

## Six Tips for Optimizing Your Next Speaking Opportunity

Hitting the speaking circuit is one of the best ways to build awareness and generate buzz about you and your organization. Speaking opportunities are everywhere: at tradeshow, conferences and the monthly meeting of the local chapter of an industry or professional organization. Speaking can range from a solo one-hour keynote at a big event to being one of a panel of six experts on a detailed topic. But no matter how big or how small the speech, some simple rules apply.

### **TIP #1 -> Use PowerPoint wisely, if at all**

One of the biggest mistakes speakers make is using PowerPoint as a TelePrompTer. Most of us have had an experience where we listened to a presenter who just popped up line after line of text onto the screen and read the words. PowerPoint is a great tool to display graphics and visuals to an audience, but is totally ineffective for words. Don't use PowerPoint as a crutch to remember what you want to say and don't just put words on the screen and then read from them like notes.

Speeches become powerful when bonds form – sometimes almost magically – between speaker and audience. And that process depends heavily on eye-to-eye contact that PowerPoint makes impossible. Except where a photo can replace a thousand words, lose the slides.

For a good chuckle, check out what The Gettysburg Address would have been like in PowerPoint: <http://www.cs.berkeley.edu/~russell/gettysburg/>

### **TIP #2 -> Don't just do a product pitch**

You speak because it serves the corporate interest, so make sure your speech does just that. But as in seduction, subtlety is a must. Don't drone on about your product and its features. Pose broad questions of general interest relating to your field, then weave your company's approach into the answer

### **TIP #3 -> Stay on topic**

When you give a presentation, stick to the topic. Conference planners and your audience want you to deliver the information they expect. What they don't expect is you to talk about your company's product or service. Your discussions must be around the topic you've been assigned and you should deliver it framed by the pain points and problems the audience faces.

Actually, you're better off declining an opportunity when the host asks you to speak on something that doesn't suit your interest or speaking style. It is better to politely decline an invitation than to go off topic.

#### **TIP #4 -> Know your audience**

Speaking well requires that you reach your audience and speak to their needs and issues. A common mistake speakers make is having one presentation and using it in front of every group. Guess what? Your sales presentation won't work in front of a group of industry analysts or at an investor conference – each is a unique messaging challenge.

#### **TIP #5 -> Be available to answer questions at the end**

You can usually count on people wanting to interact with you at the end of your presentation. Make certain you have enough time in your schedule to hang around and chat with people. Bring plenty of business cards to hand out and offer to send people a copy of your presentation.

#### **TIP #6 -> Consider hiring a professional communicator or speechwriter to draft your presentation or polish your delivery.**

I've asked the best speechwriter I know, John R. Harris, to offer some advice. John is a freelance speechwriter and communications strategist who serves senior executives and politicians on three continents. He lives in a subtropical forest in Japan. John writes speeches for some very famous people, but he has asked me not to reveal their identities...

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## **ON THAT BALCONY** **By John R. Harris**

When a new pope first appears on that balcony above St. Peter's Square to address the assembled faithful, you know he's tanned, fit and ready to run. A lifetime of sermonizing has prepared him for that very moment.

But when a Fortune 500 company first thrusts a newly appointed senior officer before crowds anything but faithful, hold your breath and avert your eyes. You may be watching a lamb led to slaughter.

There is not much on the way up to prepare rising execs for the big arena. And it can be truly painful to watch them waffle through homespun PowerPoints stuffed with over-wrought org charts; irrelevant quotes from Churchill or long-dead Greeks; cornball jokes; and useless text slides suitable for sophomores whose only question might be, "Sir, do we need that for the exam?"

Those destined to lead in business, politics or religion have carefully cultivated the rhetorical arts for years. Or else, when they saw that balcony looming in their future they hired a professional speech writer/coach – fast!

Sadly, though, those most in need of help are usually beyond it. They have no time to focus on the issue. Egos are over-inflated yet fragile. And PR staffers are too terrified to suggest remedial help.

Occasionally, things do go right. And it has been my good fortune to work closely with a number of rising executives and politicians who realized they needed help and were savvy enough to take

advice. As all Toastmasters learn, remedial coaching needs to be delivered in such a way that it does not crush confidence.

Still, you have to get to the heart of the matter. The trick is working together to define an authentic and appropriate voice; then animating it with inflection and emphasis that conveys credibility, sincerity and conviction. Once defined, the speechwriter must learn to write it and the speaker to deliver it.

Without going too deep into tradecraft, the secret of any good speechwriter is the ability to 'channel' his speaker. What would he or she think? What would be humorous or ironic? How would it be expressed naturally?

When writer and speaker really hit their stride, first drafts may cause speakers to exclaim: "How the heck did you know I think that?"

The reality is most people do not have budget for professional speechwriters. And you won't get much value from a single session. To deliver real value for money a speechwriter/coach needs to work with you over several months.

Once we're hooked, though, speechwriters are as loyal as Labradors. When our clients hit home runs we're instantly out of our seats. And – God forbid! – should our clients ever suffer embarrassment of any sort we writhe on the ground and speak in tongues.

So this advice:

If you're even remotely in line for the papacy, the presidency or VP Marketing, hone your public speaking skills while you still have time. And if you ever see a gap in your budget that could fit professional speechwriting/coaching, don't be shy. Step out onto that balcony.

**John R. Harris**

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