

Podium Prowess

How To Effectively Give Presentations Every Time Through Honesty

-By Steven Gaffney

Fingernails on a black board. Visits to the dentist. Filing taxes. These activities could not be preferred to anything – except, possibly, speaking in public. Most people really hate public speaking – and often devise complex strategies to avoid it.

Unfortunately, despite the expansion of communication media, public speaking remains one of the most powerful methods of persuading, informing, and conveying messages. A deficiency in this area means the loss of important opportunities for association executives and the organizations they lead.

Fortunately, contrary to popular opinion, effective public-speaking ability is not something with which we are born, but a learned trait. If you know your career purpose, focus on the goal of your presentation, and connect with the audience, you can dramatically improve your chances of delivering a successful presentation.

Career Purpose

Helen Keller said, “Worse than being blind is to see and have no vision.” Establishing a vision is the key to understanding your career purpose. A vision is a broadly defined statement that embodies the major things you hope to achieve or for which you would like to be known in your lifetime. An important principle to remember about a vision is that it is meant to inspire you rather than impress others.

An effective tool for arriving at your vision is to ask yourself, “When I am 90 years old and I look back, what do I want to say about my life?”

For example, a friend of mine, who is a well-known political strategist and public speaker, has a vision of an environmentally sustainable civilization within two generations. He knows that by regularly doing a good job he can increase his ability to influence decisions relevant to his vision. This overall perspective gives him the energy, excitement, and confidence to be a powerful speaker.

Goal of the Presentation

It may seem basic, but you must focus on the goal of your presentation. What is your message? What is your point? Is it to motivate, educate, entertain, persuade, or some combination? Answering these questions will define the parameters of the discussion and help construct a speech that will yield the desired outcome.

Regardless of the topic, one must never forget that the underlying imperative is to communicate with the audience. How many times have we heard someone speak or give a presentation, where we say to



ourselves, “What is the point?” When speakers lose sight of their goal, their initial energy wanes, and the speech becomes boring.

Connecting With The Audience

Many speakers have their overall vision and particular goal, but forget to answer the question, “Why should my audience listen to me?” or “What is in it for the audience?”

An audience will listen to a speaker for many reasons – from propriety to necessity – but only for so long. The best speakers always consider the audience’s concerns, needs, and desires. When successful, the speaker can sense the audience saying to themselves “Me too,” rather than “So what?”

Tips Before the Presentation

Know your audience. Find out as much as you can about the audience you are addressing.

It will help reduce the fear of the unknown and improve the quality of your speech.

Recommended questions:

- Who has spoken to the audience before? What did they like and dislike?
- What does your audience expect from the presentation?
- How will you know if you have achieved those expectations?
- What would make this presentation really special?
- Are there any sensitive issues of which you should be aware?
- What are the logistics-number in the audience? Range and average age of audience? Gender proportion? Ethnic and educational background?

Visualize yourself giving a successful presentation. Visualization helps to reduce stress. Some speakers have been known to affix pictures of themselves to a photo of a large crowd. Regardless of the method you use, be sure to focus on how you want the audience to look and feel after you complete the presentation.

Create lists. Lists can be a useful way of eradicating negative thoughts and energy that limit effectiveness and reduce confidence. Remember, you cannot build on top of a garbage dump.

Recommended lists:

- The worst things that could happen to you. This will identify the issues you fear and the issues you need to address. In many cases, writing down your fears will reveal their silliness. For example, in my fourth-grade play during my big monologue, I started to laugh and could not stop. The teacher had to come on stage and finish my part.

Because of this, I became afraid that I would laugh in the middle of a presentation. This prevented me from speaking for a long time until I realized how stupid this fear really was.

- Your accomplishments in the previous year. This will strengthen your confidence and help you realize you really are the perfect person for the job.

- Things you have not done and promised yourself or other people you would do. After you complete the list, either cross off the task and admit you will never do it or identify a date by when you will complete it. Although this may seem to have nothing to do with speaking, it is amazing how confidently you can deliver a presentation when your life is in order.

