

Public speaking revisited: Delivery, structure, and style

A former dean of the Mylan School of Pharmacy at Duquesne University once was asked to name the most important skill for successful pharmacists in today's market. He could have said deep scientific knowledge, clinical prowess, or business savvy, but instead he answered "communication skills." Indeed, it is often said that it does not matter what you know if you cannot communicate it to others. Although that may be overstating the point, quality communication skills are paramount in all aspects of our lives.

A brief review of the essentials of public speaking, a topic that many of us have not revisited for years if not decades, will energize and sharpen our skills. To be successful as an orator, regardless of the setting, attention to three key areas—delivery, structure, and style—is needed. Mentally reviewing each of these areas before your next presentation will help you put your best foot forward.

Delivery. *Fluency.* In truth, many of us spend far more time crafting our PowerPoint slides than we do perfecting our delivery. However, even the best content can be overlooked if its delivery is poor or mediocre. The first essential aspect of delivery is fluency. The steady flow of a presentation will allow the au-

dience to focus on your words and not on a choppy delivery. Correct pronunciation is part of fluency. This is especially important with a scientific topic and a knowledgeable audience. Mispronunciation will diminish your credibility, your impact, and your message. Whether intentionally or not, the audience will spend time focusing on a misstep and not on the valuable message. A presentation to an oncology physician team is the wrong place to fumble through the name of the latest monoclonal antibody.

Practice is the key to pronunciation, overall fluency, and other aspects of delivery. Challenging words are much easier to pronounce during rehearsal than during a presentation, when nerves can take over and cause mispronunciation. It is advisable to practice so that the appropriate pronunciation becomes second nature. When all else fails, spell out the problem words phonetically in your notes.

Pitch, power, and pace. Three additional elements that can drastically affect delivery are pitch, power, and pace. Like the gears on a car, these can be shifted to emphasize key points, make your presentation memorable, and wake up sleeping audience members. The pitch and power of your delivery should be different

when you are discussing a patient with an adverse drug reaction and when you are explaining an exciting breakthrough in translational research.

A component of pace is pausing, one of the most underutilized but powerful tools in a presenter's toolbox. As an audience member, how many times have you found yourself doodling or thinking about what you need from the grocery store, only to have your attention and interest roped back in by a skillfully placed pause? Pausing gives audience members the opportunity to digest key points, and it can reset their focus and interest.

Another facet of delivery is audibility. If you are in a large room, one rule of thumb is to speak loudly enough that everyone in the back of the room can hear you. Imagine your words as paint and the back of the room as your canvas.

If a room has a microphone, most likely it is because the designers of the room determined that it would be necessary, so do not hesitate to use it. If you ask the audience whether your voice is loud enough, timid audience members may not speak up and say that they cannot hear, but they likely would hear you much better with the microphone. Of course, an audience of 5 in a room built for 200 is a different story.

Microphones do, however, pose a series of problems to work through. Standing too close to a microphone that is attached to a stand can cause popping and other distortions. However, standing



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too far away will cause people to strain to hear or cause them to miss out on parts of the message. When setting the proper microphone height, be sure to position the stand where your mouth would be when you are looking up and projecting to the crowd, not looking down at your notes, which you may be doing while the microphone is being positioned.

Some presentations require the speaker to wear a lavalier or lapel microphone. Whether wired or wireless, its placement is crucial. In general, 8 to 10 inches below the chin is ideal. Also, a lapel microphone is subject to rustling and other annoying sounds generated by hair, jewelry, or clothing. Wired lapel microphones may have bulky transmitter packs. Speakers often regret their wardrobe choices when confronted with clipping the pack onto their waist or attaching it to their blouse. Be sure to dress in a way that will accommodate the possibility that this style of microphone will be used. Deep pockets or a sturdy belt will often do the trick.

Structure. It is assumed that as an expert in pharmacy, you are knowledgeable about the topic on which you are speaking. However, the organization and flow of your content are essential. Ask yourself, Is the presentation in a logical sequence? Am I speaking to the level of my audience? Does my presentation have structure, or am I aimlessly bouncing from one point to the next?

Introduction. Just as you would not travel a long distance without a map (or a GPS), you should not ask an audience to join you in a presentation without a clear sense of direction. Structure your presentation around crystal-clear main points, and let your audience know that these are the take-home “pearls.” In other words, follow the age-old mantra: “Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.” Draw a mental map, and then lead them down the path.

An effective introduction should be both captivating and brief. A bland, cookie-cutter introduction such as, “Today, I’m going to talk about hypertension” leaves the listener informed but less than enthused. Conversely, long introduc-

tions take precious minutes away from the content that the audience is there to receive. A brief, enticing introduction will give your audience a reason to pay attention to your presentation. Often, an interesting case study, a quote, or an outstanding fact followed by a few objectives and a detailed presentation outline can make for an effective introduction.

Content. Throughout your presentation, be sure to emphasize your principal ideas. When audience members leave your presentation and do not know what to do next, are not motivated to act, or are not sure of what they have learned, you have failed as a speaker. One of the most effective techniques for getting the main ideas across is repetition. In the famous “I have a dream” speech of Martin Luther King Jr., think of the number of times he repeated those four words. The repeated use of simple words can evoke emotion and resolve from the audience. In addition, repeating the main points allows the listener to remember what you are trying to convey. After concluding a main point, the speaker may review or may choose to reiterate all of the main points during the conclusion. In either case, reviewing the main points is essential for listeners to connect the presentation together.

