's NBA basketball franchise, the Vancouver Grizzlies. Much to my surprise, my friendly, relaxed audience responded abruptly with a chorus of boos!

You NBA fans already know my mistake: the Grizzlies had moved to Memphis three years earlier. The locals remained bitter over their team's desertion, so my clumsy bonding attempt had inadvertently poked a collective pain point.

Presenting far from your home field can be disconcerting enough; fumbling a key detail before an audience whose trust you're trying to gain compounds the awkwardness enormously. To help you turn a potential pitfall into a prize opportunity, let's start with a bird's-eye view of the geographic area where you're speaking. Your goal here is simple: to connect with your audience by showing them you're connected with their world.

Local Flavor

Rookie Mistakes

- Ignoring local flavor. To you, your host city may be just another blur of airports and hotels; to locals, it's their home and their world. You're not required to reference it, but ignoring it squanders a bonding opportunity.
- Getting key details wrong (like the absence of an NBA franchise) shreds your credibility instantly. If something matters to your audience, referencing it correctly should matter to you.

Key Research

- What cherished institution, noteworthy historical event, prominent figure, or well-known monument could you refer to?
- What beloved sports team or lauded hero is associated with this area that you could reference?

MVP Strategies

- Share your personal connections to the area. Did you grow up nearby, go to school in this city, live here as an adult, take a business or personal trip here? Tell your audience what you did and the (positive) effect it had on you.
- Show a photo of yourself on this trip at a well-known local spot. (“Here I am at San Francisco’s Coit Tower yesterday. What a view!”)
- Reference a recent local endorsement by someone in your audience. (“Frank was telling me this morning about his favorite restaurant here in LA: Roscoe’s House of Chicken and Waffles. Anyone been there? What would you recommend?”)
- Share a cool tidbit of obscurity about their world they likely don’t know. (“Hey Bostonians, did you know that in 1775, Paul Revere was accompanied by two other riders warning the countryside that the British were coming, and Revere was arrested and detained by the British in Lexington and never made it to Concord?”)
- Use a symbol of local life in your presentation as a prop or reward. For example, when I deliver my trade show booth staff training program at trade shows in Las Vegas, I often reward booth staffers for their participation by tossing out gaming chips they can use in the adjacent casino. (In Vegas there’s always an adjacent casino.)
- When in doubt, double-check with a local first. Some local connections that look inviting may cause a backlash if used incorrectly. For example, when speaking in Los Angeles, boasting about your devotion to UCLA’s football team might not be received well if you happen to be in a room full of (cross-town rival) USC fans.

Local News

Rookie Mistakes

- Ignoring a big local news story could be distracting for your audience or affect their general mood (negatively or positively).

Key Research

- What new, interesting, or unusual person, sporting event, holiday celebration, weather event, natural phenomenon, or other topic is big news before, during, or just after your visit?

MVP Strategies

- Incorporate that event creatively into your presentation.
For example, I once hosted an awards banquet dinner for AT&T's product and service resellers at a hotel in Dallas. The Super Bowl was taking place there just two weeks later, and many of our 400 audience members were big football fans. So we incorporated the football theme right into the event. We had AT&T's district managers don football jerseys, sprinkled football analogies in the script, had an AT&T staffer play referee and penalize me for an on-stage mistake. We conducted "sideline interviews" with key resellers at their seats, handed out giant #1 foam fingers to every reseller, and even orchestrated a Gatorade dump in which AT&T execs poured celebratory buckets of confetti over our grand prize winners.