

PUBLIC SPEAKING: MAXING THE PR OPP
by Jim Rauh © 2008

Ever been unmoved by a motivational speaker? Listened to a keynote speech that didn't unlock a door to anywhere? Endured a presentation that just didn't snag your interest?

We've all been there in the audience, pulling for the speaker to give us a peg to hang our hats on. Most speakers succeed. Many don't. And then there are those who fail miserably.

The public speaking opportunity or "opp"--- a key component of the Public Relations process --- easily is the most personal and potentially most productive, most immediate means to reach an audience. You can tackle it cavalierly or go at it cleverly and in a calculated fashion.

Is a speech something you have (or would like to have) on your schedule? Should you prepare for it? Need a coach? What's your style? Do you have a style? Highly-structured or ad lib --- whatever your choice --- make sure you know what you're saying, how you're saying it and to whom you're saying it.

There's no need to stress out about it. No need to memorize wholesale blocks of information. Nor should you try to make it the perfect presentation. Depending on your audience, specific strategy and approach, public speaking can be the best vehicle to make your point and help pave your road to enhanced recognition. It can also prove to be a horror show starring you. Should you or can you be yourself?

Morton C. Orman, the Maryland-based author and physician noted for his writings on the force, foibles, and forensics of public speaking may have said it best. "The best way to succeed (at public speaking) is not to consider yourself a public speaker." ¹

Forget about Roman numeral one, part B and all the sub-sections you first had in mind. Orman suggests you study your audience, understand its diversity, consider the location, the occasion, and then develop two-to-three main points. "The more you prepare," wrote Orman, "the worse you will be."

Get the audience on your side. Show them you're human. If possible, and audience-appropriate, begin and lightly season your speech with levity.

According to Orman, the audience wants to succeed and they admire your courage. But they also want to be put at ease. Unless you're delivering a research paper at a national convention of your peers, nobody expects you to be flawless. And the last thing a public speaking opportunity should represent is stress.

One of the most enjoyable presentations I've ever heard was a speech by a lithographer to a community service organization. It was entitled something like

"Advancements in modern lithography".

The bespectacled presenter launched into an incredibly uninteresting and irrelevant (to most of the audience) history of the printing process. Five minutes later, the groaning from the audience had reached audible proportion. About then, the speaker stopped, disappeared into the coatroom and emerged wearing an accordion. He finished his program by singing and playing sea shanties to the utter delight of those assembled. He had definitely connected.

Not all of us play the accordion. Not many of us have the pipes of an Orson Welles. Nor do many of us pack the in-person charisma of Dame Judi Dench. So when we have opportunities to speak, we must be a bit more innovative. Opening with humor relevant and appropriate to the audience is often a productive way to go.

Toastmasters International offers the following speech-making tips²: involve the audience at least every eight minutes to maintain their interest; proofread what you write --- don't trust spell-check; focus on your message and its relevance to the audience; reach a conclusion. But don't belabor it.

In a speech he delivered more than 100 times during his career, humorist Mark Twain used a unique blend of egotism and social absurdity to win over his audiences. Twain always introduced himself as follows: "The next lecture in this course will be deliveredby Samuel L. Clemens, a gentleman whose high character and unimpeachable integrity are only equaled by his comeliness of person and grace of manner. I am the man!"³

Look at it this way. Public speaking is your time to be you. To paraphrase Orman, be bold, compassionate, informative, be silly, helpful, witty. Anything you want. Just keep it simple, uncomplicated and easy to follow.

But allow for the human side. If it's humor you choose, make sure it's related to a point you're making, and make sure you can pull it off. Practice on a friend: a friend who will be candid. Remember. Your audience came to learn something. They expect to be informed, but they'd love to be entertained.

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¹ "How to Conquer Public Speaking Fear", Morton C. Orman, M.D., ©1996-2002

² "Will Your Speech be a Horror Story?", Toastmasters International, February, 2008

³ "Our Fellow Savages," Mark Twain, 1866.