Speak Up: A Guide to Improving Your Public Speaking Skills

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Studies show that public speaking is among the most common fears, but most of us at one time or another must stand in front of an audience and speak. It could be a presentation to a nursing committee about an equipment issue or to a group of high school students about entering the medical technology field. It might be at a standards committee or at AAMI's Annual Conference.

Most of us will never totally overcome our fear of public speaking, but the more you present the more comfortable you will become. And this isn't advice coming from a natural debater or public speaker! I am a biomed, first and foremost, and my first big presentation was to the presidents of our local community hospitals. It was scheduled for one hour and I was the only speaker. I would not recommend this to be your first speech! I was extremely nervous—sweaty palms and sick to my stomach—but somehow I got through it.

I realized that I needed more education and experience in public speaking, so I joined a Toastmasters group at my hospital. Most of the members worked in accounting or finance and reported to hospital executives. The group allowed me to give numerous speeches and network with a new group of professionals in the hospital. For more information on Toastmasters, including some tips and techniques, visit www.toastmasters.org. Below are a few other tips that I've picked up along the way.

Preparation

The most important rule in public speaking is preparing for your talk. Just like the rule for real estate is location, location, location, the rule for public speaking is preparation, preparation, preparation. Proper preparation will help reduce your anxiety about public speaking. You should know your subject inside and out. Preparation should also include plenty of time for laying out your presentation, practicing your speech, editing your notes, and preparing your handouts. Anticipate the questions you might get and have your answers in mind. The more you can do in advance, the less there is to worry about on the big day.

Author David Braeutigam practices what he preaches at a recent presentation.

Keep It Simple

Be sure to keep your presentation simple. Focus on the subject and not on the fancy graphics or other bells and whistles technology allows you. This means simple graphics (if needed), easy-to-read fonts, and charts that don't require a lot of explanation. Your audience has come to hear about your topic, not to be impressed by your PowerPoint skills.

If you do use PowerPoint, follow the Rule of Six: use no more than six lines of text and no more than six words per line per slide. This will keep your presentation at an easy-to-read font size and will not clutter it with too much information. Slides should highlight the basic points of your discussion. They don't have to give all the detail. Do not read the presentation word for word. Your audience can read the screen—you should be giving additional information. Avoid focusing on your computer screen and talk to your audience, not your presentation.

Know Your Audience

Another key to public speaking is to know what your audience is expecting. The best method is to talk to some of the people attending in advance to see what they want to get out of your talk. If that is not possible, anticipate what they would be most interested in hearing. For example, if you are presenting to a group of nurses about clinical engineer-

ing issues, they would probably be interested in quality, turnaround time on service requests, and safety. A group of executives likely has more interest in financial numbers and other relevant statistics. If you are talking to students, think about pay scale, educational requirements, typical work day, and future job security of your profession.

At the presentation, try and greet the early birds. Get a sense of what they have come to learn. Chances are during your presentation you will have the ability to speak to them directly, which will help your nervousness. By addressing their questions, you may also be answering questions that others in the room have. It works best when what the audience member is looking for is what you planned on presenting. And it most definitely gives you a friendly face to look at while you are speaking.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Even though you may feel foolish talking to an empty room, give your speech out loud in advance. This will allow you to time your presentation and help fine-tune what you will say. There is nothing worse than going over your allotted time, unless your presentation comes up short and you struggle to ad lib for the last 15 minutes! As you speak, edit the content, make notes on what to add, and get use to the flow of the presentation. Also make sure you allow enough time for any questions at the end of the presentation. Another practice method is to give your talk in a friendly environment—a staff meeting where you feel comfortable, for example. This will also allow you to receive valuable feedback on the content from experts in the subject.

Handouts

I am a big believer in providing handouts before the presentation. This gives attendees something to take back with them and to take notes on. There are several ways to give out handouts if you are using PowerPoint. The one I prefer to use is the handouts format with three slides per page. This gives a basic view of each slide with a place to take notes next to the slide. You can select this option from the print window in PowerPoint.

Giving Your Speech

As you get ready to give your speech, there are a couple of last-minute things you should do. Most of these are obvious, but they are worth reviewing. Always have a backup of your presentation. With the price of thumb drives so low, it pays to have it backed up in case your computer dies or you need to use a different computer. Be familiar with how to sync your computer with a projector. Mirror your screen with the projector so you can see what you are showing on the screen. Remember to speak to the computer screen and not to the projector so your voice projects out to the audience. Be familiar with how to navigate in PowerPoint using the keyboard or a wireless device that allows you to change slides.

Never let them see you sweat. In other words, don't apologize to your audience for being nervous—most will never know. A popular technique is to visualize the audience naked to relax you. To each his own, though—a naked audience would probably just make me want to run for the exit! Remember you have a set amount of time for your presentation. Place a wrist watch on the table so you can glance at it without being obvious. If you practiced timing your presentation (you did do that—right?) then this will help keep you on track. Since most of us speak faster when we are nervous, sometimes a note on the computer to speak slowly is a good reminder. Finally, as you get ready to give your presentation, take a good deep breath.

Conclusion

If you use the techniques I have presented, it should help you become a better public speaker and presenter. You may never totally overcome your fear of public speaking, but you will become more comfortable with it. I still get a little nervous every time I speak in public but it seems to diminish a little more each time I speak. Remember the only way to become a better public speaker is to practice. None of the other aspects of your job came easy at first—it takes experience, making mistakes, and getting constructive feedback from peers to improve. The same is true for public speaking! ■

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