



Seven Sins to Avoid with Your Next Speech or Public Presentation

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The words of great speech endure not only because of the strength and relevancy of their prose, but because of the charisma, thoughtfulness and passion of their presenters.

In the United States, there have been many great speeches over the course of our nation's history. I think the following speeches stand out in terms of the writing, the incredibly powerful delivery, and the articulation of a memorable and emotional message: Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address; Mother Jones' inspirational speech to militant West Virginia coal miners in 1905; Clarence Darrow's 1926 argument during the Scopes "Monkey Trials"; George S. Patton's 1944 pep talk to troops during the Normandy invasion; John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address; and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 "I Have A Dream" speech.

Delivering a memorable speech, or making a memorable presentation, even for an accomplished, dynamic speaker, requires avoiding the pitfalls that can muddle your message, disappoint your listeners, or result in your failure to achieve your objectives.

The most successful speeches and presentations are a scintillating blend of content, visuals, presentation skills, audience engagement, and most importantly, rapport with the audience. Rapport comes from passion, sincerity, and empathy.

Whether you are new to making public presentations or consider yourself an accomplished public speaker, you should be aware of the following common mistakes I refer to as the ***Seven Deadly Sins of Public Speaking***.

1) MAKING ASSUMPTIONS

It's an innocent mistake but too often the trigger that fires the first round into a speaker's credibility. Assuming that your audience grasps the significance—the importance—of what you are presenting is one of the deadliest mistakes you can make. Far too often, speakers launch into an oration about their topic, thinking listeners are not only comprehending what they are saying, but share the same enthusiasm for the subject.

If you don't establish from the very beginning why a topic is germane to the audience, what you say for the remainder of your speech or presentation could have little impact and the result could be that you struggle with trying to hold anyone's interest.

For this reason, you may want to start with a question that not only engages the audience but gives you an idea of their general interest and experience level. This of course depends on the situation, but it is a widely used technique that works well for many mixed audiences. You can start off by asking attendees to raise their hand in response to the question. If only a few participate, you can quickly backpedal and provide a planned overview of

your topic, along with a summary of its importance to the listeners before launching into your presentation. The important thing here is to be prepared for the response you may get when you ask those questions.

In some instances, adjusting to the best level for the audience could mean you never reach what you feel is the most significant part of your speech or presentation. But at least you provided your audience with information that matched their experience level. Remember, the key objective of giving a speech or presentation is to relate to your audience by educating, providing a perspective on an issue, or to a degree, entertaining or motivating them.

Your approach should follow this direction: Motivate, Captivate, and Educate.

2) UNDERESTIMATING THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGE

In all public settings, each time you make a speech or give a presentation, you should consider that a roomful of people made a decision to willingly listen to you with the belief that what you have to say may be of value to them.

For the most part, from the time you walk up to the podium or the front of the room, your audience is watching, making judgments about your appearance, comprehending what you are saying and weighing your credibility through various filters. One of those filters is how they judge your overall appearance.

If you amble up to the front of the room or across the stage, shuffle any notes you might be carrying, and then look at your laptop screen as though you are confused with how to start your slides, all the while fidgeting with your hair and adjusting your clothing, you are very likely losing credibility with members of your audience. Those first few minutes are all you have to make that critical first impression. There are always critics in a crowd and they want to, and expect to, see a person who is well prepared, professional, and enthusiastic about having the opportunity to address the audience.

Your choice of clothing speaks to your respect for the audience and your mannerisms can overpower your audience. Unfortunately, these two key points are frequently overlooked.

Your image overall should portray you as confident, enthusiastic and humble. Over the past two decades, you may have noticed top executives switching from designer suits and power neckties to stylish jeans and sportscoats. This has not been unintentional. This is an understood element of relating to audiences. Conversely, wearing those jeans and a sport coat to speak to a group of Wall Street investment bankers would send the wrong message.

Take some time before your next public appearance to think about the audience you will be addressing and how your wardrobe and your mannerisms line up with your messaging to impact audience perception and acceptance.

3) (SEEMINGLY) LACKING ENTHUSIASM

Every bit as important as what you say, is how you say it. If you speak in a monotone, too quickly or too slowly, you can't expect listeners to pay attention, let alone remain interested in your subject.

The foundation of good verbal communication—whether on the telephone, a video call, a face-to-face or small group meeting, or in a large public setting—is to connect with the listener. A parent speaking to a small child understands the need to speak slower and simplify their language. And at the other end of the spectrum, the tone of voice you use to speak with your boss is probably different than that used to speak with your spouse.

The same holds true when making a public presentation or speech. You must, in advance, determine the appropriate tone, language and enthusiasm to persuasively and engagingly convey your message. There is much to consider. Don't be afraid to interject humor or a witty observation to break up the pace of a serious talk. Also, take advantage of the "Power of the Pause"—a technique that works well after making an important point. Pause. Repeat the point. This will help to reinforce the significance. And every bit as important is showing enthusiasm for your subject. Enthusiasm is contagious. Spread the word!

A good public speaking coach can help you zero in on the techniques that will work best for you.

