

The Fear of Public Speaking is Overrated

by Ross Shafer

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He has logged more than 2,500 public appearances before corporate, sales and association groups and can show *YOU* how to dramatically improve your *PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS* and your *MEDIA RELATION APPEARANCES*.

THE POWER OF PUBLIC SPEAKING IS OBVIOUS.

There is no faster way to get ahead in your industry than to speak well in public. Look around. Great communicators are the ones who are getting ahead. They are the ones who get noticed and influence others to get use their ideas. Speaking with confidence in front of four people – or four hundred is an impressive leadership skill. You will be respected and admired. And, *YOU* can learn how to do it more easily than you thought. Some people, myself included, make a handsome living speaking professionally. But more importantly, I started right where you are!

The following is a quick sampler. These are tested trade secrets you can use throughout your life to get more respect for your opinions, make more money, and persuade other people.

STAGE FRIGHT: WHY DO WE GET IT?

There are many reasons we are afraid of speaking in public. It is the ultimate exposure of our personalities. We fear we'll be embarrassed in front of colleagues and/ or friends. We fear they will think less of us. So, it's quite natural to get anxious. Our hearts pound. Our voices quake. Maybe we perspire more than usual. These are common physiological reactions brought on as our bodies prepare to fight or flight. In fact, sometimes we'd rather call in sick (take flight) than have to face an audience of two. In fact, when I refer to "the audience" I mean anyone you're talking to is your audience.

STAGE FRIGHT HAPPENS TO EVERYONE...*EVEN THE PROFESSIONALS*.

The good news for you is that every entertainer; politician and trial lawyer that I know still feels that same anxiety; almost every time they have to address a group. The difference is this. They've learned some simple tricks to use that "queasy nervous" feeling to their advantage. (See the "Clouds" technique coming up)

HOW CAN ANXIETY BE GOOD?

It's good to feel a little tension. Those butterflies heighten your awareness to make you a much better public speaker. Plus, the most incredible revelation is this: That heart pounding, voice quivering, perspiration you feel is 99.9% *INVISIBLE* to your audience. I'll repeat that. What you feel is completely *INVISIBLE* to your audience. *You* feel

it...but *they* can't see it! I've seen this with more than a thousand talk show guests I've interviewed. Test it yourself. Listen to talk radio sometime. When you hear a caller say, "I'm a first-time caller... pardon me, I'm a little nervous." Do they sound nervous to you? No! We can't hear their voices shake, can we? Trust me. Your audience doesn't have any idea what you're feeling inside.

"THEY" WANT YOU TO SUCCEED.

We also get nervous because we have the mistaken impression the "audience" will hate us if we make a mistake. We think the audience is waiting to make fun of us...waiting for us to fail. Unfortunately, that is a holdover emotion from our early school days. When you were a child, answering a question incorrectly in public met with embarrassment and cat calls from the rest of the class. But we aren't children anymore. You are an adult and your audience wants you to succeed. Yes. They know it's uncomfortable and are very grateful THEY aren't you right now!

WHAT TRICKS or SECRETS CAN HELP?

Most people hate the anticipation of being called on to speak. Many times, the anticipation usually starts with the inner question, "Gulp. What am I going to say"? The first rule of speaking is simple; PREPARATION. If you know what you are going to say and are prepared to say it, you'll be far less nervous.

PREPARATION "TRICKS"

Plan and Rehearse Your First Six Words. Even if all you have to say is, "Hello, my name is _____. I am from _____." Most people say they are OK once they get started speaking. It's the "getting started" part that is difficult. Then, the next big hurdle is knowing how to stop. So, **Rehearse Your Closing Remarks.** I'll have more specifics on this later. But first, let's focus on getting started.

OPENING REMARKS.

These comments should endeavor to "connect" with your audience. Don't launch blindly into your opinion or topic without first giving them a verbal handshake. Say Hello. Refer to the bad chicken dinner. Comment on the weather. Acknowledge your host or anything else to break the ice and let the audience get to know you. They won't pay attention to you unless they get to meet you visually and verbally first. Take those 10-15 seconds to "say Hello" to your audience. Then, memorize how you will do it...rehearse what words you will say. Practiced Connecting Remarks make all the difference in how receptive people are to listening to you.

