
Making a Winning Presentation

by JOHN R. GRAHAM

The difference between closing a sale and losing it rests with the way the presentation is made. Whether it's selling a product or an idea, the ability to present effectively can make the difference between acceptance and rejection.

Yet, most Americans would rather die than give a speech. At least this is the popular view. Whatever the facts, the idea of standing in front of an audience ranks far below going to the dentist for most people.

Even though the fear of public speaking runs deep, the ability to get an audience's attention, hold it for a period of time, persuade the listeners to your viewpoint, and then move them to action is a skill that can be learned by just about anyone who is willing to develop it.

Speaking — like writing — is valuable in business because it points to an ability to think, analyze ideas, make judgments, develop arguments that command attention, and organize information in a way that moves people to action. Just as good writers are in demand, the ability to speak can open doors of opportunity.

If speaking is so rewarding and highly regarded, then why will we do almost anything to avoid doing it? While it's relatively easy to cover up most mistakes, giving a presentation to two or 200 people is an opportunity for out-in-the-open personal failure and embarrassment. How many times a day do we hear co-workers make excuses when they are asked

to explain why something did or did not happen: "I didn't know about it." "I didn't have time to get it done." "I didn't realize you needed it." "I thought someone else was taking care of that." The list is endless. However, when making a presentation, there's no room for excuses because the exposure is total. You're there by yourself; you're the one being put to the test. The emperor has no clothes.

Since the fear of failing is so strong, we run for cover. We hide when it's time to get on our feet. Anyone who has taken a class in public speaking knows the feeling. When the moment comes for the next presentation, everyone slides down in their chairs, hoping not to be called on. The key to becoming an effective speaker depends on overcoming the paralyzing fear of failure.

Making successful presentations is the direct result of focusing attention on the audience rather than the speakers. We overcome fear by learning to think like a listener. By following these suggestions, speaking can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience for you and your audience.

Be Prepared for the Critics

Even experienced, professional speakers have critics. Since speaking means exposure, there are those who delight in challenging what has been said. They enjoy poking holes in arguments and bringing up exceptions in an effort to diminish the speaker. No matter how excellent a presentation, there will be those who want to disparage what has been said and dismiss the person who said it. It's easier to maintain your mental equilibrium if you know what can happen.

We overcome fear by learning to think like a listener.

Stress Minimizes Mental Agility

"I knew exactly what I wanted to say and the minute I got on my feet, I forgot everything." Of course, it's to be expected that since speaking is always stressful, we all forget what we plan to say. Walter Cronkite, the retired dean of TV news anchors, reports that he never ended an interview with a world leader without forgetting to ask a question.

The key to overcoming stress is thorough speech preparation. This doesn't mean that a speech should be memorized. The task is to either write it out word-for-word or prepare a detailed outline. If speakers are haunted by worry about what they are going to say next, there's no energy left for relating to the audience.

Set the Stage for Success

The overall setting includes the room and the way it's arranged, the introduction of the speaker, and how the speaker begins. It's the speaker's responsibility to control all these elements because they determine how the audience receives the presentation.

There are few ideal rooms or room arrangements. Hotels are generally known for long narrow rooms with center aisles and poor lighting. This creates a "no-win" situation for a speaker. The distance between the speaker and the last row creates a gulf that is difficult to bridge. Many times the back half of an audience is so far away, it's impossible for a speaker to establish rapport.

Since the setting plays such an important role in the effect of a presentation, experienced speakers expect proper seating arrangements, lighting and sound.

Every speaker deserves a proper introduction because this establishes an atmosphere in which a speaker can be successful. More often than not, the introducer is so nervous (or unprepared) that the introduction fizzles. There are two solutions to this problem:

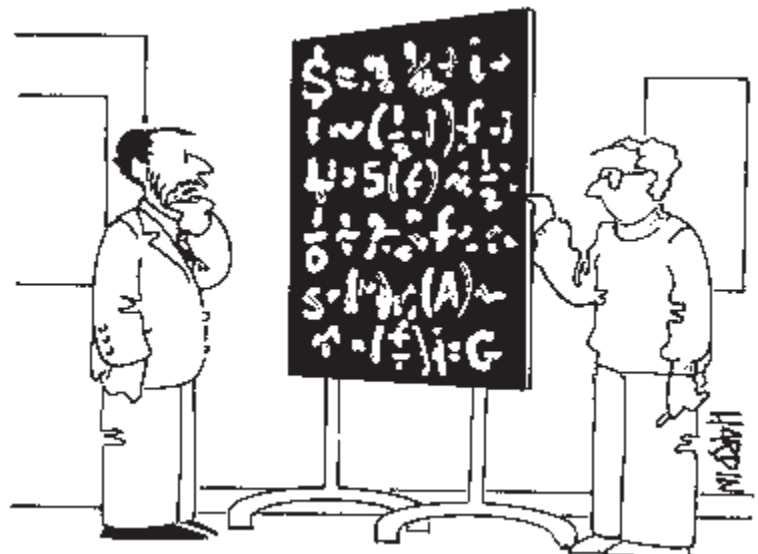
- First, provide a written introduction.
- Second, assume the introduction will be inadequate. Be prepared to introduce yourself. This isn't self-serving. A speaker has a right to be viewed by the audience as a competent individual with a message worth communicating.

The final element in setting the stage is never apologize. "I only wish I would have had more time to prepare." "I'm not a public speaker." Many speakers seem compelled to begin their comments with self-deprecation. Apologizing only serves one useful purpose: destroying the speaker's credibility with the audience. To paraphrase Sir Winston Churchill, never, never, never, never apologize.

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Build the Presentation on a Solid Structure

One outline works well for most presentations because it gives a sense of completion. It has three elements: problem, analysis and solution.



