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# What's Your Story?

## *Thinking Like A Storyteller Can Make Your Presentation Shine*

One of the core competencies for emergency managers, in my opinion, is the ability to speak persuasively. This is particularly important when dealing with elected officials or executive leaders but presentations to the public can also have an impact on your credibility. The only way to get good at speaking in public is to practice and a good opportunity to practice is by speaking to your peers at conferences.

As both an attendee and a frequent speaker at conferences, I'm amazed at how bad some presentations can be. It doesn't have to be that way. Preparing a good presentation can be easier than developing a bad one.

### **Develop Your Theme**

A presentation is essentially a story. To make sense, it must have a beginning, middle and an end and the flow through these parts must be logical and smooth. You begin developing your story by identifying what you expect to accomplish with your presentation. To be effective, your presentation must do more than just provide an information dump – it must demonstrate the value of that information and challenge the listener to do something with it.

This is where many presentations fail. Speakers fail to understand that the point of a presentation is to provoke a change in the audience's condition. This can be done by providing a deeper insight into the subject, encouraging a change of attitude, or raising awareness. Providing data without some sort of analysis and a call to action makes for an extremely boring and useless presentation.

You should be able to sum up the theme of your presentation in a single sentence or two. I'm not talking about the things you plan to do in the presentation but rather the central theme that will bind your presentation together, the single idea that you want the audience to take away. Once you have that theme, the rest of your presentation will flow from it.

### **Outlining Brings Clarity**

To develop your theme, begin with an outline of key points. These key points should support your theme and be organized in a logical sequence, e.g. general to specific, chronological, increasing importance, etc. There shouldn't be too many of them; I've seen presentations collapse under the weight of too much material.

Once you have the framework of key points, you can begin to really build the presentation. Under each of the key points, identify two to three items that will illustrate the point. These supporting items could be a personal story, a case study, or historical examples.

This is where you generate interest and hold the attention of the audience. People love to be told stories and to be entertained. You can really reach them if you take the time to select examples that are particularly relevant to the audience.

I was once asked to give a preparedness presentation at the annual conference of the Textile Rental Services Association. My contact was kind enough to grant me access to their newsletter archives and to arrange a tour of a local facility and an interview with the managers there. By incorporating examples of how laundry services had performed in several major disasters, I was able to make what could have been a stock presentation extremely interesting and relevant to the audience.

### **Strong Opening, Stronger Closing**

With the theme, key points, and supporting material identified, you've got most of your presentation done. However, the two most critical points of any presentation are the opening and the closing.

The opening is important because this is where you grab the attention of the audience. Fail to do so and you may never get it back. Don't waste time with jokes that are irrelevant to the presentation. Instead, use a startling fact, an historical example, or a story to lead them into the presentation.

I opened the TRSA presentation mentioned above by telling a story about the experiences

of a laundry company in the 1993 Midwest Floods. The audience was hooked from that point on because the story was relevant to them and to the presentation that followed.

Your closing is in some ways the most important part of your presentation. It's where you drive home your message and give your call to action. The standard method of closing is to ask for questions, then let the audience drift out. This diffuses the impact of your presentation. The audience leaves thinking about the last question (or lack of questions!) rather than your central theme.

A more effective approach used by management consultant Alan Weiss is to pause for questions and let the audience know that you will have some final concluding remarks. You can then use your final remarks to emphasize your theme and issue your call to action.

A call to action is another thing that is frequently missing from presentations. You've just spent 45 minutes or more with your audience providing them with information. What do you want them to do with it? The answer to this question should be uppermost in the mind of your audience as they leave the room.

### **Ease of Presentation**

The process I have outlined here may sound complicated, but it really isn't. Knowing your theme and key points and how you will support them makes your presentation go much more smoothly. In essence, you are telling the audience a story or series of stories rather than just giving them data. The result is a more engaging experience for the audience and a better reception for your message. 