



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Overspeaking: Just Say No

by James Gray

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Personal Opinion

I recently attended a conference where a succession of speakers crossed the line from self-absorption to rudeness.

Indifferent to the obvious distress of their audience, they each rumbled interminably over their allotted 20-minute presentation times. One person spoke for 45 minutes (yes, more than double the period apportioned) and asked for questions from the audience afterward. None were forthcoming.

By this time it was well past noon. The conference luncheon had to be delayed and was ultimately served cold. The presenters scheduled for the afternoon session didn't get to eat at all, so busy were they furiously chopping their speeches to comply with the edict of now-desperate conference organizers to reduce the length of the presentations to come. The proceedings ran late anyway. Flights were missed and delegates were apologetic.

Those who talked so irresponsibly over their limits were guilty of the most serious offense in presenting — *overspeak*.

Call me unsophisticated, but I was brought up to believe that imposing on someone's time was at best, impolite and at worst, offensive. When you *overspeak*, you're basically saying to each member of a potentially large group, "Look, I know I'm over my time, and I know you're becoming restless, and I know that the speakers to follow won't be able to fully express their views because of my selfishness. But, quite frankly, I'm more important than any of them, or any of you for that matter, so just sit back and listen to the genius that is me."

One might assume that less-effective presenters would be more conscientious about delivering a speech within the time assigned. In fact, the opposite is often true. Poor speakers, psy-

chologically disconnected from their audience, ramble on. More often than not, they're struggling to get through a speech that was absurdly too long to begin with.

Whatever the reason, those who *overspeak* exhibit disrespect for those who might have become supporters or even customers. And, to be sure, they're paying a price. Potential clients among an audience might reasonably wonder, "If this presenter can't fulfill a simple obligation like speaking for 20 minutes, why should I trust him to honor any other commitment — like delivering a new product on time, or completing a project within budget?"

Overspeaking drains time, money, reputations and the mental health of audiences throughout the world. So what can you do to avoid it? Plenty. Below are five basic guidelines.

Serve the audience

Good speech making is all about making sound decisions about information that best serves the needs of your audience. Learn about your audience ahead of time. Speak to people who'll be part of the crowd before you write your remarks. What do they care about? What could they care less about?

Write long, cut short

Write a lengthy draft as it's a healthy and productive process. Then ruthlessly edit your document. At every sentence ask, "Does the audience need to know this? Am I providing new, insightful or valuable information?" If the answer is yes, the line stays. If it's no, or you're not sure, cut it.

Cut shorter

Now practice delivering your edited draft. If you've been invited to speak for 15 minutes and your practice run lasts 20 minutes, you need to



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cut your speech in half, so it runs about 10 minutes. Why? By show time, presentations invariably expand, because of a plethora of reasons, including introductions, transitions and technical delays. (Besides, has anyone in the history of Western civilization ever complained that a talk was too short?)

Be prepared. Rehearse your speech often. Know it cold and you'll be free to be yourself on presentation day. Be aware of what you can jettison and add, if it comes to that. Be prepared for anything, including the chance that you may have to follow someone who overspeaks and cuts your own talk short, or the possibility that another presenter takes ill and you have to lengthen your remarks (adhering to the ever-lean formula for presentation success.)

Less is more. It's really quite simple. Tell an interesting story that serves the needs of your audience well within the time provided, make an impact and then sit down.

For overspeaking to be eliminated for all time, it must be rendered socially unacceptable, like smoking in public buildings, only worse. I have a friend who, when taking the lectern to follow a speaker who has gone over his time, will say, "I was going to speak for 15 minutes, but because Ed went on too long I only have 12 minutes to address you."

My friend doesn't smile when he says this. Neither does Ed.

Of course, for people like Ed, a presentation means never having to say you're finished. But the days of those who *overspeak* are numbered. The revolt has begun. □

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- Anger does not translate well to paper or e-mail. If you are tempted to fire off an angry letter, draft it and let it age for a day or so. Use the letter as a rough draft for a face-to-face conversation.
- Become an expert in some aspect of your work, and find or create opportunities to share your knowledge with peers and/or superiors.
- Market yourself within your company by getting your name in print. Submit an article to a corporate newsletter or write a letter to the newsletter editor commenting about an article and providing additional information.
- Submit an article or guest editorial to an industry publication. If you lack the skills to go it alone, hire a ghostwriter. You will

provide the background information, and the ghostwriter will add the style.

- Every two or three years, have a marketing expert evaluate your materials to ensure they are furthering your professional goals. □

