

Don't Read That Speech

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Imagine this. A CEO of a major corporation walks up to the podium. He welcomes the audience, takes a sip of water, clears his throat, opens his notebook and reads his speech word for word, line by line, page by page.

When people find out what I do, they tell me stories like this. And it's no wonder. Most people read their speeches because that is how it has always been done. Reading from a script, however, can have a negative impact on your audience. Comments I hear repeatedly include:

"Why did I take time out of my busy day to hear this guy?"

"How could this be a CEO? He doesn't seem to know what he's talking about."

"He did not care enough about the audience."

But, the end of the story is typically the same. When it's time for the CEO to conduct the question and answer session, he does great. He steps out from behind the paper and "talks" with the audience – letting his knowledge, expertise and credibility flow from question to question.

CEOs often find themselves handed a speech – written by an outside speech writer – and with little time to prepare, simply get up and read it. But, reading a speech can be a big credibility killer:

Reason #1: Reading does not allow for a natural delivery.

There is a difference between a "presented speech" and someone just talking to you. The latter is certainly more believable, interesting and sincere. It is difficult to read from a script and have it sound conversational. When reading, there is usually little eye contact, fewer gestures and facial expressions, and a more monotone voice. By the end, the speaker has failed to develop a rapport with the audience. They may walk away feeling bitter ("What a waste of time. I could have read this on my own.") and questioning your credibility and sincerity.

Reason #2: Relying on a written presentation provides a false sense of security.

Relying on a written presentation, or even detailed outline, often inhibits flexibility – which can be quite detrimental when caught off guard. For example, if you are participating in a panel discussion and time begins to run out before it is your turn to speak, it can be difficult to make adjustments at the last minute. Or, when impromptu questions interrupt or distract during a presentation, "speech readers" often find it difficult to regroup, find their place and continue.

Regardless of the CEO's intentions, perception becomes reality. If you read to, rather than talk with, your audience, chances are they will be disappointed. They will perceive that you did not take the time to prepare – your credibility may be hurt, your message will be lost, and the speech will not be effective.

How to Overcome Speech Reading

The foundation of successful communication is organization. If your presentation is clearly organized, you will develop a more natural delivery – and the rest will fall into place. Keep in mind, however, that spending a lot of time preparing does not mean you are well-prepared. In my experience, it's quite the contrary. CEOs can prepare for a speech in as little as 20 minutes – as long as they know how to do it.

The Five Steps

Preparing for a speech – whether a keynote address, panel discussion, interview with the media or presentation to the board of directors – can be done in five systematic steps. You already have the knowledge and expertise, these steps guarantee that your audience will know it.

Step 1: Presentation Analysis

Ask yourself a few key questions: Who am I talking to? How long do I have to talk? Why am I making this speech? This last question is, perhaps, the most important because it prompts you to pinpoint the goal of your presentation. Armed with this information, you can create a presentation that is targeted to the wants or needs of your audience and that will help you reach your goal. Specifically, the analysis will:

- Reduce preparation time by eliminating unnecessary or inappropriate information.
- Ensure that you use terminology appropriate for your audience's level of understanding.
- Help you anticipate questions or opposition from the audience.
- Allow you to take the same topic and quickly tailor it for a different audience.

Step 2: Funneling to Generate your Theme

Too often, people try to present too much information, hoping something will stick. But, "data dump" overwhelms and confuses the audience. To make the greatest impact, help the audience understand your message and give them only information they can readily process and retain. Generate a theme for the speech that is focused and to-the-point.

Step 3: Creating a Focus Statement

The Focus Statement keeps you focused while preparing your speech. It serves as a constant reminder of how your information will be defined, developed and included in your presentation. The focus statement is comprised of three elements:

Goal. Your goal will be the answer to the question: "What do I want the audience to know, feel or do?"

Theme. People speak either to inform or persuade their audience. Having determined which you intend to do, you will be better able to identify what you want to talk about.

Category. Generally, the theme of the presentation will determine your category: a word or phrase that tells you what your main points should be. The categories of information include steps, methods, types, benefits or reasons why. Determining the "category" before defining your main point helps to keep you on track while developing your overall presentation.

Step 4: Defining Main Points

It is helpful to categorize the information you are going to present under three main headings. This will help make sure the audience can easily follow your presentation and understand your message. It can also be advantageous to use visual aids to clarify, emphasize or add variety to the main points. It is easy, however, to use a visual as a crutch – simply reading what is on the screen or chart. People do it all the time. But, to enhance your delivery and make a more natural presentation, be sure to use the visuals as "aids" that help you make a more effective speech.

Step 5: Mapping out the Presentation

To help my clients enhance their delivery, I have created what I call a "Speaker's Map" – the crux of making a confident, smooth, natural presentation. Based on this map, I help speakers create a blueprint for their presentation that lays out all the components of their speech onto one sheet of paper. You can even use the Speaker's Map to signify when to refer to each visual. Following the map's route is easy and natural for both you and the audience. Key words and phrases are used to trigger your memory and keep you focused. When interrupted, you can quickly get back on track by simply glancing at your map.

By organizing your thoughts onto one well-constructed map, your delivery automatically becomes more conversational because you are not "reading" to the audience. With a natural delivery comes increased eye contact, more natural gesturing and increased audience attention.

Making it Work for You

While the need to prepare for a speech is common knowledge, it is not common practice. As CEOs strive to juggle their busy schedules, preparing for a presentation appears to be a lengthy and time-consuming task. This does not have to be the case. Following the five systematic steps I have laid out will expedite the preparation process and will guarantee that you:

- Develop a natural speaking style.
- Communicate a clear and concise message.
- Identify and reach your speaking goal.

As a CEO, you have the expertise and knowledge – this process just helps you communicate it most effectively to your audience.