

7 Reasons Why Speakers Flop

By Mark Sanborn

Few qualities create a more vivid impression of a leader than the ability to speak in public. The higher a leader rises within an organization, the more frequently she is called upon to address others. Ironically, hapless leaders are offered little or no training to develop their speaking skills. A fortunate few ooze natural communication talents, but the vast majority must labor to sharpen their speaking skills or else suffer from their deficiency.

As a professional who makes his living giving speeches and seminars, I have sat through hundreds, if not thousands, of executive presentations. Most of the speeches I have heard (or endured) have been less than memorable. Far too often, the presentations have been painful, not only for the speaker, but also for the audience trying to feign interest.

The majority of presenters, even those who flopped dramatically, were well-intentioned. They had a message they believed was relevant, or a passion they were eager to share. Moreover, they stood to gain something, whether support, respect, or credibility, by delivering a masterful presentation. Clearly, nobody sets out to destroy his reputation with a mind-numbing speech. Why, then, do communicators fail so miserably when they have every incentive to excel?

Thoughts and emotions require technique to be successfully communicated. Consider putting in golf. Without technique, it doesn't matter how brilliantly you wish to hit the golf ball, or how shrewdly you've accounted for the slope of the green and the speed of the putting surface. In the end, only good form and practiced skill allow you to consistently make great shots. Public speaking is no different.

Public speaking, like any skill, must be developed. The more often you speak, the better you become — IF you learn from your mistakes. The fastest gains to improve your speaking ability come when you eliminate potential sources of disaster. While I've observed great creativity in flopping a speech, there are seven common reasons why speakers fail.

1. A disregard for time

Long-windedness — speaking beyond the allotted time — may be the easiest way to alienate an audience. Strangely enough, it seems to be epidemic among business leaders. Speaking overly long is rude and smacks of arrogance and self-importance. It suggests to the audience that the speaker values his presentation greater than the time of his listeners or anything else on the program.

The length of a speech shouldn't be a function of title or power, but a function of how long a person has agreed to talk. Start on time and stop on time. Not only will your audience respect you for it, but also you will demonstrate respect for your audience.

2. Unclear purpose

Here's the million-dollar question of any presentation: What's the point?

I'm puzzled by the number of leaders who ramble through a speech without saying anything of substance. I'm equally dismayed by the number of leaders who cram 21 bullet points into a 30-

minute presentation. Communicators frustrate people when they rattle off reams of information without pointing the way to practical application. If you cannot identify a concise, worthwhile purpose for the presentation, you probably shouldn't be making it.

Design your speech the way the pros do. Begin by asking, "At the end of this presentation, what do I want listeners to think, feel, and do?" Good presenters speak to the head, the heart, and the hands.

3. Inadequate preparation

There is no excuse for "winging it." The best speakers are borderline neurotic in their preparation—even if their demeanor suggests otherwise. Presenters who come across as brilliantly unscripted likely spent hours practicing in order to appear "off the cuff."

If you paid for a ticket to a Broadway show where none of the actors had practiced in advance, you would demand your money back. Too bad the audiences of executive leaders don't get the same privilege. Each speech is a transaction. Your listeners are paying attention, and you owe them a worthwhile presentation in return.

4. Failure to capture attention

The scarcest resource in the world used to be time; today it is attention. The average listener is bombarded with messages from many different sources. From email to radio to voicemail to cell phones, everybody is trying to tell us something, and your attempt to give a speech is just one more bombardment.

Your content and delivery had better grab the audience's attention right out of the shoot. You don't have the luxury of "warming up" your audience. Hit them square between the eyes with something that will break their preoccupation with the thousands of other stimuli clamoring for their attention.

Most importantly, make your remarks relevant. Postmoderns are less interested with the question "Is it true?" and more interested in the question "How does it affect me?" Yes, you need to be intellectually honest to prove your points, but never forget to demonstrate that your message matters to the listener.

5. Pomposity

Ego-driven leaders are more concerned with what followers think about them than with what followers do because of them. Rather than influencing their listeners, pompous leaders attempt to impress the audience. In doing so, they manipulate rather than inspire.

A preoccupation with self is deadly to a communicator. Self-absorbed leaders speak in order to get their needs met rather than to meet the needs of the audience. Unfortunately for speakers, audiences are quick to pick up the scent of a pompous communicator and they will tune out any presenter perceived as arrogant.

6. Boredom

Today's audiences are filled with people who were raised on MTV. This generation spent its formative years watching music videos that contained 150 images in the course of a minute. For them, watching a talking head is about as stimulating as staring at a blank computer screen.

A speaker who entertains never fully flops. Don't get me wrong: entertainment by itself is not a worthwhile goal for an executive presenter, but it sure beats the alternative, which is to be boring. For a speaker, the value of entertainment comes from its ability to mentally engage listeners. I've found the best way to educate is to slip good ideas in on the wings of entertainment.

Great restaurants know that the presentation of cuisine is as important as its preparation. Speakers would be wise to take note: presentation and perception go hand-in-hand. The best communicators use the sizzle to sell the steak.

7. False endings

I've seen the following scenario play out hundreds of times. A speaker starts to conclude, even tells the audience of her intent, and then tells a pithy, witty story. The audience responds favorably, and the speaker gets a rush. "Wow, they liked that. I've got an even better story," she thinks to herself. And then she ends again with another story/quote/challenge. Like a junkie in search of another fix, the speaker keeps ending until there is no positive response, but rather visible signs of disgust. By then, it is too late to recover.

Conclude concisely. Each false ending weakens the message in front of it. A simple rule to remember: good endings only happen once.

Summary

The beginning of excellence is the elimination of foolishness. You can ramp up your speaking performance by analyzing your last presentation with these seven questions:

1. Did I stick to my allotted time?
2. Did I develop and present purposefully?
3. Was I thoroughly prepared?
4. Did I capture attention at the very beginning?
5. Did I positively influence listeners?
6. Was I appropriately entertaining, or at least not boring?
7. Did I end only once?

An affirmative answer to each question virtually guarantees that your next presentation won't be a flop. Not only will your communication be flop-proof, but you will likely be perceived as an articulate and effective speaker.

About the Author

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