"There could be a Nobel Prize in this, Henderson — You've proven money is everything."

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- **Problem** — This is the issue that brings you to your feet. It may be the reason why a new product should be introduced, a customer should buy your product or service, a branch office should be closed, or a new vision statement should be adopted. In this part of the presentation the audience must come to feel that the problem is real and deserves attention.

- **Analysis** — The analysis showcases your reasons why

the problem exists. To impact the audience, actual experiences are helpful, particularly when they are supported with facts, expert opinion, and statistics. A simple guide is to tell stories and document them with objective information.

- **Solution** — Once the problem is analyzed, it is time to spring the trap by presenting your solution.

Although there are emotional elements in any effective speech, the audience will be with you to the degree that you present a reasonable case. In other words, for the solution to be accepted, the audience must view it as a sensible approach, one that does not stretch credibility.

Understand the Audience

Many speakers are so concerned with what they want to say that they forget that the goal is to have their ideas accepted by the audience. You must demonstrate to an audience that you know whom they are, why they are there and what issues confront them. If it's a hostile audience, let them know that you understand their viewpoint and why they hold it. Unless a speaker establishes common ground with an audience, the speech will fail.

Speak Slowly and Move Quickly

While a speech should seem conversational, the actual delivery is quite different. First, the listener must get the message the first time because there's no chance to go back and replay it. Therefore, speaking slowly and distinctly is essential. "Word point,"

or pausing between words, is a useful technique for maintaining the audience's attention.

Second, the mind moves faster than the mouth, and about four times as fast. We think at the rate of about 500 words a minute, while we speak at about 125 words a minute. This disparity causes the listeners' minds to wander. Therefore, a properly paced speech is essential in order to maintain listener interest.

Let the Audience Know Where You're Going

"The speech didn't seem to go anywhere" is the one audience complaint that must be avoided. It is the killer. A presentation may have excellent content and address critical issues, but all is lost if the audience feels that the speaker is rambling.

A speaker's top priority should be to set out guideposts so the listener can follow easily. One and two sentence summaries along the way are helpful: This is where we have been, this is where we are and this is where we are going. Listeners need road signs to know where they are and where they are headed.

Interact with Your Listeners

Almost everyone agrees that the worst speakers are those who go to the podium, take out notes or text, and then deliver their remarks almost as if they are speaking to an empty room. Asking questions and requesting comments at certain points changes the dynamics of the situation. Speaker and audience are both participants.

Even though speakers today often interact with audiences, any type of interaction transfers some control from the speaker to the audience. Although discussion within a presentation can be an effective method for increasing acceptance for the speaker's views, it takes experience to do it successfully.

Make the Presentation Motivating, Not Motivational

If a group needs firing up, it will take far more than a speech or seminar to do it. The problem with so-called "motivational speeches" is that they don't do the job. While they may give an audience a temporary emotional jolt, they don't change behavior. An effective presentation should give the audience the

ideas, techniques and tools so they can move themselves to action.

You're not Competing With a Celebrity Speaker

Audiences are often disappointed when a so-called celebrity speaker leaves the podium. Listeners come with high expectations, but what they get is a "canned talk." The "big names" don't take time to customize a presentation for a particular audience, so the message fades faster than the applause.

Audiences appreciate speakers who make a genuine effort to understand the group and prepare a presentation that will be helpful to them. Besides, "big names" are not always great speakers.

Make it Visually Interesting

Up until 100 years ago, listening to speeches was our nation's primary form of entertainment. This was the age of the orators — speakers who could hold audiences for hours. The arrival of the motion picture began a change in audience expectations that television has only enhanced.

Any successful presentation will include compelling visual elements, either on a screen or with props. For example, one speaker describes changes in the business environment as "dog bone demographics." Along with computer-generated visuals, he brings along a huge dog bone as a prop that immediately grabs the audience's attention. When he talks about the need for long-term marketing strategies, he holds up a six-inch fir tree and suggests that the lumber industry is an example of businesses that think long-term.

While visual interest is essential, visuals should not be allowed to dominate or control a presentation. They should enhance, not overshadow the message.

You Are Your Message

While some speakers believe that what they say is all that counts, it's not true. Credibility is based in a creative and thoughtful mind that holds the listener in high regard. Good speakers are willing to share themselves as well as their ideas. A presentation is validated when this happens.

In other words, effective speaking isn't contrived.

The words aren't copied from a bevy of books and the text isn't sprinkled with quotations that are meant to impress but don't quite fit. When a presentation springs from experience and a desire to communicate, the audience finds itself on the side of the speaker.

The Goal Is Action

The only reason to speak is action. Even speeches that are designed to inform rather than persuade are action-oriented. Information in itself influences how the listener thinks about a subject. Any presenter asks one question: What do I want the audience to do? Perhaps it's just to stay the course, or maybe it's to change their minds. It may be to motivate the listeners to some overt act. Unless action is the goal, there is no presentation.

Whether it's preparing a one-on-one presentation, a seminar for 100 salespeople, or a speech to an entire convention, those with the skill to speak to groups play a key role in business.

The key to good speaking is thinking like a listener. These guidelines are a checklist for evaluating presentations before they are given. □

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John R. Graham is president of Graham Communications, a marketing services and sales consulting firm. Graham is the author of Break the Rules Selling (Superior Books), The New Magnet Marketing (Chandler House Press) and 203 Ways to be Supremely Successful in the New World of Selling (Macmillan Spectrum). He writes for a variety of publications and speaks on business, marketing and sales topics for company and association meetings. Graham is the recipient of an APEX Grand Award for writing. He may be contacted at 40 Oval Road, Quincy, MA 02170; phone: (617) 328-0069; fax: (617) 471-1504; e-mail: j_graham@grahamcomm.com; web site: www.grahamcomm.com.

