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Public Speaking: Hint ... It's Not About You

by James Gray

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Communication

Public speaking still ranks among humankind's greatest—and most irrational—fears. The anxiety has as its roots a kind of self-absorption: We become overly concerned with our "performance" and how those in attendance will perceive us.

The antidote is simple. We have to take our attention off ourselves and direct it to where it truly belongs, on the audience.

The best speakers realize that. They also know that a single presentation is rarely critical to the survival of a democracy. They realize that while speaking convincingly to colleagues, clients and prospects influences the trajectory of careers, for the most part they'll be evaluated according to how they communicate over time. It's cumulative. Speaking well in public is a long-term job that takes commitment, patience and the realization that on occasion, we'll falter. Big deal.

Armed with those new perspectives and the following eight rules, you too can learn to enjoy public speaking:

Preparation is Key

We've all attended presentations where the speakers didn't know their audiences or their material. Those experiences are difficult for presenters and onlookers alike. When you don't know your narrative, half your awareness is taken up trying to recall the information you need to communicate. You appear scattered and uncertain. And you run the risk of losing the confidence and possibly the respect of your audience. The lesson here is that you need to know your story cold. When you do, you're free to be yourself. Only then can you engage others with self-assurance and enthusiasm.

Check Out the Venue

If you'll be speaking in a room you haven't seen, do your best to visit it beforehand. Why? We're creatures of habit. We fear the unknown and luxuriate in the known. You'll appreciate the early visit when

you stride to the lectern for real, in front of 500 onlookers. Your brain will say: "Hey, we've been here before. This isn't so bad." Take advantage of the venue check to test your technology and introduce yourself to the audio-visual personnel. You definitely want them on your side. Those experts can make you look very good, or very bad. Learn their first names—and use them in conversation. ("Buddy" just won't cut it.)

Start Your Presentation Early

In a way, your speech begins when you walk into the room in which you'll deliver it. Before their addresses, many speakers will ignore the very people they'll soon have to count on for attention and support. Don't even think about it. Whenever possible, reacquaint yourself with colleagues in the crowd and introduce yourself to those you don't know. (You'll need as many friends as possible later on.) Smile frequently at members of the audience while you're being introduced. When giving their remarks, the best speakers will connect with three or four encouraging faces in different parts of a room. It creates a feeling of collective intimacy, even within a large venue.

Go Easy on the Stimulants

A little nervousness before a big speech is natural. A few jitters indicate you have respect for your audience. Too many speakers, however, stoke their pre-presentation nerves to the point of apoplexy by ingesting copious amounts of caffeine. Go light on the pre-speech stimulants. If you must drink coffee, go with decaffeinated. Better yet, sip room temperature water. (Ice water can traumatize the vocal cords.) Avoid dairy products, such as yogurt, which can thicken the voice. It's best not to eat too much before a speech and run the risk of indigestion. Promise yourself a great meal afterward—as a reward.

Have a Backup Plan

If your laptop went missing minutes before your presentation, could you still deliver a powerful discourse? The answer should be "yes." Similarly, if



James Gray is a communications skills coach in Toronto.

jgray@mediastategy.ca
www.mediastategy.ca

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conference organizers came to you and declared that because previous speakers had gone over their time you'd have to reduce your 20-minute presentation to 15 minutes, could you do it? You should be able to. You need to have a hard copy of your presentation that you can effortlessly deliver from if your technology goes down. And you should know your material so well that you can present different versions of it, depending on your time.

With PowerPoint, Less is More

Effective public speaking is about taking the pressure off yourself so you can be yourself. When speakers launch right into PowerPoint they often find it difficult to be themselves, so concerned are they with the operation of their technology. (How many presentations begin with the lament: "Where are my slides?") Try this: Forget about PowerPoint for the first minute or so of your presentation. Display a company or product logo as background, and use the time to establish a relationship with the audience. You'll build credibility and self-confidence. When your slides are done (with no more than a slide per minute), finish as you started, with personal interaction. Not so long ago, speakers addressed others like this all the time.

Start Slowly

Most presenters speak far too quickly off the top, slowing down only as they become more comfortable. You need to start slowly. Why? In the early going, members of the audience are getting to know you and what you're all about. If you speak too rapidly they'll miss essential contextual information, diminishing their understanding of your story. After a while, they'll stop caring. The best speakers always start slowly. They keep their opening sentences short and simple. Indeed, they mark up or choreograph their scripts to remind themselves to pause, or stop or smile. During your presentation you'll want your audience with you every step of the way—starting slowly ensures that you'll commence the journey together.

Aim To Be Good, Not Perfect

If you prepare your speech with the goal of delivering perfection and you flub a line early, your subconscious will helpfully inform you that you've failed. I've seen speakers fall apart after that. All of us will occasionally flub because we're human. However, if you serve the needs of your audience with discipline and passion, few will remember that you were less than perfect. Or even care. □

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NEW YORK SECTION COUNCIL MEETING

Members of the Management & Personal Development Section Council gather in New York during the SOA Annual Meeting to discuss the future activities of the section.



*Standing—left to right: Dan Shinnick (2003-04 section chairperson), Dave Miller, Faisal Siddiqi, Sim Segal (2002-03 section chairperson)
Seated:left to right: Jennifer Gillespie (2004-05 section chairperson), Gail Hall, Vince Granieri, Sudha Shenoy*



Incoming chairperson Jennifer Gillespie presents books of appreciation to outgoing chairperson Dan Shinnick