

PUBLIC SPEAKING TIPS

When I started public speaking in the mid-1980s, I was deathly afraid. It's taken me 20 years to get comfortable. I hope many of you are called upon to give speeches—it's the closest thing to being a professional athlete that many of us will achieve. Here are 11 tips for giving great speeches:

1. **Have something interesting to say.** This is 80 percent of the battle. If you have nothing to say, you shouldn't speak—end of discussion. It's better to decline the opportunity so no one knows you don't have anything to say than it is to make the speech and prove it.
2. **Cut the sales pitch.** The purpose of most keynotes is to entertain and inform. It's seldom to provide you with an opportunity to pitch. For example, if you're invited to speak about the future of digital music, don't talk about the latest MP3 player your company is selling.
3. **Focus on entertaining.** Many speech coaches will disagree, but the goal of a speech is to entertain the audience. If people are entertained, you can slip in a few nuggets of information. But if your speech is dull, no amount of information will make it great. If I had to pick between entertaining and informing an audience, I would pick entertaining, knowing that informing will probably happen, too.
4. **Understand the audience.** If you can prove to your audience in the first five minutes that you understand who they are, you've got them for the rest of the speech. All you need to understand are the trends, competition and key issues facing the audience members. This simply requires consultation with the host organization and a willingness to customize your introductory remarks.
5. **Overdress.** My father was a politician in Hawaii. When I started speaking, he gave me this advice: Never dress beneath the level of the audience. That is, if they're wearing suits, you should wear a suit. TO underdress is to communicate, "I'm smarter/richer/more powerful than you. I can't take you seriously, and there's nothing you can do about it." This is hardly the way to get an audience to like you.
6. **Don't denigrate the competition.** By denigrating the competition, you're taking undue advantage of the privilege of giving a speech. You're not doing the audience a favor. The audience is doing you a favor, so don't stoop so low as to use the opportunity to slander your competition.
7. **Tell stories.** The best way to relax when giving a speech is to tell stories—any stories: stories about your youth, stories about your customers, etc. When you tell a story, you lose yourself in the storytelling. You're not "making a speech" anymore. You're simply having a conversation. Good speakers are good storytellers; great speakers tell stories that support their message.
8. **Precirculate with the audience.** Here's how to heighten the audience's connection with you: Talk to them before the speech—especially the ones in the first rows. Then, when you're at the podium, you'll see these friendly faces. Your confidence will soar, you'll relax and you'll be great.

9. **Speak at the start of an event.** The audience is fresher. They're more apt to listen to you, laugh at your jokes and follow your stories. On the third day of a three-day conference, the audience is tired, and all they're thinking about is going home. It's hard enough to give a great speech—why increase the challenge by having to lift the audience out of the doldrums?
10. **Ask for a small room.** If you have a choice, get the smallest room possible for your speech. If it's a large room, ask that it be set classroom style (i.e., with tables and chairs) instead of theater style. A packed room is more emotional. It's better to have 200 people in a 200-person room than 500 people in a 1,000-person room. You want people to remember, "It was standing room only."
11. **Practice, and speak all the time.** This is a "duh-ism" but nonetheless relevant. My theory is that you have to give a speech at least 20 times to get decent at it. You can give it 19 times to your dog if you like, but it takes practice and repetition. There's no shortcut to Carnegie Hall. As renowned violinist Jascha Heifetz once said, "If I don't practice for one day, I know it. If I don't practice for two days, the critics know it. If I don't practice for three days, the audience knows it."

Part of the reason it took me so long to get to this point is that no one explained to me the art of giving a speech, and I was too dumb to do the research. Now I love speaking. Every time I get up to the podium, my goal is to get a standing ovation. I don't succeed very often, but sometimes I do.

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