



# The 11 Biggest Mistakes Presenters Make

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Many people are expected to deliver presentations - business executives, community leaders, politicians, school superintendents, members of the clergy, and volunteer leaders just to name a few. Why is it that so many of these people are hard to listen to? Are they naturally boring and monotone? Do they really not care about their audience? Are they incompetent? Do they rehearse? Presenting a powerful message so that an audience will listen takes work!

### **1 The speaker fails to customize the presentation for the audience.**

Do your homework ahead of time and find out as much as you can about the audience. Who are the decision makers? Is the audience culturally diverse? Do members of the audience have to leave to catch a plane or train? If yes, they are probably not that focused on your speech. Is it a large or small audience? Does the audience know anything about the topic? Are they experts? Why should the audience listen to you? Is there anyone in the audience that is going to give you a hard time or disrupt the presentation? Get to the room early and say hello to a few people. Ask them what their concerns are or why they decided to attend. Meeting people before the presentation can also help calm your nerves.

### **2 The speaker or speech writer fails to research the content and gather up to date information about the topic.**

The only thing we can really say about change is that it is constant. Everything in our world changes! Good speakers are flexible and able to adjust their speech at the last minute if it makes sense to do so. Your credibility as a speaker will increase when you are prepared with up to date information. A few months ago I was scheduled to speak to an audience in New York about leadership. The day before, Governor Eliot Spitzer resigned as Governor of New York when his dealings with prostitutes became public. The timing was incredible; I had to talk about Governor Spitzer when I got to the part in my speech where I talked about character.

**3 The speaker fails to structure the message.** The message should have an opening statement, key points and a closing. The opening statement tells the audience the purpose for the presentation. Why should the audience listen? Key points which follow the opening statement are usually content heavy. Each key point should be supported with data, an example or a story. As a rule of thumb, you don't want to have ten key points; it's too many for the audience to remember. Three or four key points works well. The closing ties everything together. When a speaker closes with "I'm done", "any questions" or "I'm out of time" it's not a strong closing. An effective closing answers the question – what do I want my audience to remember when I finish speaking? One example of a strong closing is, "By the end of the fourth quarter, we expect to save 2.5 million dollars. Thank you for your attention." The audience will never remember everything you say, at least give them a strong closing so they have something memorable to take away from the presentation.

**4 The speaker adds extra words, sounds and phrases to their message.** It is distracting when a speaker adds extra words and sounds such as um, ah, ok, and basically. Effective speakers use crisp, concise language. Your choice and use of words is related to your effectiveness. When FDR spoke, "yesterday, December 7th, 1941 — **a date which will live in infamy** — the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan." The word infamy was carefully selected. Historically, the speech is remembered as the Infamy Speech.

**5 The speaker is visually boring.** Effective speakers use visual language to engage the audience. Your hand gestures, facial expression, posture, movement and eye contact are critical components of your visual language. When you take the stage, always maintain eye contact with the audience, not with the screen behind you. Make sure you are appropriately and professionally dressed for the occasion. Make sure your appearance is neat and clean. You don't need to have a \$1000 suit but you need to be dressed appropriately. You don't want the audience to remember you because your slip was showing or because your shirt was wrinkled. Don't wear anything that is distracting and takes away from your message. For example, 20 bangle bracelets that make noise every time you gesture is not a great idea. Practice your hand gestures and body movement when you rehearse your speech. Your hand gestures should complement your language, not distract the audience. If you are a mess, the audience will perceive that you don't know what you are

talking about. Don't forget to smile! When you smile it looks like you are enjoying the audience.

**6 The speaker fails to use humor.** As a general rule, audiences like to laugh. If you're not a joke teller, and most of us aren't, share a funny story or example. Self deprecating humor is great. When we make fun of ourselves, the audience perceives us as one of them. When Sara Palin told the Republican National Convention that the difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull is lipstick she won the hearts of many moms and got a few laughs. She also showed the audience that she has a sense of humor. Obviously, there will be times when humor isn't appropriate but most of the time it adds to the speakers' effectiveness.