4) FAILING TO PROPERLY PREPARE

This is a grave mistake, if not a deadly sin, for even the most experienced public speakers. It's easy to become complacent about public speaking and public presentations for those who have been making such appearances for many years. After all, if you continue to draw sizable crowds for your presentations, and they politely applaud afterwards, it seems safe to assume that you are doing a great job. That assumption might be wrong.

People attend public presentations for various reasons. If you are an established industry luminary, they really want to hear what you have to say, and they will be more accepting of quirks and less than perfect presentation skills. If you are an unknown, but your subject matter seems compelling, they may want to attend because of the topic. Getting them to start associating your name with important content and great delivery, well that's the real challenge to getting people to come back when your next appearance comes around. Winning them over as a relatively unknown and establishing somewhat of a following is the trophy of a good speaker and presenter, and that only comes from thorough preparation.

The best speakers and presenters, including politicians, celebrities, executives, and inspirational speakers, continually review, revise and refine their presentations and speeches. As situations change, they update materials, modify visual aids and seek input from audiences and colleagues in their effort to continually improve—and win over audiences.

There is no substitute for thorough preparation.

5) RELYING ON TECHNICAL JARGON

Unless you are absolutely sure of the technical level of your audience, don't assume they will understand what you are saying when you use technical jargon or acronyms. The verbiage you commonly use around the office may sound like a foreign language in a room full of people from different companies, industries and countries.

Conceivably, every time you use an unfamiliar term, you cause listeners to briefly pause as they contemplate what you've said. When they resume listening, they may have missed an important point. If you throw too many technical terms together at one time, you may lose them completely. If you must use certain technical terms, and

you are supporting your discussion with slides, then a good technique is to reinforce those technical terms by having their commonly accepted definitions appearing on a slide.

Statistics indicate most people are better readers than listeners, but the combination of audio and visual communication increases the likelihood of your audience having a better understanding of your message. So, even with slides, it is better to speak slowly and clearly and avoid any jargon or slang that might confuse the listener. To ensure your speech is easy to comprehend, be sure to practice it at least once, a full dry run, before a person who represents your target audience. It's easier to make changes to a speech or presentation in advance, rather than having to backpedal during your discussion when you see listeners squirming in their seats or rolling their eyes in frustration.

6) USING POOR VISUAL AIDS

There is a lot of controversy surrounding the use of visual aids. We often refer to this as the PowerPoint Dilemma, understandable since it is estimated 95% of public presentations today are supported by PowerPoint slides. Unfortunately, the use and an intelligent, strategic approach to the effective use of slides to support the discussion is often completely overlooked. Just think about how many times you have heard a speaker apologize for the density of information packed on a slide, knowing the audience can't possibly read the information, yet acting as though the audience should just be thankful for the blur of letters and numbers in front of them.

Visual aids can and should play a critical role in stressing important points and leaving a visual impression with the audience. The axiom, "a picture is worth a thousand words" holds true whether discussing a business model, presenting a case study or elaborating on a revolutionary technology.

There are no great hard-and-fast rules for using visual aids aside from understanding that they're meant to complement—not replace your speaking voice. The public speaker who flashes slide after slide and then reads the bullet points might as well sit down.

When choosing or developing your slides, consider the size and type of the room where you will be speaking. If you are delivering a keynote to hundreds of attendees, you'll want to use large images that illustrate and support your remarks rather than slides with lines of copy or bullet points.

Think about your visual aids as tools to help you leave a lasting impression with your audience. Showing short video clips, interacting with websites or applications, and even playing sound bites can add to what people absorb and remember. However, it's imperative you have thoroughly tested any of these visual components so you won't stumble around in front of the audience trying to make something work properly.

When it comes to slides, simple is better. When it comes to speaking, slower is better. If you project something to help make your point, give the audience time to absorb the information and make the connection.

7) GIVING A SALES PITCH

Conference and other event coordinators face a unique challenge when selecting speakers. They recognize that most corporate speakers are eager to promote their companies or products in hopes of attracting new customers. On the other hand, the organizers are eager to sign up speakers who can talk about the latest trends,



technologies, and market dynamics. To remedy this dilemma, coordinators are careful to select presenters who refrain from giving sales pitches, and instead, concentrate on educating and enlightening their audiences.

In some cases, should you give a blatant sales pitch as opposed to sticking to a more general industry-related topic, you may fine the event coordinators balking at inviting you back to speak.

Spinning the story of your company and products into a compelling presentation isn't as difficult as it seems. First, you need to consider the challenges faced by your audience. What will be useful information to them? Does your company or products address their challenges? If so, start by discussing the challenge and then transition into the solutions at a generic level. This is known as the "threshold" message. Be sure to contrast their various solutions and talk in general terms rather than naming specific companies or products. Weaving customer success stories into your speech is an effective way of relating to your audience and opening them up to the idea of trying new technologies. They need to see you as one of them, or someone who can lead them and advise them.

Another approach would be to present future concerns while stressing the solutions that are evolving in that area. Try to appeal to what you believe are the perceived and known challenges the members of the audience can relate to. Focus on helping them see that you understand what they care about. You need to connect by letting them see that you understand their pain points, their challenges, their ambitions. You're not there to try to sell them a product or service. You are there to tell them they have options and help them see you as the person who can help them sort through the various options to determine what is the best choice for their situation.