STILL NERVOUS? USE THE "CLOUDS" TECHNIQUE.

Most Speaking Professionals use this one. Before you speak, imagine that your mind is totally empty except for a vast blue sky. Now, imagine a few white, fluffy clouds drifting through your head. Then, picture a small airplane flying through the clouds; pulling a banner. The banner has your first six words written on it. Those six words are all you

have to remember, for now. This technique isolates your opening remarks and will guarantee to lower your heart rate.

A PROPER INTRODUCTION IS CRITICAL:

An absolute must! People need a reason and a frame of reference to be interested in you. Think about when you meet people at a party. “This is Bob. He is Lorraine’s husband.” The introduction gives your “audience” (1) FRAME OF REFERENCE and (2) A REASON to listen to you. Most professional speakers take a 3X5 card with them. The card contains a short written introduction of how the speaker would like to be introduced. It might include credentials, career highlights, accomplishments, geography etc. Have someone read it. Believe me, it sets the stage.

EXAMPLE: “Bob Smith is here from Atlanta to tell us how he has increased production in his division by 35%.” Sometimes, you’ll have to introduce yourself. Do it this way.

SOMETIMES YOU WILL HAVE TO INTRODUCE YOURSELF. DO IT THIS WAY.

EXAMPLE: “Hello, I’m Bob Smith. I’m from Atlanta and your (Boss, Supervisor, Co-workers...whomever) thought it would be helpful if I talked to you about how we increased production 35%.”

Now, the audience has a reason to listen. You’re about to tell them something of interest to THEM. You aren’t going to waste their time if you have something valuable for your audience. Face it, everybody is interested in information that is about him/her self.

THE AUDIENCE IS THINKING “WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?”

In keeping with the theme of the last paragraph, decide to **talk about things that address the specific concerns of your audience.** Don’t waste their time or talk too long about things that don’t interest them. The audience is thinking, “Why should I listen to this? What’s in this for me”? If you can keep that question in mind and give the group something they can use today, you’ll be successful.

WHAT DO I TALK ABOUT?

You’ll be just fine if you stick to a subject you know inside and out. That way you won’t be hamstrung by your written notes and can speak fluently from your experience. If you are asked a question and don’t know the answer, don’t fake it. Admit that you don’t know - but will find out. Then, move on.

SPEAK WITH PASSION & ENTHUSIASM.

Great communicators speak from their heart...into someone else’s. If you’re timid, you won’t be very convincing. However, if you are excited about your subject, you can get other people to help you move mountains. Conversely, if you are dull and boring you won’t be very effective. Always ask yourself “Am I boring”? “If I was in the audience would I pay attention to this?”

DON'T GO INTO OVERTIME.

We all live by schedules. Nobody likes to feel rushed to his or her next appointment or assignment. So, if your audience is checking his/her watches...you should wrap it up.

ELIMINATE DISTRACTIONS WHEN YOU CAN.

Be aware of possible distractions. It is hard enough to capture someone's attention without having to compete with extra noise, bright sunlight, open bars, and food service. When you can, close doors, curtains, and windows. Ask that you speak AFTER the food has been cleared. Have them close the bar while you speak. It's very hard to win against clanking dishes and glassware.

STANDING VS. SITTING?

Stand whenever possible. It gives you a bigger, more powerful presence; even in the boardroom. Sitting equalizes people. You don't want equal. You want their attention. Make them look up to you; metaphorically and physically. If you can also walk and talk, you'll keep the audience guessing your next move. Suspense always staves off the audience boredom factor.

WHAT DO I DO WITH MY HANDS?

