



BY BONNIE BAKER



Engineers need stories, too!

Now that another year has wound down, the deluge of hotel technical seminars for 2006 is finally over! Attendees came from near and far to hear what vendors had to say about their wares. It's true; I can get a lot of this information off the Web. So, why do I go to these seminars? Because I want to become excited and delighted with new ideas that, in the end, will make my job easier. If the presenter tells me a good story about his or her products, techniques,

and experiences, it may help me to look at my problems through different eyes.

Granted, not all seminar sessions hit the mark, and I have seen a variety of hotel seminars. Some presenters stand proudly and read their slides. (I can read, thank you very much!) Some whip through their material with a dry, just-present-the-data delivery, similar to Joe Friday from television's *Dragnet*: "Just the facts, Ma'am." I have seen presenters that go so far as to be funny and entertaining, as well as knowledgeable, but they never quite do the trick, either. With this type of presentation, I never get answers. I leave with the same set of tools and techniques I came in with, except now I have a few new jokes to tell at work. Argh!

The type of seminar that I enjoy and remember the most is when the presenter essentially tells me what he will talk about, points out why his topic is important, comprehensively covers the material, and summarizes with the original objective. Couching these four points in a story line goes a long way to pull the presentation together. This format may sound uninspired, but the icing on the cake is when a speaker injects pertinent stories throughout the presentation. This type of organi-

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zation provides attendees with packets of sensory material that the listener can quickly and easily internalize. These presentations are true to the engineer's heart, packed with actual experiences, and void of marketing hype.

So again, with all of the material out there—articles, Web seminars, podcasts, and so on—why do engineers still come to these face-to-face seminars? I wish you could see my face as I tell this story. At one point in my career, I had a manager tell me that we didn't need to train our seminar presenters; he did not want to spend money to fly them to the training session. Can you imagine my reaction? I

looked like a deer in the headlights. I was stunned! In response to this misaligned cost-cutting measure, I calmly stated, "You are right. The speaker has little influence on the seminar, anyway. As a matter of fact, let's just package up the books and mail them to customers so they can read the material at their leisure. Then we can cancel the seminar's hotel arrangements and the speaker's plane tickets. Doing so will save the company a lot of money!" Well, luckily, we did have training that year for the seminar presenters. And you should have heard the stories the presenters told on the road!

Many times, engineers attend these hotel seminars to get the inside scoop. In fact, I know engineers who travel across the country to see and hear the voice of the presenters that work at their corporate home base. These technical presentations usually have an abundance of undocumented tips and tricks. As you may know, in the business world, location is everything. But, in the seminar world, presence has much more value.

So, before you step in front of an audience, whether it is in a hotel conference room or in one of your company meeting rooms, know your story before you walk into the room. Have in mind the beginning, middle, and end, as well as anticipated questions. This strategy gives you a credible start when you set out to portray confidence to the masses.

So ... what is your story?**EDN**

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