



Tips to take the terror out of giving presentations

WHAT'S SCARIER to most Americans than spiders, heights, or even death? There hasn't been a horror movie made about it yet, but more than 75% of Americans surveyed report that they suffer from "glossophobia," a debilitating fear of public speaking. Statistically, far more of us claim that we would prefer death to giving a speech; even comedian Jerry Seinfeld used to joke that at a funeral, most people would rather be lying in the casket than delivering the eulogy.

Why is the prospect of trying to communicate information in front of even one person so horrifying? Most glossophobes fear looking bad, being criticized, suffering rejection, and losing business or friends, all because they are

certain they will forget what they'd planned to say. Maybe you have had the experience of forgetting a speech or presentation, or you've seen it happen to someone else, and you don't want it to happen to you. Ever.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH ROTE?

Most people memorize speeches by rote-or

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word-for-word repetition-and try to deliver it exactly as they've written it. You probably don't realize that this method of learning is actually setting you up to forget what you're supposed to say because it creates tremendous stress, which is in turn the number one killer of memory.

Or if you do manage to remember every single word you'd planned to say, the effort requires so much mental energy that you come off as a terrible communicator. You're not really there while you're speaking because all of your efforts go into remembering what comes next. If, heaven forbid, something distracts you, or someone interrupts you with a question during a memorized presentation, thinking about anything other than "What comes next?" can throw you completely off-track. Your mind may literally go blank, just as you feared.

And there's one more problem with word-for-word learning: 93% of our communication happens non-verbally. The majority of the message your audience receives has very little to do with the actual words you say but with body language, tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions. So you can't expect to convey ease and expertise non-verbally if your mental and physical energies are completely preoccupied with delivering a verbatim speech. You'll simply be too tense, and it will show.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH NOTES?

What about the security blanket of an outline or notes? You may feel you need notes to stay on track when giving a presentation, but if you're tied to those notes, you aren't free to make eye contact, a key element of non-verbal communication. You'll also be stuck behind a podium, and if people can't see two-thirds of your body, that has a serious impact on the 93% non-verbal communication aspect of your presentation. Notes may make you feel a little better, but they also take away a crucial tool for your effectiveness.

As a real estate professional, for example, when you're discussing listing or selling a prospect's home, an effective presentation is one in which you are clearly the expert and know more about selling a home than the person who wants the home sold. Likewise, an American who is fluent in French doesn't need to reference a French translation guide while vacationing in Paris. So if you're fluent in your topic, you shouldn't need to consult your notes, and your audience of one or many will sense this on a subconscious level. However, if you feel you must use notes, consult them very little or not at all, and you'll gain huge credibility as an expert.

FOUR TIPS TO RELIEVE PRESENTATION TERROR

Regardless of how deeply rooted your fear of public speaking is, with a few simple adjustments to your method of preparation, you can grow more confident about your abilities so that much of your fear disappears. When you know what you're going to say and that your presentation is strong, public-speaking may still be a little nerve-racking, but it's exciting, too. Try these tips to help turn that stomach-turning anxiety into the rush of great communication.

1. Know what you're talking about. When you prepare an organized presentation of any kind, you must be knowledgeable about the company, product, or situation. Talk about things you actually know well. If you're not confident that you know all that you need to, commit to doing thorough research and learn what you need to know to feel and look expert. If you truly don't know what you're talking about, it will show, and all the tricks and techniques in the world won't help.

2. Decide on a few key points. Good keynote speakers typically don't have more than three or four key things for the audience to take away from their presentations. The classic presentation formula is a story that makes the audience laugh in the beginning, a few key points for them to take away (usually illustrated with stories), followed by an emotionally moving story at the end.

Another basic formula for effective communication is: Tell your audience what you're going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you told them.

3. Create visual triggers. Invent pictures in your mind and "store" them in various places around the room where you'll deliver the presentation. The pictures then become your speech. For example, if one of your points is about achieving goals, you can envision a set of goal posts as a visual representation of that concept. If you want to make a point about freedom, envision an American flag somewhere in the room, or a huge stack of money if you want to talk about increasing profits.

4. Relax, have fun and be yourself. People respond best to a message when the person delivering it is genuine. With sufficient preparation of the right type, you'll feel comfortable enough to be yourself in front of a group. You can then demonstrate how much you believe in what you're saying. When you can relax and be an authentic human being, you tap into powerful communication.

FROM FEARFUL TO FEARLESS

You've undoubtedly heard a few presentations—both good and bad—in your day, so you know it's a fact: you listen to and respect those speakers who talk to you, not at you. A conversation is always better than a lecture, isn't it? When you are preparing to make a presentation, know that people don't mind if you stumble over a couple of words; in most cases they don't even notice. What they will notice, though, and mind a great deal, is being read to or BS'd. If your audience feels as if you're insincere or unknowledgeable, they may give you real reason to be a glossophobe! But if you're prepared, knowledgeable, and relaxed, you can expect to get the results you want, whether that's more sales, promotions, or thunderous applause from your devoted audience. ■

Roger Seip's company, Freedom Speakers and Trainers, specializes in memory training and workshops, www.deliverfreedom.com.

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