Prepare your presentation early. Finish it at least two days prior to the deadline. This will reduce anxiety and allow ample time for fine-tuning.

Know your introduction. To ensure a good start to your presentation, script out and be most familiar with the beginning. This will enable you to relax when you are the most nervous.

Overcome hard-to-pronounce words and phrases. Try reading the difficult lines holding your tongue with your fingers. Then release your tongue and say the line again. The improvement will be immediate and dramatic.

Resist the temptation to over practice. Excessive repetition can actually increase tension and often will make a presentation seem canned.

Steps During the Presentation

Use handouts and visual aids wisely. They should enhance-not distract from-the presentation. Before you begin speaking, distribute materials that support major points. The material should have just enough information for the audience to follow along, but not enough detail to cause the audience to read and become distracted from the presentation. Hand out all other materials afterward, especially supporting information, reports and articles.

Be yourself. The reason is simple: People are best at being themselves. Imagine Matt Lauer from the Today Show trying to be like Jerry Seinfeld, or Oprah Winfrey trying to be like Larry King. They all communicate differently, yet they are all effective.

Use your nervous energy. Nervousness is not altogether undesirable. Someone once said, "I don't mind having butterflies, I just want them to fly in formation." Experienced speakers channel their nervousness into an energetic and animated speech.

Make eye contact, smile, and be physically close to the audience. If you like, and it is possible, speak in front of the podium.

Establish rapport quickly. Employ an antidote, personal experience, or some revealing information that pertains to the audience. This also helps to sincerely acknowledge the audience for having you there and listening to you. Make sure the personal experiences you share are the truth. Lack of integrity is one of the fastest ways to lose an audience.

Reinforce messages and illustrate major points. Use stories and examples. The more specific and visual your speech, the better, because people think in images, not concepts.

Encourage audience participation. Use exercises, questions and/or demonstrations. Even if you are speaking for only a short time, at least use rhetorical questions to encourage the audience to participate mentally.

Answer tough questions with questions. If someone asks you a question to which you do not know the answer, reply with a question. This will give you the time and information you need to answer. Recommended questions:

"Can you give me some more information on what you mean by your question?"

"Can you give me a specific example of what you are talking about?"

Finish at the agreed-upon time. Regardless of when you started, conclude on schedule. This will prevent people who must leave from appearing rude as they depart.

Make sure your conclusion is powerful. Ending on a weak note is like having a glass of sour milk after a great dinner.

Steps After the Presentation

Get feedback. One of the best ways to improve and grow as a speaker is via feedback. The easiest way is to provide evaluations and to hang around after you speak. Although it may be difficult to hear, the more brutal the feedback, the more you will grow as a speaker.

Mistakes will happen. Remember that only the speaker knows the script, so most of the "errors" will go unnoticed. Something will go wrong; it always does. Do not fret about it. Just be ready to deal with whatever adversity arises, no matter how big or small. Often, unplanned moments can provide an opportunity to make a speaking engagement memorable.

No matter how much you plan and no matter how great you are, after you finish, you realize ways to improve the presentation.

There is no substitute for experience. **The best way to become a strong speaker is to speak.** There is never a perfect time to start. As W. Clement Stone said, "Thinking will not overcome fear, but action will."

The Big Picture

And finally, the most important tip of all:

Have fun. After all, what is it going to matter in a hundred years? And remember, speakers who truly enjoy what they are talking about and relish the opportunity to share their knowledge with others can contribute greatly to their audience's quality of life.

Steven Gaffney is a leading expert on honest, interpersonal communication, influence and leadership, and is one of the recognized authorities on the subject of honesty. He is the author of two groundbreaking books, Just Be Honest: Authentic Communication Strategies that Get Results and Last a Lifetime and Honest Works! Real-World Solutions to Common Problems at Work and Home. He is also the co-author of the book Honesty Sells: How to Make More Money and Increase Business Profits.

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