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Public Speaking

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SIMPLY SPEAKING

Paul Horn's Top 10 Tips for More Polished Presentations

1 Enlist your whole self.

Spoken messages—speeches, presentations, interviews—require a different set of skills from written communication. Mainly, it's physical energy—from your voice, your gestures, your movement, and your eye contact. You yourself are an almost inseparable part of your message—how you look, how you sound, and how you move all affect the impact of your message. An audience doesn't separate “the dancer from the dance.”

2 Give yourself a strong goal or purpose for your talk, no matter how mundane the topic may seem. Ask yourself, “At the end of my talk, what do I want my audience to do, think, feel, understand or believe?” Your own clarity about this goal or purpose will help you organize your thoughts and put energy behind them.

For example, in talking with your employees about the company's 401(k) program, think of your purpose as not simply to explain the 401(k) program but to have a majority of employees sign up for the plan, even if they just start with the minimum contribution. It's action-oriented, measurable, and therefore provides more “motivational thrust” for both you and your audience.

3 Think about your audience and ask yourself “So what?”

As you mull over the purpose of your presentation,

ask yourself what the *benefit* is for your audience. After all, that's what your listeners will be asking. They want to know “What's in it for me?” and will lose interest if you don't make that clear.

Thus, with our 401(k) example, the benefit or “So what?” you could offer your audience is not simply to understand how the plan works but, rather, that it will help them secure a comfortable retirement.

4 Be passionate.

Find something...anything!...in your subject or message that you can feel passionate about—perhaps a personal experience (your own or someone else's) relevant to the topic. The experience itself can be happy, sad, inspiring, amusing or frustrating. Whatever the emotion, this passion will energize you and help you make a connection with your audience.

5 Keep it simple.

Let's face it, most of us don't retain much information for very long. Sometimes we're distracted or preoccupied. So, as speakers, our job is to motivate our listeners by presenting a limited number of points as clearly, succinctly and colorfully as possible. Our audience can usually find more detailed information later if they're motivated. But too much information in a talk can obscure the main points and leave people feeling confused, tired, irritated or all of those! So focus on key points and illustrations that are meaningful to your audience.

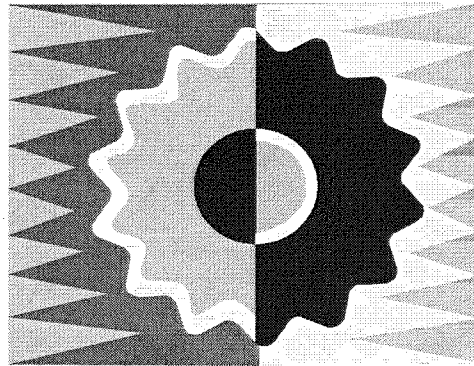
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Returning to our example, you might say: "Let's assume you make \$40,000. Under our plan you can put up to 10% of your salary, or \$4,000, into your 401(k) plan. Since the company will match your contribution 50 cents to the dollar, or \$2,000, you can save a total of \$6,000 for the year. And remember, those contributions will not be taxed until you withdraw them during retirement when you'll most likely be in a lower tax bracket! Now, here's the clincher: Our next slide shows you the advantage of saving under the 401(k) plan with taxes deferred, rather than in a regular savings plan, assuming an interest rate of 6%."

6 Make it colorful. Use appropriate stories, personal anecdotes, analogies, and/or quotations to enliven your material and engage the audience on an emotional level. We're always better at remembering colorful stories than information or abstract principles by themselves. For instance, you could say: "So one of our employees stopped me in the hall the other day with a very skeptical look on his face, his arms crossed against his chest, his head cocked back, and asked, 'Did you say the company would *match* my contribution?'"

7 Vary your pace. This will aid your audience's comprehension, help you catch your breath if you tend to talk quickly, and check for understanding or agreement. Pauses or brief silences can be very powerful, and they're especially effective at key transition points.

