

When it's "Showtime," you can't just show up

Editor's note: This is the first in a series of 2011 Professional Development articles provided by the Sports Turf Managers Association.



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YOU HAVEN'T TOUCHED THE CHICKEN CORDON BLUE that is still laminated onto your plate. You drained your ice water glass four times, but your mouth still feels like you used a Q-tip instead of a toothpick. You nervously fidget in your chair as the chairman of the parks district board of trustees starts to introduce you.

"Oh, my God. I've got to go to the bathroom."

"And here to tell you about how your local Parks and Rec Department is doing fantastic work in preserving the environment . . . let me introduce your director, Mr. Ron Dayvoo. Let's hear it for Ron."

Your knees buckle as you approach the podium. Your stomach growls. You gasp for one last breath.

Welcome to the world of public speaking. Think that scenario only describes the beginners? Think again. Even the experienced pros feel a little of that when it's "showtime."

Bear in mind, some of that nervousness is a good thing. It will ensure you are awake, alert and ready to perform. Because that's

what you are about to do—perform. And how you do in that performance may go a long way in shaping the public perception of how well you do your day job. So keep in mind: *public speaking comes with the job.*

If you follow the steps of brainstorm, gather, organize, produce, practice and present you will find proper preparation makes speaking easier. Not easy, just easier.

BRAINSTORM

First consider the difference between choosing a topic and being assigned a topic. That can run the range of being invited to "talk to us about the recent changes in pesticide use that has led to improvements in run-off" to a more generic, "talk about anything you want to talk about." The first sce-

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nario will likely occur when a particular organization has a special interest in a topic of your expertise, such as a professional conference. The second scenario will likely occur when those civic organizations with monthly or even weekly meetings require a speaker, and the organization contacts you to fill a slot on the program.

Next consider the audience. The more you know about them the better you can prepare. Belaboring points your audience already knows has the same deadly result as taking a knowledge base for granted and talking over your audience's heads.

Find out what the members of your audience do for a living. Are these professional people, blue-collar workers, retirees, students? You will find it helpful to also know the age and sex of your audience. If you're speaking to an audience of Baby Boomers, a pop culture mention of Woodstock or Mrs. Robinson might help you make a point. An audience of current college students would greet those same references with a head scratch, a yawn or both. Consider what areas

of agreement you will have with your audience. On what points will they disagree?

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GATHER

Yes, you want to deliver an emotional message, but you will need a fact base to set that up. The fact base often comes from your education and experience. That's probably why you got invited to speak in the first place. Personal experiences and anecdotes will be invaluable when you begin to organize your presentation.

Just don't be afraid to expand that fact base beyond your experiential base. Use the Internet or the library (you do remember what a library is, don't you) and see if any new information has become available. Use your contact network you've acquired

through your participation in the Sports Turf Managers Association and contact your fellow professionals. The STMA headquarters may also be able to steer you to additional resources. No matter how you do it, specifics sell your ideas better than generalities.

ORGANIZE

Think in terms of a thesis statement. Just what point do you want to make with that audience? If you can't state it simply, then perhaps you haven't focused your topic enough, or you may be working on more than one focus, which means you are working on more than one speech. A solid thesis statement does more than just describe. It gives context and perspective and goes a long way in answering the "so what" and "who cares" questions.

Consider the difference between the following statements.

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• The new Monsanto Turf promises to reduce serious abrasion-type injuries more than 30 percent.

The first statement provides mere description. The second statement delivers context and explains the importance of the topic. Get to your thesis very early in the speech. Use the old adage of “tell ‘em what you’re going to tell ‘em, tell ‘em and tell ‘em

speakers end up being a joke. Sometimes that happens because the joke is unrelated to the topic at hand. Sometimes that happens because the joke is in poor taste. Sometimes that happens because the joke just isn’t funny. Sometimes it’s all of the above.

The moral of the story is if you must use humor, keep it related to the topic at hand,

tions from the players or boos from the fans than normal.

“That was my first lesson that style triumphs over substance,” he said.

Then he went on to prove style was triumphing over substance in television news. Pertinent, tasteful and closely tied to the topic.

Generally speaking, if you can come up with a personal experience or anecdote, often one that pokes fun at yourself, you will have found an attention-grabbing way of starting your speech. Just don’t start thinking you’re the next David Letterman.

