



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

March 2003 – Issue No. 11



Ten Rules for Giving a Great Speech

by James Gray

As a young business reporter in the early 1980s, I covered a lot of bad speeches—mumbled, disorganized, meandering, interminable, ultimately incomprehensible discourses that sorely tested the inconceivably polite Canadian audiences to whom they were addressed.

It was left to me, as a journalist, to make sense of the just-completed assault on common understanding. Because speakers weren't always available for interviews following their "remarks"—and because I had to produce a story, regardless of whether or not a speech warranted coverage (usually not)—I was left to grapple with a perplexing question: just what was their point?

Out of this trauma came a determination to devote my existence to helping executives give better speeches and ensure they had a point. Today, I'm a communication skills trainer, which means I help clients speak effectively to the people they need to reach, whether it's through a speech or a media interview.

Here are my top ten rules for giving a great speech.

1. Be yourself: There's remarkable power in being "you". "You" are the person everyone is expecting—don't let someone else show up in your place. If you do try and take on another persona, a puffed-up or too-humble version of yourself, listeners will sense your insincerity and tune you out. Audiences for the most part are tremendously supportive, especially when they perceive that speakers are being true to themselves. The world already has more than enough phonies; don't add to

the running total. Be "you", imperfections and all. Chances are that no one listening will be perfect, either.

2. Do your homework: The members of an audience can tell within seconds whether you've taken the time to learn about them, or if you're simply delivering a 'canned' presentation.

At the very minimum, take time to learn the basics about the people you'll be addressing. Talk to speech organizers about them. Who are they? What are their issues, challenges and concerns? These are the kind of questions asked by speakers who respect those they're about to address, because in the end it's all about serving your audience. Do that well, and benefits will naturally accrue to you.

3. Hook them early: At this very moment, throughout the world, scores of executives are giving speeches to folks who've mentally checked out. Why do so many presenters lose their crowd? It's invariably because a speaker will fail to tell audience members early on why the information that's about to be disseminated is important to them. If you don't tell people, they'll spend a few minutes trying to make a connection between your exciting new Web site and their own lives. After that, they'll get frustrated and bored and their minds will go someplace else. Once that happens, it's almost impossible to get them back. You need to state early on that your Web site can improve their lives—and then tell them how. If you don't hook them early, you won't hook them at all.

4. **Have a point:** In high school English, it was called a “theme.” Whatever. Be able to express the core of your presentation in a single, clear, concise statement that a 16-year-old can understand. If you can’t produce that, you won’t have a speech, you’ll just have verbiage. We’re all craving the lean, direct, well-organized information and perspectives that a great speech can provide. It all starts with your point.
5. **Keep it simple:** How do you organize a speech? Think in threes. I have nine nieces and nephews aged eight to 15, and when I visit them, I listen carefully to how they tell me their stories. They organize their stories in “three’s.” Children are often better communicators than us because they’re not encumbered by our minutiae; they tend to have a point and get to it with dispatch. So think like a kid. Organize your speech in three sections: Introduction, Body and Conclusion. In the introduction, tell the audience what you’re going to talk about—your point—and what’s in it for them. In the body, expand upon your point in three distinct but integrated parts. In the conclusion, summarize your point and state what you want the audience to do with the information you’ve laid out. It’s your “call to action” and it’s essential.
6. **Be brief:** If you’re asked to speak for 20 minutes, speak for 15 and leave five minutes for questions. If no one has any questions, ask and answer your own questions until you hit the 20-minute mark. It’s easy to lengthen a speech on the fly and much harder to cut it. There’s nothing more irritating than to have a speaker go way

over his or her time limit. It’s absolutely rude—it shows contempt for the audience and displays an inflated ego that’s far too prevalent in business today. It also indicates a lack of credibility. If you can’t speak for 20 minutes, as promised, why should I ever trust you with any other commitment? I love a speaker who’ll get up and say: “I’ve been given 30 minutes for my presentation. I’m going to speak for 20 minutes. I’ll answer questions for another 10 and we’ll be done by 12 sharp so we can all pile out of here and enjoy the delicious lunch that’s being prepared down the hall.” With a speaker like that the audience knows it’s in good hands, so everyone relaxes, free of concerns about time and listens.

7. **Easy on the PowerPoint:** It’s the most misused technological innovation since the handgun. PowerPoint was developed to enhance speeches, not replace them. When PowerPoint is over done, as it usually is, speakers are reduced to tech support for their own presentations, which diminishes them in the eyes of their audience. PowerPoint has its place, but you need to run it; it shouldn’t run you. After all, people have assembled to hear you speak—not to watch you read out loud slides that they can process faster with their eyes. If you do use PowerPoint, the rule of thumb is a maximum of one slide per every minute of speech time. That’s 20 slides in a 20-minute address. And please, no more than three points on a slide.
8. **Rehearse:** There’s no substitute for it. The better you know your speech, the more comfortable you’ll be with it and the better you’ll deliver it in front of

Easy on the PowerPoint. It’s the most misused technological innovation since the handgun.



an audience. When you know your story, you're free to be "you" (rule No. 1!) Okay, you've rehearsed in front of the family dog for two weeks now and you're still nervous. That's natural. Take the pressure off yourself by speaking slowly (the audience won't mind; they're still getting to know you). You'll gain confidence as you go along—and so will they.

9. Make eye contact: More than 70 percent of communication relies on the visual component. People won't buy what you're saying if you don't look them in the eye. But when you're facing an audience of several hundred, how can you possibly look everyone in the eye? Pick out three or four supportive faces in different areas of the room and speak to

them. Speak to those people as if they were your friends—warm, caring individuals whom you like and respect. By speaking to a few, you'll be speaking to the many.

10. Again, be yourself: It can't be emphasized enough. Recently I had the pleasure of conducting a communications workshop with a small group of intellectually challenged adults. They were terrific presenters—they were themselves. One animated young woman, upon receiving the video tape of her speech at the end of the session, hugged the tape with both arms and exclaimed: "I love me!"

Beautiful. She'll need no coaching on being herself. □

James (Jim) Gray is a senior consultant at National Public Relations and one of the company's primary communications skills trainers. Jim brings an extensive background in journalism to the service of our clients in Canada and the United States. A former reporter with *The Halifax Herald*, *The Toronto Star* and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, he retains a sharp edged news sense.

Jim works closely with senior executives, public figures and athletes, helping them communicate effectively with the people they need to reach—through the media and directly, through speeches and presentations. His training is effective because Jim plays an integral role in the formation of compelling key messages—messages that reach their targeted audiences with power and credibility.

An expert in crisis communications, Jim frequently provides counsel to organizations facing challenging public and internal issues. In addition, he's often called upon to advise companies and associations on the planning of their overall media strategies. Jim conducts media skills, presentation skills and crisis communications training across a range of industries. He has strong expertise in the pharmaceutical, financial services and technology sectors. Jim is a graduate of Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

Rights Reserved. ISSN1499-0806



More than 70
percent of
communication
relies on the
visual component.
