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THE FIVE DEADLIEST SINS IN SPEECHMAKING

I often tell clients there are Five Key Ingredients in making a great speech:

1. Remember Your Audience
2. Keep It Short And To The Point
3. Rely On Words, Not Images
4. Always Make Your Point
5. Work Fast, Change Speeds, Throw Strikes

These elements all are designed to keep the speaker focused on his or her mission, which is to leave the audience with a compelling message and call to action.

These five ingredients will to a long way to making your next speech truly memorable and well-received. But it also is important for you to avoid what I call the Five Deadliest Sins.

Sin # 1: What's Your Point?

I love to tell the story of an insurance executive who once tried to impart to employees his “dirty dozen” – 13 key priorities for the year ahead. Which means he had none. His audience left wondering, “What was his point?”

I know it's tempting to want to tell everyone all the important issues on which you may be working. Or to demonstrate your knowledge and expertise across a broad range of subjects. The mere fact that you have been invited to speak helps establish your *bona fides*. So get right to the subject at hand.

Keep in mind the audience really is looking for only one or two key points. Strike that balance between audience expectation and what you want to emphasize.

If you insist on presenting your “dirty dozen,” you'll lose the audience in a heartbeat.

Sin # 2: I-Me-Mine

How many times have you heard a speech in which the presenter talks as if he were the only one involved in running the show? A little ego is fine, but you should keep it in check when speaking. Show a little humility and deference to your team and employees and you will win over an audience.

The old adage, “There’s no ‘I’ in team,” certainly holds true here. As a CEO or senior executive, you don’t want to give the impression that your company is a one-man show. To the contrary, you should go out of your way to point out the depth of talent in your company or organization.

Now you’re probably saying, “Wait a minute. What about Donald Trump? He certainly has been successful blowing his own horn.”

True. But arrogance is a big part of his shtick. He has created a bigger-than-life persona that depends in large measure on bluster. Is that really the image you want to create for yourself? For every Trump that succeeds, there are hundreds of blowhards that don’t.

The bottom line is that you have to stay true to your own personality. Most people can spot a phony and most people really don’t warm up to self-centered executives.

At a large insurance company where I once worked, we got a new CEO who thought the “I-me-mine” approach would work. He held a series of employee meetings, getting together with about 30 or 40 employees at a time for a q & a session. He would open each one with this remark: “Well, there’s one of me and all of you. I guess it’s a fair fight.” That was a real crowd pleaser. He’d lost his audience before he even got started on his message.

Having spent more than a decade in the hotel business, I worked with several CEOs who had a much more down-to-earth approach, more team-oriented and more humble. It’s no surprise that these companies were and are enormously successful, both with customers and Wall Street.

Sin #3: MEGO (My Eyes Glaze Over)

How many speeches have you heard and seen that were jammed with information and graphics that left you near comatose? Often, when I’m in an audience, I’ll survey the room to see how the crowd is reacting, or if they’re reacting at all.

For those speeches laden with slides and data, I see the MEGO phenomenon – My Eyes Glaze Over. People drift off into another place as they are bombarded with information that does not resonate or inspire them. They shuffle in their seats, thumb through their programs or nod off to sleep.

At a company that annually held a large convention, I counseled senior executives to trim back on their speeches that at times took on lives of their own.

One executive insisted on including every accomplishment for his organization in mind-numbing detail. And in the process, he proceeded to pat himself on the back so eagerly that I determined he had to be double-jointed not to dislocate his shoulder.

When asked by a colleague about the speech, I noted it was “twenty pounds of crap crammed into a ten-pound sack.” Not terribly diplomatic, but true.

Sure enough, when it came to the delivery, you could see the audience drift in and out. Moral of the story? This speaker failed to achieve that critical balance between audience expectation and the message he wanted to deliver. He talked too long (did not work fast), delivered his message in a shotgun fashion (did not change speeds) and did not focus his message on the most critical points (never got one over the plate).

Sin #4: I Get No Respect

The worst temptation any speaker faces is to include humor in his or her remarks. Unless you have some natural comic ability and timing, **do not tell jokes**. Like Rodney Dangerfield, you'll get no respect. Unlike Rodney, you probably won't get much of a laugh.

The speakers who can best include humor in their presentations are those who are well-experienced in speaking, who have a sense of timing and delivery. If you are new to the speaking circuit, and not yet comfortable with getting in front of an audience, I suggest you forego the humor and focus on the message you want to deliver.

Not only do some speakers feel compelled to include a joke or two, they sometimes venture into the double-entendre or off-color territory that is not suitable for any audience other than a country club locker room.

This really compounds the sin of trying to be a comedian. There is no good reason to risk offending people in your audience or making them uncomfortable with the subject matter.

If you think you can carry off a little humor, it's best to try something that is self-deprecating and connected to the audience and occasion at hand. Just telling a joke out of the blue because you just heard it and it made you laugh is not a great idea.

Sin #5: Viva Fidel!

The worst sin any speaker can commit is not knowing when to say thank you and leave. Fidel Castro can drone on and on for three or four hours because he really **does** have a captive audience. You don't. Yours can always vote with their feet.

In business, think how many times you tell a potential or existing customer, "thank you for your time." You also should thank your audience for their time and not overstay your welcome.

Remember that a speech is an opportunity – an opportunity to inform, to inspire, to impress and to motivate people into action. If you include the Five Key Ingredients and avoid the Five Deadliest Sins, chances are you'll come through a winner.

Need help with your next speech? Let J. C. Hawkins create a compelling, memorable script for you. Contact him today at jch@jchawkinsassociates.com or (904) 461-3903.

*For more information on *The Five Key Ingredients For A Great Speech*, visit our Web site at www.jchawkinsassociates.com.*

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