



Speaker's Notes

Give your audience a reason to listen by cutting the clutter

By Karen Friedman

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. The occasion was the group's rehearsal before a big presentation to the Federal Drug Administration. Given that these men and women are some of the best and brightest in their field, I thought the rehearsal would be a breeze. So, I sat down, pen poised to make a few notes so I could help them fine-tune their presentations.

What a letdown. Five articulate, highly educated, well-dressed presenters, armed with shiny animated slideshows, droned on and on and on and on. It didn't matter what they were saying because the audience wouldn't really hear any of it anyway. Around me, eyes closed, and others pretended to take notes while playing solitaire on their laptops. I wondered how in the world I could help these presenters. I also thought about tripling my consultation fee on the spot.

All presenters believe their words are important, and they are. But if you don't give an audience a good reason to listen, they will quickly tune you out. In an age in which the sound bite is king, cutting through the clutter is more important than ever.

Consider the following points before stepping onstage for your next presentation:

The take-home

No matter how many years and dollars you've spent on research and development, no matter the technical complexity of your subject matter, when speaking to a group your entire presentation must boil down to one key point. If you had to sum up your talk in 10 seconds, what would you want your audience to know?

Move toward a goal

Powerful presenters who can hold attention have something in common with each other. They've learned that speaking is for the ear, not for the eye. Instead of preparing a presentation as a research paper jammed with minutiae, these people have learned to present only the information needed to move an audience toward the desired outcome.

Present, don't read

Is your presentation written like a term paper? Is it written in sentences? Do you allow room for pauses so the listener can participate? People don't converse in long-winded sentences. We speak in short phrases. Be sure to write your presentation notes as phrases or bullet points. You will then find yourself talking more and reading less. Also, take time to pause between key thoughts so your listeners can digest what you're saying.

Bring facts to life

Explaining the features of your product may be important, but explanation without example has no meaning. People can't remember all of the facts, but they do remember impressions. By comparing and contrasting, providing analogies and visual images, your presentation will come to life.

Slideshow or presentation?

No one comes to a presentation to see a slideshow. They come to hear a knowledgeable person talking about a particular subject. Visuals should only reinforce what you're saying. Instead of preparing the slides first, prepare your remarks then create appropriate supporting visuals. Let your words drive the visuals instead of the other way around.

Nix the jargon

Just because your audience is packed with colleagues doesn't mean you should talk jargon. Get rid of the buzzwords and throw-away phrases. Rather, look for opportunities to put your words in context by humanizing your material and telling stories or anecdotes.

A change in tactic

As I worked with the oncologist presenters, I brought these points to their attention. After some reworking, their final presentations were a far cry from the rehearsals. They made an effort to connect with their audience rather than confuse them, and they created a focused, central message that excited and inspired them. And in the end, the cancer drug they were promoting made it to market.

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