**7 The speaker doesn't allow the audience to interact.** It doesn't matter how large the audience is, there are always ways to get the audience involved. Ask a thought provoking question or ask for a volunteer to help you with something. The volunteer can come up front or walk to a microphone in a large room. Remember to ask the volunteer for his/her name. People always like to hear their own name being used. Remember that you are in front of the audience for their benefit, not for yours. The speech is always about the audience NOT about you!

**8 The speaker fails to rehearse.** Never, ever read a speech! Create an outline, study the outline, and then speak naturally and from the heart. During your rehearsal visualize yourself delivering the speech. Imagine that you are in front of the audience feeling relaxed and prepared, imagine friendly faces looking back at you, imagine that you confidently answer all of the questions that the audience throws at you, and finally imagine applause. If you have the opportunity, go to the room ahead of time and practice your presentation. Actually speak the words and choreograph your movement. If you can't get to the room, rehearse in front of a mirror. Rehearsing your presentation out loud will help you be more effective. Anticipating questions will help you formulate your answers before you get in front of a live audience.

**9 The speaker uses inappropriate words, jargon, slang and phrases.** Curse words and off color remarks are never appropriate in a speech. You will offend someone when you use bad language and one thing you don't want to do is offend anyone in the audience. The minute you offend them, you lose them as a listener. Using jargon and slang just confuses the audience and makes the audience feel inferior or frustrated. Every profession has its' own language. Lawyers talk about quid pro quo and depositions. Teachers talk about magnet schools and inclusion. Doctors talk about scripts and consults. Americans use phrases that don't

translate well or don't mean anything in other languages. For example, a Catch-22 situation, getting to first base, it's between a rock and a hard place, or what's up? It is your responsibility as a speaker to use words and phrases that the audience will understand, comprehend and retain.

**10 The speaker sounds monotone.** Pay attention to your vocal quality. How you sound can be the difference between a fabulous presentation and a horrific experience for the audience. Take care of your voice. Drink lots of warm water before speaking. Stay away from caffeine and tobacco. Slow down your rate of speech by at least 20% when you are in front of an audience, learn how to use a dramatic pause, clearly articulate your words and use vocal variety. No one wants to listen to a monotone speaker. If you are naturally soft spoken, use a microphone. If you yell or push your voice out of its natural range, you will eventually do damage to your vocal chords. Every time I listen to Hillary Clinton, it sounds as if she is yelling at the audience. She looks fine, her message is usually well rehearsed but her voice is irritating.

**11 The speaker has no idea how to use technology.**

PowerPoint is a fabulous tool which can enhance the entire experience for the audience when it is used correctly. Visual aids are tools to support the presentation; visual aids alone are **NOT** the presentation. PowerPoint is a powerful tool that has been widely abused in the corporate world. PowerPoint slides should be simple and easy to read. When you are saying something, the PowerPoint slide should complement what you are communicating. If the PowerPoint slide shows something different, the audience will be confused. Never, ever show a graphic that the audience can't see. When a speaker says, "I know you can't see it but...." it's like telling the audience that you really don't care about them. All you care about is showing your complicated visual. If the visual contains critical information, put it in a handout and say, "turn to page 9 in your handout, there is a graph of XYZ....." If you have a clicker in your hand as you speak, make sure you know how to use it. Practice using the clicker during the rehearsal to increase your comfort level.

So there you have it, to be an engaging speaker, you must:

- Customize the presentation for the audience.
- Keep current with your content.
- Structure the message and have a powerful closing.
- Pay attention to the audience
- Avoid using extra words and sounds such as um, ah, OK, and basically.
- Be visually engaging by maintaining eye contact, using hand gestures and moving around a bit.

- Use humor to engage the audience.
- Rehearse
- Use vocal variety.
- Use appropriate words.
- Use technology to enhance your presentation not to take away from it.

If you believe that you or your business partners are making any of the “11 Biggest Mistakes” in your presentations, call today for more information about presentation skills coaching.

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