

Speaking to Groups is Part of Life and Your Career, So You Might As Well Get Good At It!

By Jeff Davidson, MBA, CMC

All other things being equal, young professionals who speak well in public are more likely to be promoted than those who don't. Also, public speaking can provide you with many new business contacts and possible additional income. The key to success is to know what to talk about and how to get invited to speak.

All About Your Speech

I can vividly recall the first time I ever spoke to a group professionally. I was speaking to about 75 entrepreneurs at the Hartford District Office of the Small Business Administration. At the time I was working for a management consulting firm that provided marketing and management assistance to small to medium-sized businesses. One of our marketing activities to gain exposure for the firm was to serve as seminar leaders at SBA-sponsored workshops.

Although I had only been with the company six months, this Tuesday in May was to be my public speaking initiation. The presentation was to last 30 minutes. I was prepared and qualified, having offered the same type of advice to individuals for two years.

When I got in front of the group, everything changed. The words were coming out and what I was saying had impact, but my stomach was doing somersaults. By the end of the session, a feather could have knocked me over; I was lightheaded, dizzy, exhilarated, and glad to be done.

In the months that followed, the presentation became easier and easier to give. I think it was after the sixth time that the butterflies left and my feet were firmly planted. And a funny thing happened by the next year -- I actually started looking forward to speaking before groups. All of the things that I had read about the nervous energy that never dissipates didn't seem to apply. In succeeding years I was better prepared to communicate on the job, impressed bosses and coworkers with the names of groups I had spoken to, and acquired confidence that spilled over into other areas of my career -- such as attracting new clients to my firms.

You may have never considered speaking in public, yet becoming a good public speaker can help you to advance your career rapidly. You'll be perceived as bold and dynamic, and you'll also gain visibility and new business contacts or clients.

Speaking Preparation

Your first step in preparing your speech is to focus on exactly what you want your speech to convey to the group. Try describing the impact you want in one sentence. Then tackle two or three ideas at most. It's more effective to illustrate a few ideas in depth than to touch on a wide variety of topics. Examples and anecdotes will help your audience remember the main points.

You can't go wrong following the old adage, "Tell 'em what you're

going to tell 'em, tell 'em, and then tell 'em what you told 'em."

Here are a few initial tips on the three parts of a speech -- the opening, the middle and the closing. A strong opening is vital to holding your audience's attention. If figures can document your point, use them. Be careful, however -- don't overwhelm your audience with figures throughout the speech. Members of the group will be uninterested if they hear too many numbers after the first third or so of your presentation.

The body or middle of your speech is the meat of it. Here you strive to be compelling, alluring, insightful, and watchable. If you're going to lose members of the audience, here is where it's most likely. Some may nod off, others may daydream. Some may give you stares of false attention. I always take the attitude that it's not my audience's responsibility to stay interested in what I'm saying -- it's my responsibility to get them and keep them interested!

Your conclusion is as important, if not more so, than anything in your speech. Make it dynamic, drawing together the points you have made in your speech with a strong example or anecdote.

Plot it Out

After you've decided on your opening and closing, outline the important parts of the body of the speech. When outlining, use key words to remind you of the key points. Writing out whole sentences is unnecessary and burdensome.

Practice your speech using the outline, written on notecards or with any other method that's comfortable for you. Your speech will be different each time you practice it. Don't worry about that. It will be different also for each different audience as well. The secret of becoming a good public speaker is the ability to turn a speech, even one to a huge audience, into a two-way conversation. You modify your speech based on the energy level, intellectual understanding, enthusiasm, and many other characteristics of each audience.

If you use an unfamiliar or technical word that your audience may not know, rephrase it or define it in the next sentence without being condescending.

Deliver with Style

If you must use notecards, place them on the lectern or table from which you'll be speaking. However, move away from the lectern whenever possible. A speaker who moves a little seems more dynamic and involved, even if he or she uses the same words as a speaker frozen behind the lectern. Furniture separates you from your audience. Once you get comfortable, step out from behind it; eventually, you'll wonder why you ever needed it in the first place.

Your intonation is also important. Vary your pitch, tone, and speech according to the emphasis on your content. Tape one or two of your practice sessions to help you judge how you sound to an audience.

Many speech coaches will tell you that most people speak several tones too high. The reason -- they don't hear their voices as others do. "The sound reaches them through the head rather than through vibration in

the air, distorting the tone," says one coach. The antidote is to use lots of jaw and lip movement. "This will improve tone and make you look more animated. It will also slow your delivery, which gives you more time to think of what you want to say."

Making Eye Contact

Maintain eye contact with an individual for three, four, or five seconds, or until you have completed a thought. Most speakers look at people momentarily before moving to someone else, scanning the audience rather than establishing specific eye contact. Don't let yourself slide into this habit.

It's important to establish eye contact because it helps to reduce your tension. Also, by focusing on one person at a time you remind yourself that you're in a conversation. Even with a room of many people everyone you speak to is interpreting you individually and will respond to you individually. If you look at somebody for three to five seconds, you have time actually to see that individual. That will enable you to read the whole audience. You'll know, or sense, how they're responding.

Public Speaking in Perspective

While you may make speeches with the idea of advancing your career or gaining new business, never turn your speech into a direct attempt to self-promote or to make a sales pitch or sales presentation. Speak on a topic of interest and do your best -- anything else is a turnoff and can backfire.

Your decision on whether to seek speaking engagements as a personal promotional tool hinges on 1) your ability to be interesting and 2) having something worthwhile to say to a group composed of targets of opportunity or influence. If you have never spoken before a group, you have a unique experience in store. Everyone is nervous at first, but after a while you may find public speaking to be quite exhilarating.

Speaking Organizations

To further your speaking capabilities, there are two organizations you may consider joining. The National Speakers Association is the professional association for public speakers. As a member, you receive inside information and the opportunity to network with and learn from some of the top professional speakers in the world today. This is a friendly group, and practically everyone is willing to share information with you.

The National Speakers Association has local chapters across the country. As one speaker put it, "Here's where the action is year round. Ongoing programs to develop your skills, networking with local, friendly, professional speakers and business people like yourself, and new opportunities -- all are yours at the local chapter level." NSA has more than 30 chapters. Your local chapter will welcome your interest.

Also, contact your local Toastmasters chapter. Toastmasters is a worldwide organization with thousands of local chapters, which provides training in speaking skills. While NSA and Toastmasters often approach different aspects of speaking, their programs are complementary. Many

aspiring speakers belong to both. In NSA you discover the aspects of speaking professionally. Toastmasters is more nuts-and-bolts speaking skills with feedback and evaluation.

Toastmasters chapters often exist within large corporations for their employees; usually chapters are independent and open to the public.

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