The second item on the big no-no list is **DO NOT READ FROM A PREPARED SCRIPT**. If you do it will look and sound like you’re reading from a prepared script. Working from an outline usually provides sufficient structure to keep your mind at ease and your speech on track. It also provides enough departure so you won’t sound like you’re reading it from a prepared script.

Extemporaneous is clearly the best way. It allows you to connect better with the audience because your focus is on them, not your note cards or script. It’s also the most dangerous one, dangerous because if you ever forget where you’re going or where you’ve been, the awkward silence of trying to get back on pace will turn out to be a speech killer. The audience will remember you all right—just for the wrong reasons.

Keep in mind you got invited because your inviters knew that you knew a lot about the subject. You probably talk about that subject virtually every day. You don’t need note cards to talk to your boss or a member of the city council or a coach.



» **BOARD MEMBER** Mike Tarantino presents during the 2011 STMA National Conference in Austin.

what you just told ‘em” as the basic organizational structure of the speech.

That will help you provide a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning grabs the audience and sets the thesis. The middle provides the evidence to prove your thesis. The end should make the final reference to the thesis, leaving the audience, hopefully wanting more, rather than making them glad this whole speech is over.

PRODUCE

Once you’ve decided on your topic and have turned that into a thesis, you now must decide how you will present it. Let’s start with what *not* to do.

Do not try to imitate David Letterman. Dave has carved out a nice career saying funny things in front of live audiences. He also employs a number of people to help him write those funny things. Far too many speakers think you must start your presentation with a joke. As a result, far too many

show good taste, and for goodness sake, make it funny. Former CBS Television President Van Gordon Sauter once began a speech about the decline in quality of television news. He recalled working his way through graduate school refereeing high school basketball games. One night he tossed the opening tip-off and a player accidentally knocked off his glasses and smashed them as his feet came back to the floor. Sauter confessed he couldn’t see a thing without his glasses. He also had not brought an extra pair to the game, so he would have to officiate without the benefit of clear eyesight. He promptly decided that whenever he would blow his whistle, he would “sell” the call with great conviction.

At the game’s end he noted he had not received any more complaints from the coaches, ques-



» **STMA PRESIDENT** Troy Smith, CSFM informally presents to a group during the educational roundtable sessions that closed the conference education program in Austin.

With enough preparation and practice you can at least get by with a modest number of note cards or points in an outline.

PowerPoint can help you get your point across, but sometimes PowerPoint just gets in the way of getting your point across. PowerPoint offers an advantage of visualization of your ideas. So if you are offering visual ideas, then PowerPoint works well. PowerPoint also offers some distinct disadvantages. You can't adjust the presentation during the presentation. Think of the times you've seen a presenter fly through the final three slides as time started to run out.

PowerPoint users also have a tendency to put too many words on a slide. That leads to reading the slide, which is the visual, but equally annoying, equivalent of reading a script. The use of standard PowerPoint templates suggests a lack of creativity if not a lack of preparation. Click on the template called "Dad's tie." Tell me you can live without ever seeing it again.

PRACTICE

Nothing special about the advice here: practice, practice, practice.

PRESENT

In the 1979 movie "All That Jazz," Roy Scheider plays a boozing, drug-addicted, sleepless Broadway choreographer/dancer. In several scenes you see him rise from the dressing room couch looking like the boozing, drug-addicted, sleepless dancer he was. He walks up to the mirror, opens his bloodshot eyes, squirts in a few eye drops, blinks and loudly proclaims, "It's Showtime." He then proceeds on stage and does his magic. Perhaps you can close your eyes for a moment and think, "It's Showtime," before you take the podium.

Listen to your introduction. If the person doing the intro doesn't establish your credibility, make sure you blend that into the early part of the speech. If that intro does establish your expertise, don't repeat it in your speech.

Part of "Showtime" is being enthusiastic. If you can't show interest in your topic, how can you expect your audience to show interest?

Use your voice. Most often you will be using a microphone. That allows for easy changes in volume. A very soft voice can get additional attention. So can a louder voice. Vary your pace. The "pause" and the resulting silence can be a most effective device. Other times talking fast can deliver a dramatic effect. If you are using a podium microphone you will be tied to the podium, but if you are equipped with a lavalier mic feel free to move around. It can help you maintain eye contact with different parts of the room. Use gestures to help communicate key points, but avoid constant movement that resembles a sapling flapping in the wind.

Above all, be yourself. That's really tough to do when you're nervous, but perhaps that practice we talked about earlier can make that easier to accomplish. That way when it's "showtime" you'll be ready for the show. ■

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