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FIVE KEY INGREDIENTS FOR A GREAT SPEECH

For most people, the thought of making a speech sends a real chill down their spine. For senior executives, speechmaking is a **must** for effective leadership. Even if you don't relish the thought of getting up in front of an audience, there are a few essential rules to follow to make sure you make the most of your opportunity.

Here are the Five Key Ingredients to making a great speech.

First, **Remember Your Audience**. The people you are speaking to have come with a set of expectations. If you don't meet them, you are doomed to fail.

Most audiences know well in advance what the speaker is going to talk about. They may have come to the event looking for some particular information that will inform and even inspire them. Or they may be there to learn news, either good or bad, that will impact them directly.

That being said, you also have to make sure that you tell them something they maybe didn't expect. Have an element of positive surprise that will make them leave with the feeling that listening to you was time well spent.

You undoubtedly have key points you want to make as well, so the first element of a great speech is striking the right balance between meeting your audience's expectations and making sure that you get your points across as well.

Second, Keep It Short And To The Point. You may be invited to speak for 45 minutes or even an hour. Don't! You can always use the remainder of allotted time for a question and answer session, if appropriate.

Most audiences can handle a 15 or even 20-minute speech. But after that, their attention will start to fade, even if you are a real spellbinder. Former president Bill Clinton is a very effective presenter. But how many of his speeches are memorable? Most are far too long, filled with too many competing issues and the lack of a clear message.

In contrast, President George W. Bush's second Inaugural address, which lasted about 12 minutes, was highly effective and definitely memorable as he laid out a message of freedom and human liberty that resounded around the world. By having a central theme, he set the tone for his second Administration.

In fact, the most revered speech in American history, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, lasted just two or three minutes. No one has provided a more powerful impact in less time in our history.

We live in an age of information bombardment, with information being dished out in shorter and shorter bites. Keep that in mind as you craft your remarks.

Some years ago I worked with a senior insurance executive on an employee presentation regarding the company strategy for the year. He wanted to present his “dirty dozen” key initiatives for the year. Yes, 13 of them.

As politely as possible, I told him that employees would find it confusing. After all, if they have 13 key initiatives to focus on, how do they even get started? If the 13 are equally important, then none of them are really a priority. I recommended that he hone in on the three or four that mattered most.

Like many senior executives who are in love with their own ideas, he declined my sage advice and delivered a 45-minute harangue that left most people shaking their heads.

As a result, a golden opportunity to engage and inspire employees was lost.

Third, Rely On Words, Not Images. Most senior executives love Powerpoint presentations, with slide after slide to back up their remarks. Unfortunately, people in the audience wind up focusing on the images, not listening to the words.

As I always say, words matter. And the right words, delivered effectively, convey a stronger image than most graphics. How many times have you gone to a speech or presentation and found the slides repeating the words of the speaker? Yes, a little emphasis is fine if used selectively. But to reproduce much of the speech in slides is distracting and vaguely insulting to the audience.

Some of the best speeches I’ve heard had no graphics at all. Not even a title slide. Others relied on a handful of selective graphics to help underscore key points. My advice for a 20-minute presentation? Have no more than two or three graphics and make sure they have a big impact.

Fourth, Always Make Your Point. Every speech is an opportunity to tell people something you think they need to know, to enlighten them on a key issue or to sell them on a key idea or a product. Most speeches I write include a brief opening that tells the audience what will be discussed and wind up with a reiteration of the key points in the speech. A little repetition and emphasis is fine to sell your point and make sure it gets across.

The most effective speeches include a “call to action” for the audience. You want to inspire your audience to get engaged and involved, to see what role they play in helping you achieve a goal or vision. You want them to leave with a compelling message on their minds, a clear sense of what they can do to further your cause.

Your call to action may be to increase sales, improve customer service or advance a political issue. But it should be crystal clear to your audience when they leave that you had something worthwhile to say.

Fifth, Work Fast, Change Speeds, Throw Strikes. Ray Miller, the famous baseball pitching coach, has relied on this advice for pitchers for decades: Work Fast, Change Speeds, Throw Strikes.

The same advice works well for speakers. Deliver your speech in a timely fashion – keep it short, clear and concise. Vary your tempo with the right amount of pauses and shifts in direction so that the audience can catch a breath along with you. And zero in and get your point across – throw that strike right over the plate.

Remember that like a pitcher, a speaker is in charge of the presentation. You control the pace, the delivery and the message. Use that to your advantage.

These five ingredients will to a long way to making your next speech truly memorable and well-received.

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.

Look for Part II of J. C. Hawkins' advice on speechmaking – The Five Deadliest Sins. Visit our Web site at www.jchawkinsassociates.com.

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