8 Manage your visual aids — don't let them manage you. Many of us are "visual" learners, and certain information does lend itself better to pictures or diagrams than to verbal expression, so visual aids do have their place. But use them sparingly—to highlight and support, not to deliver, your message. Beware the seductions of PowerPoint, as well as old-fashioned overheads—they tempt us to put too much information on a slide and to use too many slides in the first place. Above all, don't *read* your slides or overheads to your



audience—your listeners will find that tedious and even annoying. Finally, keep that connection with your audience alive and look at them when you're speaking, not at your visual aid. No one wants to look at the back of your head for very long.

9 Open and close with energy and conviction. Openings and closings are often what our audiences remember most, so use them to your advantage. Make strong choices. In opening, be a little bold and provocative when you can (taking into account your audience). The famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright once opened a speech to a large VIP audience in Pittsburgh by saying, "This is the ugliest city I have ever seen." You don't necessarily have to go that far (and probably wouldn't want to unless you have certain credentials), but attention-grabbers upfront are important. Likewise, try to give your closing more than the traditional, polite "Thank you." Use the closing as a call to action by saying something like: "So, think of all that you want from your retirement—whether it's spending time with your grandchildren, hiking the Grand Tetons, putting around the garden, or teeing off at your favorite golf course. Start with just a small contribution if you want, but sign up today."

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10 Savor the Q & A. Question and answer periods may be challenging, especially if you face a hostile audience, but they're also an opportunity to test for understanding and acceptance, reinforce your key message, address misunderstandings or objections, and to learn something new yourself. A few pointers:

- ◆ Give yourself time to listen, think and respond; your silence may seem an eternity to you, but you will appear thoughtful to your audience.
- ◆ If your response requires more than a quick sentence or two, make eye contact with others in the audience to hold their attention.
- ◆ With large groups, repeat or paraphrase the question to make sure everyone has heard it; this also gives you more time to gather your thoughts and formulate your reply.
- ◆ Whenever possible, use your answer to bridge back to your main theme or key message, especially if the question challenges your message, as in this example:

Q: Haven't a lot of people lost their shirts with their 401(k) plans?

A: Thank you, yes, some people have experienced serious losses with their 401(k) investments. Of course, all investments carry a certain degree of risk, but when people "lose their shirts," it's almost always because they made investment choices that were too risky. Typically, they invested too much of their money in one particular company or industry rather than diversifying or spreading out their risk. That's what happened to a lot of Enron employees, as you know. However, our 401(k) plan will give you the tools you need to make sensible choices plus the advantages of tax-deferral and regular matching contributions from the company.

- ◆ Anticipate questions and have one or two in mind that you can pose on your own if you sense your audience may be reticent to speak up but eager to know more.
- ◆ Make sure, too, that you aren't packing up your equipment or materials when you ask for questions. This may signal that you aren't really very interested in taking questions and just want to make a quick exit.

As these 10 tips suggest, good presentations are in some ways like good one-on-one conversations: energetic, animated and compelling. As you become more conscious of good speaking habits that you and others demonstrate in ordinary conversational settings, you'll be able to absorb and transfer these to more formal speaking situations.

Here's one last piece of advice: Find a way to videotape yourself delivering a talk, then review your performance with a friend or two who can offer honest, constructive feedback. Note what you do well and what you can improve. Focus on one or two behaviors you can practice and improve on for your next presentation--your eye contact, for example, or your use of visual aids. Don't worry about being "perfect." Just concentrate on delivering what any audience appreciates: a lively, interesting message that clearly conveys "what's in it for them."

* * *

Paul Horn offers individual coaching and group workshops in public speaking, presentation skills and other areas of personal and business communication. He draws on his background as both an urban planner and an actor specializing in corporate training and marketing programs produced for video, film, CD or the web.

Making More Powerful Connections with Our Audience

Question: How can we convey our technical knowledge and insights in a powerful and engaging manner?

Answer: Speak from the heart. Avoid purely technical, abstract discussions. Instead, try to link technical points to your own experience and observations. Personal stories and reflections, and humor-- appropriate to the setting and audience, of course--will "ground" and energize you and help you draw in your audience. Stretch a bit to find and integrate these personal elements. It always helps to have some good stories at the ready.

Examples: Think of how you might complete statements like the following or think about developing similar formulations of your own.

In working with a wide range of clients over the past 20 years, I think the biggest lesson I/we have learned is....