Be cautious not to overwhelm your listener with too much information. Whether you like it or not, 45 minutes is not enough to cover breast cancer from beginning to end, and it may not even be enough to cover one particular treatment modality in detail. Leave your listeners wanting more and show them where to find it, instead of leaving them with information overload and a headache. For speakers who are experts on a subject, this can be tough to accomplish.

There is nothing worse than an audience staring at their watches and waiting for a presentation to conclude. Even the most engaging speakers can lose an audience toward the end of a presentation if they do not respect the listeners’ time. Often, presentations go over the allotted time because the speaker tries to pack in too much information. A better approach is to have less information and spend time emphasizing main points. On

the other hand, a presentation may be shorter than planned because a presenter speaks more rapidly (because of nerves) than he or she did in practice. Seasoned speakers may make notes in their presentation as to where they should be at the 5- or 10-minute intervals. If they hit the mark, they are speaking at an appropriate pace. If they are behind, they are cued to cut out some secondary comments, and if they are ahead, they know that they ought to slow down and spend time emphasizing main points.

Conclusion. Far too many presentations end abruptly, without smooth transition or a take-home message. Some presenters wrap up by saying “That’s all I’ve got today” or “That’s the end of my presentation.” Most people don’t like movies that end without resolution of the conflict, and presentations may be thought of in the same manner. A smooth conclusion with a brief summary of main points will leave the audience informed and involved and will make it clear that you are finished.

Style. It is tough to compare two masterpieces. Each is unique and exquisitely crafted. Likewise, your presentation will be excellent not in comparison with others but because it is full of your customized style. It is possible, however, to master certain techniques that will allow your style to shine.

Enthusiasm. It is difficult to garner the attention and interest of an audience for an extended period of time if they can deduce that the speaker is either uninterested or, frankly, bored. Listeners are naturally enticed when a speaker is so engaged and interested in the topic that he or she seems to exude the information. Although we are not all naturally enthusiastic, we can all muster enough enthusiasm to captivate an audience. This is essential if you are truly committed to leaving your audience enriched by the experience.

For a professor who delivers the same lecture year after year, it may be difficult to bring the same luster to a presentation as when it was first prepared. The speaker must make a concerted effort to remember that although he or she may

be so familiar with the topic as to have lost interest, the audience is hearing the material for the first time.

Poise and confidence. Your posture and poise say a lot about your comfort level with a topic. Standing straight, with feet aligned under your shoulders, both feet flat on the ground, and hands at your sides except when gesturing, helps project your confidence and poise. Often, speakers who are unsure of themselves fidget, cross their legs, pace aimlessly in an unorganized manner, or gesture wildly without purpose. These motions are both distracting and unnecessary. Make notes in your presentation to remind yourself every five minutes to avoid those bad habits. Many speakers get into a “haze” when they are presenting and focus on little else besides their content. A lack of focus on poise can detract from your presentation and ultimately from your message. In this regard, themed ties, unmatched clothes, and scuffed shoes can all cause a listener’s mind to wander. Also, one need not stay behind the lectern or podium. That may be most comfortable, but well-timed, planned, and coordinated pacing can highlight transitions in your presentation.

To drive home a point, skilled presenters often use both rhetorical questions and illustrations. They make the audience members think and help fix the point in their minds.

Use of an outline. When a presentation consists of merely reading from a prepared script, engaging the audience and moving it to action are nearly impossible. Reading a manuscript aloud makes it difficult to add feeling, and audience members may simply tune out. It is important to recognize that written and

spoken messages are constructed differently. A written paper may sound stiff and unemotional when read aloud, just as the transcript of a spoken presentation may appear overly casual or repetitive. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to have effective eye contact while reading from a manuscript. Presenters should aim to make eye contact with members of their audience, and they should be sure to address the entire audience, not just members on their dominant side or the side where a monitor displays the presentation slides.

Rather than trying to read from a manuscript, the speaker might practice using an outline. This way the ideas in the outline jog the speaker’s memory. As an audience member, you can probably recall the difference between having an engaging speaker talking to you and hearing a speaker read at you from a typed set of notes. To master the delivery of ideas without following a script, one must be well prepared. Thorough, in-depth preparation helps prevent nervousness and promotes a more natural delivery.

Preparation. It is natural to be nervous about a presentation. Gifted orators often say they still are nervous before a big presentation. A case of nerves can be overcome with thorough preparation and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, even beyond what is being presented. Rehearsing out loud allows the speaker to be familiar with the content without being focused on the presentation medium (e.g., slide set, overhead projector). Ask a friend or a colleague to listen as you give a practice presentation. Be sure to break any bad presentation habits and master your content and timing so that the

actual presentation will capture all that you have to offer. Both new and seasoned presenters can benefit from this type of peer feedback. Remember, you have only one chance to get it right.

Conclusion. Public speaking skills are never perfected. They must constantly be updated, refined, and developed. You may never speak in front of 10,000 people, but whatever your audience, a review of the preceding points should help make your next presentation a successful one.

Suggested readings

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