

Unaccustomed as I am...

54 Though public speaking is notoriously more widely feared than death, and many business lawyers would far rather cling to their desk than a microphone, CHRIS SCOBLE shows how even unpromising presenters can boost their skills, personal satisfaction and commercial impact

Just think of those times you have witnessed someone making a speech or a presentation and became so engaged you did not even notice the time going by, you hung on their every word, there was only one point of focus for the entire room or audience, you laughed at all the right places, and felt disappointed when the speaker sat down. It can and does happen. Some speakers are that good.

Then again, think of those other times – sadly, I suspect, far more numerous – when someone stands up to speak and, no sooner have they opened their mouth (perhaps even before?) than you wish you could be somewhere else. Indeed, you wish the speaker was somewhere else. He starts by apologising for not being a very good speaker and then proceeds to tell a joke that is both lame and inappropriate. The talk drifts on with no discernible structure or message, the slides are in the wrong order and you can't read them anyway. Mercifully, the ordeal does end eventually – more than ten minutes over the allocated time.

Consider also the powerful message that our good presenter makes. He comes across as an expert in his field, an individual who is both efficient and warm – someone you would really want to do business with. This impression also passes by association to the organisation the speaker represents. What price does that have?

Compare this to those dreadful presenters who make you want to cringe. What does that say about them, their professional ability and the firm they represent?

Of course, we are talking about the extremes of performance. For that large percentage of people making present-

ations who do not find themselves at the pinnacle of excellence, the question is: 'What do I need to do to improve?' In fact, that is probably the very question that the really great presenters are constantly asking themselves!

After all, if you accept an invitation to speak, whether at a conference or a wedding, it is your duty to put on a good performance – yes, a performance is what it should be. Apart from wanting to make a good impression to reflect well on yourself and your company, you owe it to the audience that is turning up to listen to you. Imagine the opportunity cost of the time dedicated by an audience of 100-200 lawyers at a one-hour presentation. It is a very large figure indeed. If your presentation isn't worth that much, you need to think hard about making it better.

So, what are the things you need to consider when preparing a speech or a presentation? I focus on three questions. What is the *Result* or reaction you are trying to achieve? Do you understand your *Audience*? Do *You* recognise your own ability to deliver this presentation? Let's take a look at each of these in turn.

There are endless reasons why someone finds themselves standing in front of an expectant audience. Comics and after-dinner speakers do it for a living and their desired result is generally fairly straightforward – make them laugh. On the other hand, the aim of a tour guide is to provide clear information about a museum or a monument, while also conveying enthusiasm about the subject matter.

A great example of understanding the desired reaction is the sports coach addressing his team in the changing room before an important match. He may choose to go down a couple of

contrasting, yet complementary, routes: on the one hand, reminding his players about what they have done in training and how they need to execute those moves on the pitch; on the other, touching their emotions by stressing the importance of winning the game and how much it means to the fans. Or he may even choose a mix of these two strands; but the coach that relies solely on pumping up the team may miss important tactical considerations, while the more cerebral approach may fail to release the full energy of the team.

What result is a lawyer trying to achieve when standing up to speak at a conference? He or she also takes on a delicate balancing act: a whimsical approach with lots of jokes may grab attention in the short term, but will undermine credibility. An over-earnest presentation will eventually bore the attendees and give a sense the presenter is lacking in personality. A fine line indeed, and one you should only tread possessing a clear understanding of the audience.

The first thing you will need to understand about the audience is their motivation for attendance. Are they there under duress, sent to take up a place, with little or no real interest in the subject? Or perhaps, having paid for their own ticket, they will be hanging on your every word and looking for value for money from each and every speaker?

The second thing to consider is the audience's level of understanding of the subject matter you are presenting. If you assume too much, you risk losing parts of the audience. If you assume too little, some may be bored. Where your research tells you there is a mix, the trick is to build layers of sophistication into your talk that will cater for everyone.

Finally, you will often need to assess the audience's ability to understand the language you use. There will be many occasions when either the presenter, members of the audience, or both, are not operating in their first language. Non-native speakers will always be at

some disadvantage in their understanding. Speaking too quickly or with a strong regional accent can cause problems. The answer here is simple – make an effort to speak more slowly.