I'll never forget what one of my professors in architecture school once said about this....

I think our approach to "smart buildings" is still evolving....when I graduated from Wentworth, I remember being absolutely convinced that..... and then in 19__ we got involved with a project in....what we came to realize was that...

It's sort of a cardinal principle of construction and design that and I think that's still generally true, but sometimes it pays to take to take a different approach. For example, we worked on a project in....

We had a client once who I think taught me/us something very important.....

When people ask me what keeps me up at night on a complex project like this, I usually say....

The most important thing I've learned to share with a client is....

In the graduate course I teach at _____, one of my students posed a very interesting question the other day on exactly this issue....

You may find this surprising, but I've come to the conclusion that the biggest misconception about the construction, even among some contractors I've met, is that.....

You get the idea. A degree of genuine self-disclosure, relevant to the subject matter, conveys your humanity, complements your technical authority, and thereby strengthens your overall presentation. Formulations like these can help you discover, tap into, and share your own sources of passion with your audience. If vividly described and sincerely told, these stories will energize you physically, while allowing you to demonstrate qualities of humility, humor, and confidence -- qualities that appeal to any audience!

Got the Presentation Jitters?

Try Some of These Techniques for Controlling Your Nerves

If you care about making a good presentation, it's natural to be bit nervous. And presentations benefit from some nervous energy. It's just that we want those butterflies, as the old saying goes, to "fly in formation." Here are some techniques to help you.

AS YOU PLAN YOUR PRESENTATION.....

- 1) Stimulate your creative juices. Start thinking about your presentation as far in advance as possible, and keep a notebook nearby to jot down facts and ideas that occur to you—even things that may seem "off the wall." Collect articles and cartoons that may be relevant. Start talking about your topic with friends. Don't feel that you need a full outline right away—it will emerge in time.
- 2) Find your POP ("Point of Passion") about the topic and introduce it early on—maybe as a bold and emphatic statement that serves as an "attention-grabber" (e.g., "Ladies and Gentlemen, the revolution has begun. People from across the city are turning in their cell phones....")
- 3) Know how you're going to begin and practice the opening lines of your talk. Once you do, you'll be comfortable varying them slightly, which will add spontaneity and an energy an audience will appreciate. As you get close to a "final draft" of the whole talk, practice it in front of a friend or two.
- 4) Plan to share a personal experience that relates to your topic and has emotional meaning for you (amusement, wonder, joy, relief, sadness, frustration, puzzlement, etc.). Choose a scenario you can express not only verbally but physically as well through facial expressions, gestures, body language, and vocal variety.
- 5) Keep the structure of your talk simple so you can almost visualize the outline of main points. If you forget a point during your presentation, chances are the audience won't know it, and you'll find it easier to get back on track.
- 6) Think of questions you might ask to encourage audience participation. A conversational approach with the audience will help relax you.
- 7) Consider showing a funny picture or cartoon (assuming some humor is appropriate). Laughter and the relaxation it brings are contagious.
- 8) Realize that a certain amount of nervous energy is good since it produces adrenalin that can enhance your presentation—just as the surge of adrenalin before a race helps a runner's performance.
- 9) Remember that nervousness is often the result of focusing on ourselves rather than our audience. Tell yourself: "It's not that **I** have something they need to hear. It's that **THEY** will appreciate hearing what I have to say." It's a subtle difference, but notice who comes first.

- 10) Keep in mind that speakers seldom look as nervous to their audience as they may feel inside. If you don't believe this, ask your friends or colleagues who observe your practice talk, or watch a videotape of yourself giving a talk.
- 11) Worried about questions you may not be able to answer? Ask a friend or colleague to throw a wide variety of questions at you so you can figure out appropriate responses ahead of time. At times, the best answer may be admitting that you don't know but will try to find out. Or there are times when it's perfectly OK to ask other audience members if they know the answer.
- 12) Remind yourself that you don't have to be "perfect" to be effective and appreciated!

SOON BEFORE YOUR PRESENTATION...

