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Telling Your Story

Techniques for Holding Your Audience's Attention

Last month I made the case for thinking like a storyteller as you prepared your presentation. But while preparation is important, you still need to actually speak before an audience. Speech coach Darrin LaCroix points that there is no substitute for experience. In his words, the three most important things in learning to be a good speaker are, "Stage time, stage time, stage time."

However, even if you are new to public speaking, learning a few of the basic techniques used by professional speakers can immensely improve your presentations.

Rehearse the Right Way

You've probably been told over and over to rehearse your presentation. There are many good reasons for this. Rehearsal helps you get your timing right. I recently gave a ninety-minute webinar without a lot of rehearsal, assuming that I was so familiar with the subject that it would not be a problem. The consequence was that I spent too much time on the early part of the presentation and had to hurry through the latter part. The audience probably didn't notice, but I did and I had to gloss over some key points.

By the way, rehearsing also helps you identify areas where you can speed up by moving quickly over material or slow things down if you're moving too fast.

The reason many people avoid rehearsing is the assumption that it takes too long. They assume you need to do a full rehearsal each time. This isn't true. Consultant Alan Weiss runs through his presentation once and tapes it. He then listens to parts of the tape where he feels he needs work. Speech coach Ed Tate recommends rehearsing over multiple sessions, with each session focusing on just part of the presentation.

My personal approach is to run through my presentation once, then to focus on rehearsing those parts where I'm having trouble. I then try to do one last full run through.

Memorize Your Opening and Closing

You've just been introduced and your hands are shaking. You step up to the mike and your mind goes blank. Relax. Everyone is nervous before beginning a presentation. One way to get over this hump is to memorize your opening remarks.

Speech coach Patricia Fripp reminds her students that your opening remarks are critical. This is where you grab your audience's attention and set the tone for the entire presentation. You want a powerful opening, one that can move you over the initial nervousness you'll be experiencing.

Likewise, your closing remarks are the key takeaway for the audience. These are the last they will hear from you. Your closing should be powerful and memorable. For this reason, Fripp recommends writing out both your opening and closing, revising them until you are satisfied, then memorizing them.

Internalize, Don't Memorize

All the speech coaches with whom I have trained agree on one key point: do not memorize your presentation. Memorization makes you come across very wooden and stilted. Worse, it's easy to become lost. If you lose your place, you may find yourself fumbling to remember where you were. Things get really ugly if your allotted time changes.

I was once asked at the last minute to substitute my 90-minute breakout session for a one-hour plenary session. As I stood on stage waiting to be introduced, the host proceeded to use fifteen minutes of my time to hold a raffle. Had I memorized my speech, I would have sounded like the "small print" guy on car commercials.

The secret is to internalize your speech. Know your key points and supporting information and be prepared to use them spontaneously. This allows taking advantage of an idea that occurs to you on stage or making a small digression onto an area that resonates with audience. It also allows you to move on if the audience appears to be losing interest.

Use Stories

Here's the big secret to keeping the audience enthralled: tell stories. Everybody likes a good story and they are a great way of demonstrating key points. My personal favorites are historical anecdotes, usually involving interesting characters. Personal stories also work well, depending on how they are presented.

But leave that aside for a moment. Stories also are a useful technique for you as a speaker. First, they are easy to internalize; just about anyone is comfortable telling a story. The audience sees you as relaxed and interesting. Running out of time? Shorten the story or skip it altogether. Need more time? Spin out the story with more detail. Stories are a great technique for both holding the audience and for managing your time.

Don't End on a Question

Remember that ending that you spent so much time crafting and memorizing? No one's going to remember it if the last thing they hear is you answering some minor question. You want that ending to be what they are thinking about as they leave.

I usually display a slide with my contact information and say something like, "I'm going to pass briefly for questions before offering some concluding remarks." After questions, I display my last slide and make my closing remarks. Three things to remember: make sure your moderator understands what you're doing and doesn't dismiss the audience, make sure the audience knows and doesn't start leaving, and, above all, keep your remarks short and relevant. Remember, everyone is getting ready to move on. 