

# TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

October 2007

## Public speaking shouldn't be scary



Studies show that public speaking is the executive's number one fear—outranking even death. This was first pointed

out in a survey of 3,000 Americans by the Sunday Times of London in 1973. Getting behind a podium may make you wish you could jump off the nearest cliff, but with a few tools and techniques, the anxiety of public speaking can now be put to rest.

As I've studied the art of speaking over the years to help my clients become better presenters, I've learned that excellent public speakers don't do one thing 100 percent, but rather just the opposite. The best presenters employ a multitude of techniques to deliver a total package that is relevant, insightful and bottom line makes an impression on the audience.

**Preparation is key.** Many people underestimate how much time they need to prepare an effective presentation. They put it together at the last minute and then don't have time to practice their delivery. Respected actor Laurence Olivier put it best when he was knighted by the Queen of England. On the occasion, a reporter asked him, "To what do you attribute your great success?" "Two things," Olivier responded.

"The confidence to perform and the humility to prepare."

We are most successful as speakers—and less likely to suffer stage fright—when we know our material and feel comfortable about how we will deliver it. A good rule is to role play your presentation a minimum of five times before the big moment.

**Research the audience.** One of the most important parts of your preparation is understanding the people you'll be speaking to, and what they need and want from you. A canned presentation pulled off the shelf doesn't cut it with today's demanding audiences. To best understand how to target your presentation, learn the demographics of your audience, including the size of the group, age range, percentages of males and females, education level, economic status, cultural background and occupation.

It is also important to understand how your information can help them. From the moment you begin to prepare for your presentation, keep in mind that your audience comes first. Develop an understanding of your audience and their attitudes toward your topic. Anticipate their expectations and consider the circumstances surrounding your presentation: What do they already

know about your topic? What do they think about you? What is the history of your audience as a group? And, what is the program surrounding your presentation?

Taking a close look at what's appropriate for your audience given this important context information will ensure that your speech is as relevant, targeted and engaging as possible. Still, while reviewing the rough draft of your presentation, be honest with yourself. If you feel like something doesn't connect or isn't consistent, it's often better to leave it unsaid. Make sure your speech accomplishes what you want— are you simply informing your audience, or trying to persuade them to action?

**Content is king.** For experts and novices alike, it's important to remember some basics about delivery that will help your audience connect with the key points of the message. Remember the light rule. Tell the audience that you are turning on the light; tell them when the light is on and remind them why the light is on.

Audiences typically determine if they are interested in the first three seconds of a presentation. Therefore, spend your "first impression" time hooking the audience rather than thanking them for the opportunity

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to present. We have so much information to share and it is often times difficult to decide what to include or leave out—but less is usually better. Your audience can only absorb a limited amount of content. The more information, the less they will retain. When you limit your entire presentation to three or four main points, people are more likely to remember them—and you.

**Spice it up!** In this age of the Internet, the blogosphere, YouTube and short attention spans, people expect to be entertained while they're being educated. Stories and anecdotes help bring the information home to the audience, as do examples, demonstrations and props. Use caution with props to ensure that they are appropriate and tie in with the presentation, and be careful not to overuse them as this may become distracting to the audience.

**The power of nonverbal communication.** What you say is important, but no one will hear or care about your words unless your nonverbal communication is equally effective. The stronger your body language, the more likely you'll keep the audience's attention. Use natural gestures that help you feel and look more comfortable. Make regular eye contact with each person in the audience, or at least each region of the room, and convey confidence by standing planted on both feet rather than shifting or rocking back and forth.

When you're behind the lectern, you have to work even harder to communicate effective body language. Keep in mind that the lectern is not a life raft to hang on to. The best rule is to try not to use a lectern, but if you can't give it up, at least occasionally come out from behind it. If you move in front of the audience, walk with purpose rather than roaming aimlessly back and forth.

A good presenter has the unique power to create change and inspire new thoughts. This ability is exactly what makes the work we do every day—and the presentations we give and listen to—worthwhile. When all is said and done, just remember what Jerry Seinfeld said when it comes to the number one fear of public speaking and number two fear of death: “Now that means to the ‘average’ person that if you have to go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.” This is one instance when it is best to be better than average. 



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## *Karen's Top 10 Tips for Public Speaking:*

- 1) Dress appropriately for the occasion; first impressions count.
- 2) Never read from a script; use cue cards with key words and phrases or sketches instead.
- 3) Rehearse your presentation to yourself, and then in front of some colleagues, and consider how visual aids will tie in to your words.
- 4) Deliberately pause at key points. This emphasizes importance.
- 5) Unless you are an expert or a comedian, avoid jokes.
- 6) Keep an eye on the audience's body language. Know when to stop and when to cut out a piece of the presentation.
- 7) Keep visuals simple.
- 8) Change your delivery throughout the presentation, i.e. speed and pitch of voice.
- 9) Know the purpose of the presentation: to inform, persuade or evoke an emotion.
- 10) Remember that good speakers are not born, they are made.