Making Public Speaking Fun

Brian H. Ashe, CLU

Since we’re here in Philadelphia, where the movie Rocky was made, I thought you would enjoy the Rocky theme music as you walked in. Now I’m not going to yell out “Adrian!” like Sylvester Stallone did in the movie, but “walk in music” or any music at all may be just one consideration for the mood, the environment you’re trying to create for your message. And that’s what we’re going to spend some time on today: setting the stage, analyzing and designing, getting a feel for context, and being aware of body language in designing and performing a successful presentation. Hopefully, some of the suggestions will help take some stress out of the process and actually make it fun! Because if there’s anything we do a lot of in our business, it’s make presentations.

If you read my biographical information, one of the first things you will know is that I am neither a professional speaker nor a speech coach. Why does no one look surprised? In fact, when MDRT asked me to do a session on becoming a better presenter, of course I was honored. But then I thought, is this just because they want someone who’s the perfect “bad example”? You know, be careful, or this could happen to you!

Then I thought that maybe the program committee thought, he has been speaking so long on industry issues and making sales presentations, he has probably made just about every mistake there is. Maybe, just maybe, he may have actually learned something. I’m going with that one!

There are lots of opportunities for us to make presentations, from an elevator speech to a corporate boardroom—to the MDRT Main Platform. No matter what the venue, we know they all have some common elements, and in the time we have together, I’ll give you my take on what I think works—and what may not. For the things that actually do work, I owe a lot to real speech coaches like Burt Decker and Terri Sjodin, great teachers who have worked with MDRT committee members.

First, let’s start with something as simple as meeting people for the first time and shaking hands—the first opportunity we have to make an impression and the first chance to maybe get a shot at making a sales presentation or being asked to speak. Believe it or not, those first few seconds of meeting—that’s a presentation—and how you do it makes a difference.

Here’s what the experts have taught me. Take the hand of people you are meeting for the first time, and hold it long enough for you to determine the color of the their eyes. And then introduce yourself this way: Say your name with a pause between your first name and last name—like this: Brian . . . Ashe—kind of like Sean Connery did with “Bond, James Bond” in the 007 movies. You want to take enough time to make a positive connection with them. Then pay attention to their name, because, when you repeat it, there’s nothing sweeter for most people than the sound of their own name. If you want them to feel even more in control, gently turn their hand to the top. That action kind of subliminally gives them power! Then, of course, be sure to let go!

Let’s say we’ve moved past the handshake introduction, and you’ve actually been asked to speak. First—and we probably all remember this from school—when you are putting comments together, start with an outline. I don’t care if you’re just offering a three-line invocation or grace before a meal. We need to know what we’re going to say and in what order it will be said. Someone once said, “Ad-libbing is

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for amateurs,” and that’s true even on “little” presentations. Outlines work. They’re a map that helps us get from one point to another.

One big opportunity for little presentations is elevator speeches because they offer us a brief window to make an impression strong enough for people to want to know more about us. Let’s look at a great elevator presentation—and the presenter wasn’t even human. [video clip]

Wasn’t that great? If you want to learn more about elevator presentations, Terri Sjodin has written a great book called Small Message, Big Impact. In it, she notes three things that are essential to a good elevator speech: define your intention, avoid data dumps, and, when making your case, be creative and authentic—all in three minutes or less.

Another tip for making a good elevator speech is made up of elements I call “The Magnificent Seven”: Be clear, concise, consistent, compelling, authentic, passionate, and humble—humble probably being the most important because we don’t want to turn people off.

The speech could be a statement or it could be a question. Here are a couple of examples, and I bet they take less than 15 seconds:

**Statement:** What do you do for a living, Frank? Elevator speech: “We help families accumulate and distribute wealth more efficiently.”

**Question:** What does your firm do, Mary? “Well, you know how people can get confused about how to maximize their retirement income safely when combining it with social security benefits?” [The client presumably says yes.] Well, we help them with that.

What if I’m sitting across from a client or presenting to several people at once? Then my outline morphs into an agenda. It may look something like this. [visual] Mine usually has the name of the client, the date and place where we are meeting, and several bullet points for what we are going to discuss. And mine usually ends with a point that says “timetable for action” because I want to know what’s going to happen when we’re done with the presentation. I use an agenda almost every time I make a presentation to a client or prospective client.

