It’s How You Make Them Feel!

Recently, I attended a continuing education event. Some of the presentations were meatier than others— isn’t that always the case? We started off with what I call a drum-banging speech. You know the kind: here was our goal, here’s what we did, gee aren’t we great! It was well-received!

The next presentation got a bit theoretical, but it was presented in a very engaging way. People clearly followed the topic, and because the speaker posed many of the points as questions, most people in the audience paid attention and responded. Then the speaker ended with a question where we had to “score” ourselves in terms of how well we perceived we had performed. Yes, it was a great presentation!

Several other events, such as a break, lunch, and concurrent sessions followed. (Aren’t they always part of a typical continuing education event?) Then the last speaker was ready to participate. Now, had I read the evaluation form, I would have been alerted to her topic, which from my perspective had nothing to do with the theme of the meeting. However, the presenter is an excellent, almost mesmerizing, speaker. She rose and started speaking about her organization. In fact, probably half of her time was about it. But, I kept thinking, “It has nothing to do with the conference theme.”

The conference was over. Between the people who spoke directly to me and overhearing other conversations, I can tell you which presentation won as the best speech hands-down! Yes, it was the last speaker. Did that surprise me? No, this person is mesmerizing, remember. What did surprise me is that no one else wondered why she spoke about her organization rather than the reason for the conference.

Why, you may ask, did people love this speech? That is easy to answer! It was how she made us feel. She painted pictures in our mind as she talked about different aspects. She provided a small “side” story to the main point. We felt as if we had been invited into her personal life. She made fun of herself (in a very professional way) and told some of those aspects in a way that I am sure most of us could see ourselves doing what she did. She paced the presentation so that no one could drift off. She provided humor (not jokes) throughout so that we were eager to hear what was next. In short, she made us feel as if we were part of her community, as if we played some small part in the big whole she described, and as if we were close at hand as best friends would be.

No one said anything negative about any of the other speakers. And, no one was talking about them either. To paraphrase Maya Angelou, people forget what you said or what you did, but they remember how you made them feel. Next time, I’m going to test that theory and ask people what big points their beloved speaker made. I wonder how many points I will hear.