Never put them in your pockets. Don't clasp them behind your back. Keep them to your side or use them to express yourself (like you do when you're talking to your best friend). A good exercise is to practice speaking with two heavy books in each hand. You'll notice how often you gesture by how often you raise the heavy books, naturally. It's good to use your hands! If you are uncomfortable with your hands by your side, lightly pinch your thumb and middle finger together. The pressure will relax you and it will look natural.

NOTE: In the Jennifer Lopez/Ralph Fiennes movie, "Maid In Manhattan" politician, Ralph, hid a paper clip in his hand when he spoke to ward off nervousness. Try it. If it works, you don't have to see the movie for the tip.

TALK A LITTLE FASTER.

Talk slightly faster than normal. Speaking quicker holds an audience's attention. It sounds like you have more energy. We normally speak at 140 words per minute. TV broadcasters speak at 190 words per minute. Speed it up. Since we can read at 400+ words per minute, don't worry about the audience trying to keep up with you. As you stay interesting, they'll keep up.

POWER POINT, CHARTS, and GRAPHS?

Most of the time charts bore people. Use them only when you absolutely have to. Too many people try to load up the slide with text the audience has no way of possibly reading. If you must use PowerPoint, limit the text to 6 lines of text...with 6 words in each line. Never read the slides. Your audience can do that without you. Better yet, use large compelling images or video clips to tell your story. Then, stand next to your slides so that

you give the impression you are participating in the presentation. Also, if you must use them, make sure they are good ones. "Good" mean that they live up to the quality of what you have to say. Cheap charts cheapen you.

BE CAREFUL WHEN USING STATISTICS

Giving an audience exact percentages (%'s) is too taxing on them. Round off. Instead of 66%...say, "two thirds". Say "nearly half" instead of 47%. That gives the audience a quick reference point with which to identify.

WHAT ABOUT NOTE CARDS?

Notes are fine. But NEVER READ from 3X5 cards. Reading a speech doesn't inspire confidence. If you read from cards, the audience might as well be hearing this talk on the radio. Use cards for reference only. And, use the 6X6 rule. This means that each card should only have six lines with six words per line on it. The words should only be used to "prompt" you on your subject. (This same rule applies for slides, overhead projections and other "visual assists").

Notes should only be used as a safety net - or road map in case you get lost. Also, the lettering should be large enough so you can read it from 18 inches; since that is about the distance from a usual podium or desk to your eyes. As you may have experienced, typewritten notes are practically worthless. Here is another secret. If you are using a podium, pre-place your note cards so that you can walk up without them. It's very inspiring to an audience to think you don't appear to need a security blanket.

STRUCTURING YOUR "ACT"

Entertainers have a simple formula for structuring their "acts." They start very strong..but not as strong as they end. That means they open with their 2nd best material. Then, they finish even stronger by closing with their #1 material. Closing BIG will hopefully elicit the encore. Getting an encore leaves an indelible impression on an audience. It means they want more from you. So everything you do along the way is building toward the Big Finish. If there is a weak song or a weak joke, it should be buried in the middle of the act.

You can do the same thing with your speaking presentation.

For example, if I had a speech where I wanted to make (10) premise points, I would assign a value of 1-10 to each point; #10 being my strongest point and material - material I know will move a audience. #1 being my weakest material - but still necessary. Now, I would arrange my material in order; strong to weak. Finally, for maximum audience impact and response I would talk about them in the following "stacking order:"

BEST "STACKING ORDER" TO IMPRESS THE AUDIENCE

#9 = Start w/2nd strongest material. Get their respect and attention immediately.

#7

#5

#3

#1 = Weakest material goes here. If it bombs, I still have time to

save the show.

#4

#6

#8

#10 = Strongest material is delivered last to leave the audience with the best impression.

Think about what you have to say and create a “stacking order” for each thought, each premise, each story, or each teaching point. Start strong and build your talk to a big finish. CAVEAT: You will have tendency to stack your material in a linear fashion. That works for a book outline but not for a speech. A speech is a LIVE presentation; not a book on tape.

HOW DO YOU SMOOTHLY SEGUE BETWEEN SEGMENTS OR TOPICS?