It is not only how you say things, but also the words you use that can cause problems. We are all regular users of idiom in our daily lives and, indeed, it is an important element in adding colour to our speech. For instance, for those presenting in English, phrasal verbs can be a real nightmare for non mother tongue speakers. Instead of saying ‘to pick up on something’, why not say ‘to notice’? Or ‘to attempt’ instead of ‘to have a go at’? Whichever language you are operating in, it takes a level of awareness, some practice and no little concentration to moderate your choice of words in this way, but your audience will certainly thank you for it.

Once you have a clear result in mind and an understanding of your audience, you need to ensure you understand your own capabilities. Firstly, ask yourself the same question you posed about your audience – what is your motivation for being there? Do not agree to speak at an event unless you feel sure you have something interesting to say. That does not mean you should not stretch yourself or that you should not feel a little nervous about it (you should), but do not attempt something that is clearly beyond your reach. You must believe in yourself, or else the audience will soon find you out.

The way you deliver is also very personal to you. Some are comfortable speaking without notes and walking around the stage, while others enjoy the safety of a lectern and a fully written text. A difference in style does not make one a ‘better’ speaker than the other; what is important is understanding what style suits you. So, if you are used to presenting from a written text, don’t throw all your support away for your next presentation; try speaking to slides or a few written notes first. Presenting can be hard enough without making it more difficult for yourself.

The use of humour is also an area where it is worth grasping how you best handle things. When helping people with their speeches, I often get asked to ‘give me a good joke to kick off’. There may be cases where a talk would benefit from beginning this way, but only once you have assessed the result you want to achieve as well as your audience. And, of course, your own ability to tell a joke. Never do anything simply because you saw someone else do it and thought it worked well. It may have been effective for them, but could be a disaster for you. Understand yourself.

Just a few words about the use of PowerPoint. Everyone knows the golden rules: never read from the slide, don’t fill up the screen with words, make sure any images you use match the tone of your presentation etc. Used correctly, PowerPoint can provide a wonderful support tool. Organising your thoughts into a series of slides with headings and bullet points gives both speaker and audience a clear and visual structure. Yet the point to remember is that the slides in themselves are not the presentation – this consists of the words and gestures of the presenter. Look at it this way: if for some reason your PowerPoint facility is not working, there should be no reason why you cannot go ahead and deliver your presentation anyway. It may be more challenging, but if you are properly prepared it can be very rewarding.

The final piece in the jigsaw of a great presentation, is the actual delivery. Unfortunately, any attempt to discuss delivery techniques in a written article are doomed to frustration. It’s a bit like giving printed instructions to someone on how to hit a top-spin backhand in tennis. Still, there are a few tips that are worth remembering: seem confident (even if you are not) – the audience has to listen to you, so they want you to succeed as well; never apologise – you will not get their sympathy, even if you are ‘unaccustomed to public speaking’; smile and engage the audience with your eyes – this will relax people and

open up two-way communication; don’t be afraid to use the powerful tool of silence – it may seem bizarre, but you can guarantee that the audience is listening when you are saying nothing!; change your voice speed and tone – this breaks up the rhythm of the presentation and keeps the audience on their toes; use strong gestures – fiddling shows a lack of confidence; let them know what is coming – set out a simple structure at the beginning to make them feel comfortable; use linking expressions – verbal communication naturally uses these much more than the written word, eg ‘So, moving on to the next point...’; summarise at the end – also a chance for you to focus on the result you are trying to achieve; use stories and anecdotes – this brings your message to life and adds an important personal touch; practise your opening and closing words – a hesitation at the beginning can throw you off track, and a stumble at the end can damage the good work you have done earlier

A useful tool is to practise your presentations in front of a live audience – be it friend, colleague or family member. Even an untrained eye will be able to tell you if you are not making sense!

Public speaking can be very rewarding, both professionally and personally. Some people are naturals, while others have to work harder to achieve success. But, with the right preparation and guidance, everyone can become effective in their own way. I have seen very reluctant and nervous presenters experience their first success and instantly express their enthusiasm for the next speaking opportunity. I have also seen experienced presenters live through moments of true exhilaration when they address an audience with silence and feel the total control and power of the moment.

Finally, one golden rule about speaking in public: ‘Make sure you have finished speaking before your audience has finished listening.’ If you prepare and practise (and follow this rule) they may even ask you back. ■