

## What makes a Speaker Engaging? Regina Clark, CSP

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! First of all, the speaker or speech writer must research the content and structure the message. The message should have an opening statement that communicates the purpose for the presentation. Why should the audience listen? A carefully crafted presentation has key points which follow the opening statement and finally a strong closing. 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. Speakers that add extra words and sounds to their content - um, ah, ok, basically - are not as powerful as speakers that 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.

Having great content is not enough. A speaker must also have effective visual language and know how to connect with the audience. Keep in mind that the audience wants you to succeed. The audience wants to listen to an inspiring, thought provoking presenter with a powerful message. Connecting with the audience is not as hard as it sounds. 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 help calm your nerves. When you take the stage, always maintain eye contact with the audience, not with the screen behind you. Use some humor in your presentation, 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. Allow the audience to interact. Ask a thought provoking question or ask for a volunteer to help you with something. Call on audience members by name if you can. Never, ever read a speech! Create an outline, study the outline, and then speak naturally and from the heart.

Your visual language also includes your posture, hand gestures, appearance, facial expression and movement. A powerful presenter looks confident. If you need help building up your confidence before a presentation, try to visualize yourself delivering the

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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.

You also need to pay attention to your clothing. You don't need to have a thousand dollar suit but you need to be dressed appropriately and your clothing should be neat and clean. 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, twenty 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.

Finally, 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.

So there you have it, to be an engaging speaker, you must:  
Have great content,  
Select the right words,  
Connect with the audience,  
Pay attention to your visual language, and  
Maintain vocal variety.

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