The best way to move smoothly from one topic to another is to use the “Seamless Segue.”

The seamless segue connects by combining an element from Topic #1 and Topic #2. The connecting segue words “link” the two topics. The audience doesn’t hear it and assumes you are making a smooth transition; when in fact you are carefully orchestrating the transition.

EXAMPLE: Let’s say you wanted to address the sales team on two subjects; Customer Service and your New Product Line. Here’s how to weave the two topics together seamlessly.

TOPIC #1: CUSTOMER SERVICE:

“You all know the importance of Zero Defects Customer Service. You live it. You breathe it. You know the customer can find these products elsewhere...sometimes at a better price. But, **superior service will keep them coming back...**

SEGUE WORDS:

...And if we can get the customer to come back, we’ll have a better chance to show them our new products...

TOPIC #2: NEW PRODUCTS:

...And what a great new line of products we have to show them!
This year we can finally compete with the big package stores...”

Learning how to use seamless segues gives your message a nice flow. Speakers who jump around from topic to topic (without a plan) don’t inspire as much confidence as speakers who can (1) Organize their thoughts and (2) Smoothly execute those thoughts so a listener can easily make the connections.

STORIES LEAVE A HUGE IMPRESSION ON PEOPLE.

Whenever you can use a personal story to accentuate your point, do it. Everyday stories can bring complicated thoughts and topics down to earth. They put flesh and bone on a skeleton. Let’s say you are talking about cutting expenses; don’t

say, “We must cut expenses, starting today!” Instead, relate the cost cutting to a specific successful example everyone can relate to.

EXAMPLE: “One year ago, XYZ Organization **was in the same spot we’re in now**. They were strapped for cash and didn’t know what to do. All they did was trim A, B, & C and now they are having their best year ever. **We only have to make half the cuts they did** to accomplish the same thing in four months.”

The same rule applies to filling in the details of your plan. Don’t just say, “I have a dog”. If you leave it up them, they’ll concoct their own vision of your dog (all different) and possibly miss your point. It’s better to give people a specific frame of reference. Instead, say, “I have a little black and white Jack Russell terrier.”

Now, everyone has the same important frame of reference.

HOW DO YOU HOLD THE AUDIENCE’S ATTENTION?

Even the best public speakers can “lose” a tired audience. So, here are some tricks to hold their attention.

- 1) Personalize. Direct your comments to specific members of the audience. Use their names. “I was talking to Heather and she told me...”
- 2) Vary your voice. Talk fast...then slow down...raise it a little...then whisper. It forces them to pay attention and the variance keeps them from getting bored with the same rhythm.
- 3) Stop and stare for three seconds as if you’re thinking. The silence will make them perk up. It’s called the “dramatic pause.”
- 4) Ask for volunteers to answer a question or take a poll. “How many of you have experienced _____.” “Good. Would you mind telling us what happened?”

Taking the attention away from yourself changes the pace and keeps you interesting.

- 5) Vary your physical stance. Move forward...then move to the right and left. Make yourself a moving target they have to watch.

SHOULD YOU USE HUMOR & DRAMA?

Yes! Yes! Yes! Jokes and funny lines are fantastic and if done well are very endearing to a group. But, you should follow these guidelines. Humor that is self-deprecating (jokes on yourself) are *always* winners. Sarcasm and satire are tougher forms of humor to master. Unless you’re good at it, you could easily offend someone. Also, jokes that are racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, anti-gay, or otherwise offend some other religion, creed, or ethnic groups are totally unacceptable. Don’t even think about using them!

Using a dramatic or funny story to emphasize a point is always welcome. Stories are easy for both you and the audience to remember. They also galvanize your point in a way no chart or graph can ever achieve. Even better, if you are good at

accents, impressions or dialects, use them! Again...see the guidelines above about taste.

WHAT ABOUT TAKING QUESTIONS FROM THE GROUP?

