

Public Speaking Skills Enhance Sales Ability

By Frank H. Leone

It was a harrowing experience. I waited all day to ask Cheryl Kinnear to my high school freshman prom, and when I finally saw her, the words wouldn't come out. Such was the plight of a chronic stutterer; although largely overcome, it remains somewhat of a challenge to this very day.

Fast forward to the early 1980s. I looked around and saw some enormously accomplished individuals with relatively modest intellect who seemed to have made their way because of their ability to speak in public. I vowed then to become an accomplished public speaker. Now I relish the opportunity each time I am in front of an audience.

I am convinced that a sales professional with proficiency in public speaking can greatly enhance their sales performance. There are several reasons why:

- A sales encounter is little more than speaking publicly to an audience of one or a small group. The same rhythm, hand gestures, eye contact, and volume control that are instrumental to public speaking are equally as important in a one-on-one or small group encounter.
- The art of preparing a public speech – an integrated beginning, middle and end - is also a well-advised approach to a sales encounter.
- The more one speaks publicly, the greater one's confidence as a communicator – a level of confidence that readily translates to success in sales.

This issue of the *Advisor* provides basic public speaking guidelines. The goal for the sales professional is to genuinely want to become a more effective public speaker. Unless that desire genuinely exists, it would be folly to incorporate public speaking into your career-building approach.

Public Speaking Guidelines

Here are some key ingredients to becoming a more proficient public speaker:

1. **Practice, Practice, Practice:** Simple as it is, the best way to become a public speaker is to do it over and over again. Seek out every opportunity before any type of group – regardless of whether the group is related to your profession - and work on your skills. Consider joining a Toastmasters International group in your community. They can be easily found on the Internet.

2. **Prepare, Prepare, Prepare:** The better you know the content of your talk, the more effort you can put into your delivery. Always take more time than seems necessary to refine and practice your talk. Whether you use notes or audiovisual aids (more on that later) you should know your material so well that you can give your talk without notes or audiovisuals.
3. **Structure Your Talk and Offer a Roadmap:** *Advisor* readers will recognize this sage advice from Mark Twain: "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, then tell 'em, then tell 'em what you told 'em." Let your audience know where you are taking them and offer a crisp summary at the end.
4. **Involve Your Audience:** At the outset of your presentation, always assume that your audience is tight, unmotivated, and lackadaisical. It is up to you to thaw this frost and get them involved. I believe that the audience needs to be aroused both physically and mentally. Accordingly, I like to get an audience to stand up, turn around or engage in some similar method to get their blood flowing. At the same time, I want to get them thinking about the subject at hand. With a larger audience, I might ask a simple question such as, "What's the greatest challenge you face in dealing with the workers' comp system?" Then I typically have audience members share their answers with their neighbors. Even in a one-on-one setting, a thought-provoking question about the company's experience can be used to break the ice.
5. **Be Yourself:** Many emerging public speakers seem to think that humor has to be part of any public talk. The problem is, if the speaker isn't funny, attempts at humor can fall flat. If you are a particularly funny person, by all means go for it. On the other hand, if you tend to be more of a no-nonsense type, do not try to be a comedian.
6. **Don't Force Your Movements:** Beware of the two extremes: the Wooden Indian and the Energizer Bunny. The former tends to hide behind a podium and maintain a rigid posture. No wonder their audience usually finds their presentation boring. The latter tends to race back and forth across the stage or within the audience. Unless you are a budding evangelist, your audience would likely find such a technique forced and distracting.

7. **Speak from the Heart:** I continue to be amazed by how many talks seem so canned and rehearsed as to come off as blatantly insincere. An effective public speaker/sales professional should always incorporate a “from the heart” segment in their talk or presentation. When using phrases such as, “Let me speak from the heart for a moment,” markedly slow down your pace and delivery. By routinely employing this technique, you are likely to find that you connect better with your audience and ensure that your most important points come through loud and clear.
8. **Minimize or Eliminate Audiovisuals:** Although I (begrudgingly) use PowerPoint for educational sessions, I almost always refrain from audiovisual support during major presentations. I recommend using a single index card that might list the major eight points of your talk, but even that becomes unnecessary after awhile. Why? Eye contact with an audience is crucial and the use of audiovisuals inevitably compromises such contact. Further, audiovisuals can be a distraction: You will be tempted to turn toward the screen, read words that are plainly seen by your audience, and periodically have to address errors in the audiovisuals or equipment. Far better to focus entirely on your talk and send a message to the audience that you truly care about them.
9. **Present a Challenge:** Make your audience think during your presentation. Ask questions that are associated with your next thought (e.g., “When was the last time that you...?” or “What do you think is the best solution to the problem I just described?”). If you simply lecture to your audience, you will quickly compromise their attention span.
9. **Show Sincere Appreciation:** No matter how small or large an audience, I am genuinely touched that each person found the time to hear me speak. Most speakers feel the same. Thus, it is appropriate to let your audience know just how appreciative you are at both the beginning and end of your presentation. Be certain that the appreciation is not just mentioned in passing (“I appreciate you being here”) but from the heart (“You know, I never take for granted that busy people such as yourselves can find the time to hear what I have to say; it means a great deal to me. Thank you.”).

Coming in September: Dealing with Competition.

In summary, if you make a commitment to becoming a seasoned public speaker, you will find that it enhances virtually every other aspect of your professional activity.

Public Speaking: A Primer

Here is a “starter kit” for a budding (or even self-professed) public speaker.

- **Re-arrange the room if necessary** – Do what you need to do to make the room comfortable for you. Re-arrange tables, put people closer to one another, narrow your sight line, etc.
- **Repeat questions and keep answer brief** – This gives you pause to think and clarifies things for your audience. And keep your answers brief; they may be of interest only to the person who asked the question.
- **Never turn your back on the audience** – This means turning around to look at a screen as well as walking into an audience to make a point.
- **State facts, show remedy, appeal for action** – Use this as the core of a presentation: 1) The issue or problem; 2) The solution; 3) Action steps.
- **Repeat key points** – Drive home your most important points by repeating them.
- **Don’t Fear Silence** – Nobody likes a motor mouth. Give audience members a chance to catch their breath. Often, silence is golden.
- **Change your pitch** – Record and listen to your next presentation. Are there periods in which you speak louder or softer than normal? There should be. Avoid droning.
- **Vary your pace** – Likewise, speed should be continuously adjusted throughout a presentation.
- **Pause before and after important points** – A pause reinforces what you said. What better time than before and following key points?
- **Act and look confident** – If you enjoy speaking and are well prepared, you should be confident. Makes certain that this confidence comes across in a professional manner.
- **Eat and drink sparingly before you speak** – At our 1988 national conference, I quickly downed a soft drink just before I spoke and got an overwhelming case of the hiccups. Big mistake.
- **End with an emotional story** – We live in a world in which good deeds vastly outnumber bad ones. Hook on to an emotional story and retell it.

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