- 13) Visit (or at least find out about) the place where'll you'll be speaking. It helps to visualize ourselves where we'll be speaking. Also anticipate and arrange for any equipment you may need—extension cords, a microphone, a flip chart. You may want to develop a written checklist, especially one that you can send to your host if you can't visit the location ahead of time.
- 14) Check the seating configuration for comfort and accessibility to your audience. Attendees tend to avoid the front rows—but that's where you want them if you want to feel connected.
- 15) Warm up to your audience in the minutes before your talk. Introduce yourself and chat with them as they arrive. You may even consider phone conversations prior to the event if possible and appropriate. By doing this, you won't feel like you're talking to complete strangers.
- 16) Take a brisk walk—preferably outdoors, but even indoors will help release some nervous energy.
- 17) Do some stretching and vocal warm-ups. (Hint: reading Dr. Seuss books aloud can be useful. Try one of my personal favorites: "If I Ran the Circus.")
- 18) Have a glass of water within easy reach during your talk.
- 19) If someone will be introducing you, provide a statement he or she can use. Keep it light and add some humorous note that an audience will appreciate.
- 20) Look your best. Make sure your attire is appropriate for the occasion. If anything, dress a bit more formally than your audience. Men: shine the shoes, make sure everything is clean and pressed, wear a tie you like, check the grooming. Ladies: keep the jewelry simple, the shoes comfortable.

AS YOU GIVE YOUR PRESENTATION...

- 21) Smile, take a deep breath, and find a friendly face or two in the audience before you begin.
- 22) Use strong deliberate gestures that convey your points with more power and, at the same time, release some of your nervous energy
- 23) Remember to breathe! Nervousness can literally leave you breathless unless you make a conscious effort to slowly inhale and exhale.
- 24) Similarly, slow down and don't be afraid to pause—particularly after making major points you want to sink in. Nervousness can make you talk fast, which leads to "ums" and "uhs." which in turn make you more nervous, cause you to talk faster and so on...
- 25) Take a sip of water if you get dry or need to slow down and collect your thoughts.
- 26) Look at individuals long enough to make meaningful eye contact—as if you were engaged in a "one on one" conversation. Don't try to look at everyone or merely scan the audience.
- 27) Pose questions to your audience about experiences related to the topic. In other words, get them to talk! While questions can be planned, they are sometimes more effective when spontaneous.
- 28) Keep a basic outline of your talk on a small card, a sheet of paper or a flipchart to reduce any anxiety you may feel about losing your place. But also remember that an audience won't know what you leave out. Better that you make a few points clearly and energetically and maintain eye contact than have your nose and eyes buried in a script!
- 29) Remove or minimize any physical obstacles between you and your audience. For example, do you really need a lectern? Step away from it if you can and move toward the audience. If you're nervous to begin with, standing behind a lectern or table tends to increase a sense of isolation, which in turn tends to create nervousness. Generally, audiences appreciate a speaker who removes such barriers and tries to connect with them physically and emotionally, as well as intellectually.
- 30) Worried about fidgeting? One solution is to form a steeple with your hands that tends to funnel nervous energy out of your system. Eventually your hands will fall naturally to your side.

Try out some of these tips and techniques, and you're bound to feel less anxious about your next presentation. But don't forget that some nervous energy—the excitement of anticipation—will give you power. Practice putting it to use!

Preparing Your Talk

A Checklist and Worksheet

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| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Your Audience Who are they? What do they expect, need or want? What's their mood? What do they know or assume about you or your subject?</p> | |
| <p>Your Goal What do <u>you</u> want your audience to do, think, feel, or understand? What's a realistic goal for this situation?</p> | |
| <p>Your Key Message <u>Why</u> should they accept your goal? What's in it for them? What's the benefit?</p> | |
| <p>Background What background information or context does your audience need to understand your talk?</p> | |

Preparing Your Talk

A Checklist and Worksheet

| | |
|--|-------------|
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| Body of Your Talk List perhaps 3 points and examples, facts or arguments to support your Key Message. | |
| Opening/"Grabber" A statement to arouse interest (perhaps a statistic, a quote, a brief anecdote, a rhetorical or real question to stimulate discussion....) | |
| Closing A "Call to Action" consistent with your Key Message. Maybe another quote or anecdote to drive home the message. | |
| Q and A What questions should you be ready for? What questions will make you most uncomfortable? What questions might you want to ask of the audience? | |
| Visual Aids What visual aids might enhance or dramatize your message? | |

Preparing and Delivering Effective Presentations

Pre-Workshop Self-Assessment

Circle the answers that are truest for you and add whatever comments you feel are appropriate:

1) I enjoy making presentations to groups of people I don't know well.