Great idea if you can answer anything and everything about your subject. But, what if you ask, "Are there any questions?" ...and nobody responds?! Embarrassing, isn't it? Disaster if you planned to end your talk with questions. A silent audience, at this point, NOT because they don't have questions but because (1) People don't like to speak in public...even to ask a question...and (2) Nobody wants to be the first to raise their hand...in case you already answered their question (in your talk) and *they* weren't paying attention.

THE BEST WAY TO HANDLE QUESTIONS IS TO...

Prime the pump. In other words, if you ask for questions and nobody responds, start the questions yourself. "One of the first questions people ask is..." Then say, "Are there any other questions?" See what you did? You fooled the audience into thinking a question has already been asked. Whoever raises their hand next is no longer first!

Questions will flow like a river.

However, there is one very important rule here. **NEVER END YOUR TALK WITH A QUESTION.** You have no control over how good the question will be or how compelling and powerful your answer will be. And, you certainly don't want your talk to just dribble out with a weak ..."Uh, if there are no more questions...I guess I'll go...Good bye..."

OK, after you have answered the last audience question, go right into your *Prepared Closing Remarks* to guarantee you will leave them with your most important point.

CLOSING REMARKS.

Pick up the pace for your closing. Talk a little faster. Be more animated if you can. Tell a closing story. Tell a closing joke. Write a quotable ending. You can find them in bookstores under "Great Quotes" or you can write your own. During the O.J. Simpson trial, attorney Johnny Cochran said. (sic) "If the gloves don't fit, you must acquit". Attorney Christopher Darden countered with (sic) "The defense is giving you smoke and mirrors. Don't choke on the smoke." Obviously, both men carefully concocted their closing remarks to make the most memorable impact on the audience (in this case, Jury).

However you close, leave them with something valuable and important to **THEM**. Use the word **YOU** often. **THANK THEM** for their time. **ENCOURAGE THEM TO TALK TO YOU** afterwards if they have more questions.

HOW FAST WILL YOUR SPEAKING SKILLS IMPROVE?

Immediately! Most of these trade secrets can be implemented the next time you have to speak. And, you will make quantum leaps each time you speak. If you want to accelerate the learning curve, use a small tape recorder and listen to

yourself afterward. How did you sound? Did you say a lot of “uh’s”? Did you talk too slow? Just edit out the slow parts. Review the stacking order of your topics (1-10 technique). Could they be re-ordered? Did I forget to look around for distractions? Could I have varied my visual aids? Did I read my speech? *And so on.....*

WHAT ABOUT AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION?

Some public speakers hand out evaluation forms to the audience. They have questions like:

- 1) Was this topic useful?
- 2) Was the material easy to understand?
- 3) What would you like to have heard but didn't?
- 4) What did you think of the speaker's skills?
- 5) ...and you make up your own

THE SECRET EVALUATION.

Many presenters do something far less formal. After they finish speaking they go into the bathroom and hide in a stall. Behind closed doors people will file in and talk about you in the bathroom. You'll hear all of the un-edited impressions. It is definitely low tech but very helpful.

A QUICK CHECKLIST.

Now you have some of the best trade secrets to becoming more comfortable in front of groups. Review this list anytime you think you may be put on the spot to speak.

- 1) **Clear your mind and only concentrate on your first (6) words.**
- 2) **Insist on a proper introduction...even if you have to do it yourself.**
- 3) **If you can, eliminate any distractions like open doors, windows etc.**
- 4) **Organize your thoughts in order of strength. Start strong. Finish stronger.**
- 5) **Use “stories” to galvanize your point.**
- 6) **Personalize with names whenever possible.**

- 7) **Be ready to change pace if you feel “you’re losing them”.**
- 8) **Control the Questions and NEVER end with one.**
- 9) **Make your Closing Remarks “quotable”.**
- 10) **Evaluate yourself to improve.**

Ross Shafer is a 6-Time Emmy Award winning comedian/writer who is also one of the most highly sought after keynote speakers in America. He is the author of "Nobody Moved Your Cheese" "The Customer Shouts Back" "Customer Empathy" and "Are You Relevant?"

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