

How to avoid falling flat in front of a big audience

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In the world of social media, you realize very quickly that if you don't share good content, you are quickly ignored. I wish this message could get through to speakers at conferences. I attend a lot of conferences. Sometimes I'm a speaker, some I attend just for my own education. I notice one disturbing trend: panelists and speakers who fall flat. I'm not trying to be callous or mean, but when you are preparing to speak before a large group of 50, 100 or even 250 people, you better come ready to play. There's nothing that bugs me more than a speaker who wastes the time of the audience; it's disrespectful and bad form. So now that I've had my rant, how can you avoid falling flat?

To answer this question, I interviewed Lou Hampton, a professional with more than 30 years' experience as a message consultant. He has done everything from working with presidential candidates and leaders of the U.S. Senate to helping Fortune 500 companies and handling fallout during what at the time was the largest fraud case in United States history (protecting a third party). He even worked at one time with the ABA's Board of Governors on an initiative to improve the public's perception of lawyers. (They are still working on that one.)

I asked Hampton, what are the most common problems you see from presenters? He provided six common mistakes that destroy a speaker's credibility and impact.



* Failure to decide what result you want out of the speech.

Every speaker should be looking for measurable results in terms of outcome. Do you want business cards? Meetings? Or some way to capture interest, build relationships and follow-up? What do you want the listener to be able to do as a result of the program? What concepts do you want them to walk away with?

* Failure to pay attention to the audience.

Put yourself in the shoes of your audience and ask What Here Applies to Me? Hampton calls this the WHAM!factor. You need to move past the golden rule of “what would I want” to “what would they want?”

- * Failure to select a dominant image for people to take away.

What is the image people are going to take away with them? What is going to be at the top of their minds that will immediately remind them of your key message? If you have the right image that people remember, you have a good chance of success, even if they don't remember much else.

- * Failure to have a good opening.

Your hook shouldn't be, “Prepare for something boring,” or, “I didn't have time to prepare for this.” Use a personal experience, story or some other narrative to grab the attention of your audience. Something that will pull their attention away from whatever else is on their minds to what you are saying. Caution: Make sure your opener relates to your message; no jokes just for the sake of being funny.

- * Use of bullet points.

Bullet points are not visuals. Visuals mean that there is something to see. Bullet points in slides actually reduce retention. If your presentation is laden with bullet points, time to go back to the drawing board, literally, and come up with photos or diagrams to represent your content.

- * Using sentences that go on forever and start slow.

Attorneys are especially prone to this mistake. Keep your sentences short. And get to the point; don't make your audience have to listen to lengthy qualifiers before they even know what you're talking about.

Avoiding these six mistakes is just the beginning. Doing so won't make you great speaker by itself, but it will aid you in giving a speech the audience will remember and that helps you get the result you want.

Please review these steps before you speak next time; I'm not sure I can handle another hour-long presentation of long slides covered with bullet points. For additional speaking tips from Hampton, visit his blog, www.SpeaktoLead.com .

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