

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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If They Snooze, You Lose: How NOT To Be Boring As A Speaker

What's the #1 thing that people are most afraid of?

Public speaking ranks higher on the fright list than seeing the dentist, going to a funeral, or even being audited by the IRS. It is the most terrifying thing most people in business are faced with regularly.

Whether you're speaking to a group of 10, or 10,000, the experience doesn't have to be hair-raising. Here are ten tips to help you get over your fears and do the best possible job on the platform:

Use Notes

Some people believe that you should memorize the speeches you give. I don't believe that's true. Use notes, but don't graft yourself to them. Look up often, and know the material so well that you can pick up where you left off easily when your eyes go back to the page.

Don't Read Your Slides

Many presenters that use PowerPoint pack an enormous amount of verbiage on each slide, and simply stand up in front of people and read what's there. ARRRRGH! Why do you do that? Audiences can read your slides just like you can! Use bullets or numbers with fewer words on your visuals, and elaborate on each one verbally. You will come across as much more learned on your subject, and you'll still be able to use your slides as visual cues.

Know Your Audience

Get to know what your audience is interested in, and what they want to know from you. Some presenters only focus on what they want to tell, and can miss the mark completely. Do a little research beforehand, and even schmooze with a few people just before your talk. You may learn something very topical that you can reference during your presentation.

Use Props or Visuals

Most talks can be made more interesting by using large diagrams, charts, photos, or a prop of some kind. They help tell your story visually to those who are better visual learners, and draw a portion of the focus away from the single-dimensional view of you talking. Good props or visuals can also help to clarify a point you're making in a memorable way.

Eliminate "Um"s, "Y'Know"s, etc.

Some people are "Um"ers. Some people are "Y'Know"ers. My 16-year-old son is a "Like"r. It can be VERY distracting to an audience. Know what you are, and practice avoiding that word or phrase. If you must, speak slightly slower or put brief pauses in certain places, which is better than repeating your "word" over and over.

The best way to improve on this is to tape every speech you do. Pocket digital recorders are now available for very little money. Turn it on just before you start, and listen to yourself afterward. It's a great investment in your career, and gives you a digital dose of reality.

Connect With Your Eyes

Most people who are nervous have little or no eye contact with their audience. Make it a point to scan the audience at several points throughout your talk, and lock eyes with people as you do, spending a few moments with each one if you can. People trust others that have good eye contact, and your speech will go over better if your audience trusts you.

Involve Your Audience At Every Opportunity

Find places in your talk where you can make them an active participant. Ask a trivia question, point out a quality of an audience member that relates to the point you're making, recognize someone's past accomplishments that the entire room is aware of, or something else that gets them involved. Take every opportunity to do this, and your impact will go through the roof.

Use Testimonials, References, and Quotes

There's a saying that goes something like this: "If you say it, it's bragging... if someone else says it, it's true." Don't be afraid to reference sources, testimonials, and quotes from others in your speech, while still keeping it your own.

Be Brief

The #1 audience complaint of most every speaker is the length of the talk. Look for places to cut out long-winded, lengthy material. Your impact will be measured in the quality of your speech, not in the length of time you spend on the platform.

Practice

Before you do your speech, find a fearless truth-teller in your life that will give you honest feedback, and practice in front of him or her. Take the feedback willingly, and adjust if necessary. This may be the single most important tip I can give. I have learned more about my material speaking in front of my wife, Sherri, than any audience could ever give me, and her honest comments have allowed me to improve immeasurably.

Two more thoughts on public speaking you may find helpful: Good speaking is good salesmanship. Long term, if you want to become better at speaking, become better at sales. Speaking is just sales done to a whole group of people instead of one.

And lastly, most people say that they get nervous right before they begin a speech. Even after many years of public speaking, I get nervous too. What I've learned is that the more I'm prepared, the less nervous I am. The antidote for being nervous is to be prepared. If something goes wrong, it's no big deal... if you're ready.

Good luck... and good speaking!

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