Almost always

Seldom

Only if.....

2) At work the topics or issues I am usually asked to speak about are:

3) I feel my greatest strength or skill as a speaker is:

4) The areas of public speaking where I'd most like to improve are (check the top 3 and/or add your own):

- Organizing my thoughts
- Staying calm and focused
- Being interesting—not boring
- Handling difficult questions (or audience members)
- Physical movement (e.g., knowing what to do with my hands, etc.)
- Designing or using visual aids
- Projecting more authority
- OTHER: _____

TEST YOUR PSQ (Presentation Skill Quotient)

- 1) In a presentation, the best place to put your key message is:
 - A) At the end of your talk so that you keep your audience in suspense
 - B) At the end of your talk where, after you've presented all your arguments, it's most convincing
 - C) At the beginning of your talk so your audience has incentive to listen
 - D) At the beginning, the middle and at the end

- 2) If you don't know the answer to a question asked by your audience, your best strategy is:
 - A. Just admit you don't know the answer and move on
 - B. Offer a reasonable, guess but don't look like you don't know!
 - C. Admit you don't know but offer to find out
 - D. See if anyone in the audience knows the answer

- 3) Unless it's a solemn occasion, opening with a joke is a good way to start a presentation:
 - A. As long as you're sure it won't offend anyone
 - B. As long as you can deliver it well
 - C. As long as it seems relevant to the topic
 - D. As long as your audience hasn't heard it before

- 4) It's a good idea to use Powerpoint or other visual aids because:
 - A. They save you from having to memorize your talk or look at your notes
 - B. They can present complex ideas in a colorful, more memorable way
 - C. They convey a certain sophistication
 - D. Simply because, like it or not, audiences nowadays expect it

- 5) As audience members we are affected by sight and sound as well the actual content of a presentation (the words or data used). According to some research, the relative magnitude of these impacts (from greatest to smallest) is:
 - A. Auditory, content, visual
 - B. Visual, auditory, content
 - C. Content, visual, auditory
 - D. Content, auditory, visual
 - E. Roughly equal – depends on the audience, speaker, topic and setting

6) One of the best ways to deal with nervousness or "butterflies" is:

- A. Imagine your audience all in their underwear (or less)
- B. Start with the great joke you heard recently to loosen everyone up
- C. Darken the room and start with a slide show until you're comfortable
- D. Talk with individual audience members before starting your talk

7) As a speaker the single most important thing for you to consider is:

- A. Good visual aids
- B. Your audience's perspective
- C. The configuration of the room
- D. Good eye contact with the audience

8) At the end of your talk, if you ask for questions and the audience is silent, the best thing to do is:

- A. Thank everyone, pass out any hand-out materials and get ready to leave
- B. Talk further about a point you feel deserves emphasis or clarification
- C. Ask if people would like to take a break and come back for Q and A
- D. Invite people with questions to meet with you or call you individually

9) The best time to hand out materials is:

- A. Before you start your talk
- B. During your talk
- C. At the end of your talk
- D. Whatever your audience prefers

10) Some studies show that after 24 hours an audience forgets about ____% of what they heard, and after 2 days about ____%.

BONUS QUESTION: Who was it who said:

"If it's true that the fear of public speaking is even greater than the fear of death, then the average person at a funeral would rather be in the casket than delivering the eulogy."

- A. Will Rogers
- B. Jerry Seinfeld
- C. Mark Twain
- D. Abraham Lincoln

ANSWERS

How did you score?

- 9-10 correct answers: Fess' up: Either you're a natural, you were looking over someone's shoulder, or you've taken one of my workshops before.
- 6-8 correct answers: Congratulations--good instincts.
- 3-5 correct answers: Don't worry, you're in good company!
- 0-2 correct: Hey, sign up for one of my workshops or some individual coaching!