

## **Cut through the Clutter**

*Connecting with audiences by speaking their language*  
by Karen Friedman

The information you have to offer may be very important to your audience, but if you don't give that audience a reason to listen, they will tune you out faster than you can say hello. In an age where businesses are struggling to survive and so many of us are bleary eyed from trying to devise ways to keep our customers happy, cutting through the clutter is more important than ever.

Thanks to technology, like children, we expect instant gratification. We want the home page to load faster, the images to appear clearer and the transactions completed sooner. After all, if we can broadcast events from around the world as they happen, why shouldn't we expect everything in an instant?

That is the challenge during today's business meetings or public presentations where fidgety impatient audiences aren't interested in verbal foreplay. That's why it's essential for you to be able to describe your product or service in a sentence or two. Before you simply spit out some words, make sure those words answer these questions. What sets you apart? Why should your listener care? What will you do for them?

Most people are not born presenters. Even the most seasoned speaker battles butterflies and sweaty palms. Realizing that's okay is the first step. Learning how to connect with your audience is key, but many people will never accomplish that goal until they change their attitude. All too often, doctors, scientists, researchers, engineers and other technical types balk at personalizing business presentations. They seem to think it's an insult to their walls of degrees and years of schooling and they fear colleagues won't take them seriously if they deviate from "just the facts". What they have never learned in all of their advanced chemistry and biology classes is that presenting is for the ear, not the eye. Just the facts sounds like an endless thesis being read into a tape recorder. It doesn't work.

Not too long ago, I walked into a room where some of the country's top oncologists were preparing to launch a new cancer-fighting drug. This was their final step before presenting to the FDA. Given that these men and women are some of the best and the brightest, I thought rehearsals would be a breeze. So, I sat down, pen poised to make a few notes in order to help them fine tune their business presentation, but I was really looking forward to learning about the latest in fighting this disease.

What a letdown! It didn't matter what they said because the audience never heard them. Five articulate presenters, all well dressed, all armed with animated power points and technical grids droned on and on and on. While eyes closed and others pretended to take notes while playing solitaire on their laptops, I wondered how in the world I could help and if perhaps I should triple my fee.

### **WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME?**

No matter how many pages are in front of you, how many years and dollars you've spent on research and development, when presenting, your entire project should boil down to one key thought. If you could sum it up in ten seconds, what

would you want your audience to know? For example, workers around the country spent the past ten years collecting census data. The statistics and volumes of information are endlessly complex, but their message is short and simple: Fill out the form.

### **HOW IS YOUR PRESENTATION LAID OUT?**

Is your presentation written like a term paper? Is it written in sentences? Does it allow room for pauses and repetition when you want to drum a point home? Your words should not be in sentence structure. People don't speak in sentences. They speak in phrases. If you make notes and bullet points, you will find yourself talking more and reading less. If you allow spaces between key thoughts, you will start to identify missing transitions desperately needed to connect point a to point b to point c. These transitions are like the tick-tock of a clock, giving presentations pace and energy. Without them, the clock stops ticking.

### **DO YOUR HARD CORE FACTS AND FIGURES HAVE PERSONALITY?**

Presentations are like people. They come in all shapes and sizes and develop their own personalities. Reciting data and revisiting medical trials may be necessary to explain why your product is qualified to come to market, but data without examples has no meaning. Spouting off statistics is boring. Most often, your audience won't remember the actual numbers. Comparing, contrasting and providing visual images to back up those powerful statistics is memorable and brings your business presentations to life.

### **LESS IS MORE**

Overheads and computer graphics should not detract from your message. Too often, presenters put far too much information on the screen when an overhead should compliment what you are saying. Three to five lines with three to five words per line is plenty. Wherever possible, use a picture or moving graph to illustrate technical information. If your audience is too busy sorting through a maze of words on a screen, how can they hear what you're saying?

### **TECH TALK**

It's not about you. It's about your audience. Don't assume that just because your audience is packed with managers and peers, you can talk technical jargon and lingo. You live and breathe your work. They don't necessarily understand the complicated details you are laying out. Remember to explain technical facts in non-technical terms, not rattle or lecture and whenever possible, use analogies, short phrases and visual aids.

By the way, those scientific experts I told you about a few paragraphs above did eventually bring their product to market. There was nothing wrong with the product, but during mock presentation drills, they saw that the audience was confused, had more questions than answers and never got excited about the product. Because the presenters never connected with their audience, there was no take home message, meaning no one really understood how this product differed from others and how this new product could ultimately improve the quality of life of cancer patients. Ultimately, the failure had nothing to do with the product and had everything to do with the presentation.

Having the knowledge to speak does not make you a good speaker. To connect with you, your audience must be energized or moved by what you are saying. They won't be able to do that if you don't give meaning to what you're saying and you can't do that unless you're willing to adapt your material for the ears of others.

To make this easier, think of the word **S P E A K** and remember this acronym to help you connect with your viewers, readers and listeners.

**S**uccinct. Short sentences or phrases are more effective than long ones. You want to inform your listeners by talking with them, not at them. Your sentences should contain single thoughts in plain, simple language.

**P**assion. If you're not enthusiastic about your subject, how can you expect to excite or inspire an audience. The audience wants to like you. If you appear bored, they will be bored. If you're visibly uncomfortable, they will feel uncomfortable. However, if you look people in the eye, gesture accordingly, and involve your audience, you will keep their interest.

**E**xperience. Don't just tell people what happened. Let them experience your words. Create examples, stories and descriptive adjectives that bring your words to life. If you try to memorize what you want to say, you'll sound insincere and you won't give meaning to your words.

**A**nalogies. Use analogies to drive home a point. For example: The new store that's being built in this community is the size of *two* football fields. Analogies also help us visualize which increases the likelihood that we will remember.

**K**eepers. These are what I call take homes. If you want a listener to take away one or two points after hearing you speak, what would those points be? Have you delivered those points passionately and succinctly through analogies and recreating experiences. Did you leave the audience with something to remember?

In an age of information overload where headlines speak louder than facts, your job is to make it as easy as possible for your audience to cut through the clutter and connect with what you're saying. They can't do that if you don't **SPEAK** their language.

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