

# Public Demonstrations

by

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## **Introduction**

As a greater segment of the general public becomes aware of the blacksmithing community's resurgence, we are asked more often to do public demonstrations. I frequently hear the excuse that "I just don't know how to show people what I know how to do." This demonstration is aimed at teaching smiths how to present their skills to the public.

## **Target Audience**

The first thing you must decide in building a demo is whom you are trying to reach. It makes a lot of difference, because a demonstration that is targeted for grade school children will probably not be interesting to attendees at the ABANA Conference. Therefore, we need to know a little about our audience.

### ***General Public***

This includes all the people you might expect to see at the average fair or event. There will be folks of all ages and backgrounds, but the common theme is that most of them will have little or no experience with metal work. You can expect all ages, from toddlers to seniors. Often the entire show will have a lot to see. Because of this you should keep your presentation short, not more than 10 or 15 minutes from start to finish. In this way the people who walk up in the middle of a demo can stay for the start of the next one.

### ***Special groups***

#### **School groups**

Very often you will have a request to demonstrate either at a school or at a museum or festival where the target audience is one or more school groups. I personally find this a very satisfying experience. It is helpful to know in advance what age the kids are. Once you know this, you can speak to their level without either going over their heads or talking down to them. I like to include a history lesson in how the apprenticeship program of old worked and how lucky the students are to be in school today instead of working 14 hours a day for room and board as the apprentices did.

#### **Seniors**

The museum where I demo the most often has tour groups of seniors. This group may or may not have an interest in what you are doing, but there will almost always be one or more "experts" who have seen a forge before and want to explain it to the others. Another common occurrence is that they may have watched or helped their father or grandfather in the forge when they were young, since almost every family farm had a small forge for repairs.

## **Blacksmiths**

Perhaps the most daunting group for whom to demonstrate are other smiths, because they know something about the craft and you may feel you don't have much to contribute. Just remember that you would not have been invited to demo if somebody didn't think you have something to teach.

## **Scope**

The scope of your demonstration will be determined by both the target audience and the available time. If you are doing a school demo, you will likely have each class or other group for only about 15 to 20 minutes. On the other hand, if it is a weekend hammer-in and you are the only featured demonstrator, you will have much more time to fill. Plan your demo around what you need to accomplish.

## **Preparation**

It is important any time you are putting on a show to be prepared, and smithing demos are no exception. If you want to look professional or at least competent, you must make sure that all needed tools and materials are at hand. You must also be prepared to minimize any errors that occur during the show.

## **Practice**

You should determine what you intend to make well ahead of the demo and practice doing it in your home shop. Sometimes things come up that you didn't expect, so it might be well to use the actual equipment and setup in the practice session that you will use in the demo. This way you will also know how long each demo piece should take in case you need to modify the demo on presentation day. You will want to develop a patter that informs and entertains. Mention the temperatures involved and the materials, but don't get too technically involved for your target audience.

## **Tools**

Be sure to have all the tools you will need with you. Make sure chisels and hardies are sharp and punches are dressed. It is a good idea to have some maintenance equipment such as files and a small hone in case something gets overlooked or damaged during the demo.

## **Materials**

I try to have enough materials at hand in convenient sizes and lengths to do what is expected, plus some for custom work if that is a possibility within the scope of the demo. In cases where I am doing small production pieces, I always have more pre-cut stock than I will need so I can keep moving and not waste time cutting during the demo. If it is an involved demo such as for a weekend, you might take a page from the cooking shows on TV and have several examples of completed stages already done to show.

# Presentation

## ***Appearance***

Always dress appropriately for the occasion. At some events this will mean some sort of “period correct” costuming, at others it can be a tee shirt and jeans. I strongly recommend wearing only natural fabrics.

## ***Safety***

Be sure that the public, and especially small children, cannot get to where they will get hurt. It is a natural thing for people to want to get closer for a better view, but as we all know, this stuff gets hot! I have a small wrought iron fence to keep the public safe, but you can often get by with just arranging your equipment to keep them out of your workspace.

Be sure to protect your body at all times. Wear eye protection and long pants at a minimum, and it is recommended to wear long sleeved shirts and perhaps a leather apron. You may want hearing protection if it is not already too late.

## ***Manner***

When doing a demo, it is important to interact with the audience. The demonstrator must look at the audience from time to time and must make every effort to be sure his explanations can be heard. Try to answer questions clearly and accurately, and if a project is done in stages, show the completion of each stage.

## **Projects**

What to make is often a tricky question. I try to have several quick projects that show process in just a couple of minutes. For instance, it takes about 30 seconds to forge a nail after you come out of the fire. I often tie an overhand knot in a piece of 1/4” round rod, which takes less than a minute and impresses lots of folks. I make miniature horseshoes that take about 5 minutes. This is an example of a project for which I make precuts. I use the bandsaw at home to cut about 100 of these at a time, and when I get low I make more. One piece of 3/8” or 1/2” square bar 2’ long will make at least 10 leaves before it gets too short to use without tongs. These leaves can be made in 4 to 6 heats and make nice key rings with the addition of a simple split ring you can buy almost anywhere. I have even made novelty items. One such is a checkmark made from 1/4” round hammered flat. It is very popular with bankers and retailers when sold as a “forged check”. Sometimes I go so far as to point out that when I first make them they are “hot” and that if dropped onto a table they will bounce. It is easy to go too far in this vein though.

## **Conclusion**

Public demonstrations can be fun and even a source of income to support your tool habit if you are well prepared in advance and plan your presentation. The main things to be aware of are preparation, safety, and targeting the demonstration to fit the audience.