

# The Key to All Great Presentations:

## What's the Story?

By Karen Friedman

I am a proud alumnus of the Pennsylvania State University so you can imagine my excitement when graduating students asked me to deliver the commencement speech at one of the campuses. I probably spent more time preparing this speech than any I've ever given because it was so close to my heart and so important to me to share pearls of wisdom that graduates might draw on and remember as they entered the next phase of their lives. Many of my friends and family were also attending so that only amplified my jittery nerves.

It was a day I will always remember and over the years I've heard from a few of those former students who tell me they still remember some of what I said. Obviously flattered, but mostly curious, when I've asked what they recall, they've all said the same thing. They said they remember the stories I told.

Before every talk, presentation, meeting, interview or slide show it's essential to think about the story you want to tell and how stories within that story can bring your content to life. What is the goal of your talk or presentation? What are the key takeaways you want your audience to remember? What do you want them

to feel, do or know when you are done speaking? Your story must be clearly defined to help listeners understand how your ideas and insights can address their challenges and help them accomplish their goals. To do this, you must look for ways to personalize information.

An insurance company president I worked with was preparing to deliver a keynote address to several thousand colleagues who were edgy about significant challenges facing their business. He really wanted to shine so he hired a professional speechwriter and then asked me to help him with style, delivery and speaking techniques. While I have written more than a few speeches in my day, I am not an executive speechwriter. That said, when I read the speech, something about it really bothered me so I decided to be as blunt as possible even though I knew it might upset him given time and money he had already invested. Here is part of an e-mail I sent to him:

"The speech sounds like it's trying to convince people to feel optimistic... instead of really being optimistic. It uses negative words instead of energizing and tries too hard to add little pithy analogies and quotes that miss the mark. Most importantly, it



**Karen Friedman** is a professional communication coach and speaker who serves as president of Karen Friedman Enterprises. Her techniques to help business professionals become more powerful persuasive communicators have been applied on four continents. This article is based on her new best-selling book *Shut Up and Say Something: Business Communication Strategies to Overcome Challenges and Influence Listener* (Praeger 2010). She is also a contributing author to *Speaking of Success: World Class Experts Share Their Secrets*. Friedman was formerly an award-winning television news reporter and a political candidate.

[www.KarenFriedman.com](http://www.KarenFriedman.com)

does not have personality and doesn't capture who you are—warm, caring, proud... and it certainly doesn't tell the story your audience wants to hear... It seems to talk at them, instead of having a conversation with them. I believe speeches should be personal; you have to bring people into the fold and make them feel that

you get them...that you really understand your audience...you have to humanize your thoughts and words so it truly reflects who you are and tells the story you want to tell..."

What resulted was a different approach; a brainstorming session to identify the story and create a theme which was simple: "Imagine the Possibilities." Once you know the story you want to tell, everything else will fall into place.

Without vignettes and stories, a speech or talk is nothing more than a bunch of words void of meaning and impact. In fact, across all academic levels, storytelling is used to spread news, teach lessons, and learn about cultures and history. It's something that comes naturally to all of us because we do it every day without even thinking about it—in hallways, at the bus stop, at home and at social gatherings. But because many of us

fear not being taken seriously or risking credibility, instead of using stories to enhance understanding and achieve outcomes, we often lapse into what I call "presentation mode" which is typically boring and robotic. Via the use of good stories, you can avoid this presentation-killing death spiral.

### Coaching Notes

1. **Always think "story, story, story."** What is the story YOU want to tell? What is the story YOU your audience wants to hear?
2. **Remember to *tell* the story** as opposed to going through all the details of your slides. Does your audience really care about the mathematical formulas you devised to make your points? Do they care about your complex charts? If you're leaning on these

devices, you're likely way too complicated for most of your audience.

3. **Keep it simple!** Limit the information and think "audience." What does management really want to know versus everything you think you need to tell them? They don't need all the code numbers and legislative details. What do they really want or need to know, especially if you only had a few minutes to tell them.
4. **The blessing and the curse is that you know a lot!** But not everyone wants to know everything that you know. What they care about is whatever's genuinely critical in terms of what they came to hear you explain. Remember, stories are not what you care about... Stories are what *other people* care about.