You know, the word **agenda** comes from the same Latin word as **agent**, meaning “power”—and for good reason. The agenda puts us in the driver’s seat. It allows us to control the interview and move in an organized fashion to the conclusion we desire. A suggestion from the school of hard knocks—never, never, never make a really significant presentation without an agenda for all participants to follow.

I think your results will increase geometrically. Let’s take a look at a video that’s kind of a “grainy” reminder of what can go wrong when you don’t use an agenda, when you haven’t gotten the prospective client to buy in from the beginning. [video clip]

If we’re making a presentation to a large group of people, we may not have the agenda right out front for everyone, but it should still be in our noggin—the internal map for us—the pathway that takes us from the beginning of our comments to the end.

Speaking of pathways, I have always been a fan of symmetry—a certain harmony between the beginning of the presentation and the end of the presentation, a stylistic bow that kind of ties your story together. Let’s see if I can give you an example with a clip from last year’s Main Platform presentation by MDRT President Scotty Brennan. [video clip]

Really great story telling always seems to include symmetry. If you’re storytelling or not, if you’re in a boardroom or on a stage, you still really want to connect with your audience, right? Well, do you think you can get the same emotional response standing behind a podium? I suppose you can. President Obama does it all the time, especially since he likes to use a teleprompter. In fact, he even seemed to rely on it when he was speaking to a group of sixth graders. [visual]

This is a little overkill if you ask me! I mean these kids can’t even vote yet!

I don’t really think you need a podium most of the time, and the teleprompters are meant to do just that—prompt you. But in my mind they should never become a primary prop for your presentation. Not only do they limit your movement and eye contact, they occasionally get screwed up, with speed of the scroll being different from your own speaking speed. Or, in the truly lowest level of Dante’s Inferno for speakers—TECHNICAL FAILURE—and the whole darn script just disappears! Now what? Shadow puppets? Dancing? You are screwed! Important rule in setting the stage—DON’T RELY ON TELEPROMPTERS!

How can you avoid this type of disaster? Memorize your script! That’s right. Memorize it. Then you’re back in control. You will feel empowered. You’ll feel like a well-trained actor who knows her or his lines perfectly. That leaves you free to concentrate on your audience. Or, in a one-on-one presentation, to concentrate on your prospective client’s reactions.

There are tricks to memorizing things, and it usually takes me about six or seven times through a new presentation before I at least start to get the feeling that I’m getting it. One of the keys for me is to remember some transitional word
that bridges from one paragraph of my speech to another paragraph. That one single word is a trigger to the content of the next paragraph. That way, I don’t have to think of the speech as one massive memory task but, instead, as more like a bunch of little sound bytes.

Let me give you an example: If you have a music CD you really like, I bet most of you would be challenged to memorize and give back, in perfect order, all the song titles on the CD. But if you hear the first song, I can almost guarantee that you know what the next song will be. And the next one . . . and so on. It just seems easier to memorize things serially than in one huge lump! At least it is for me. Start with the idea of memorizing your comments. Then set trigger words to move from paragraph to paragraph.

When we’re composing our presentation, we have lots of considerations about the elements that will enhance our message or make our point of view compelling, interesting, or entertaining, and, most of all, effective. Those considerations include the use of humor, the use of audiovisual aids, the cultural background of our audience, and whether or not the presentation is being translated into another language.

For example, is the translation concurrent or sequential? Concurrent, meaning at the same time I’m speaking, is really tough for the translator. Have you ever seen any of our MDRT Main Platform translators trying to keep up with some fast-talking speaker from Texas? After a while, their heads are about to explode! They have to hose those poor folks down with cracked ice! Sequential translation requires us to pause after a couple of phrases, making rhythm a little more difficult. But, either way, translation causes problems we don’t encounter if we’re speaking in our own language.

Humor? Well, anyone who knows me knows I love humor. However, humor in general can be tough. Let’s look at a humorous video clip highlighting Jim Valvano, the coach of the 1983 National Collegiate Basketball Champions from North Carolina State. He’s telling a story about one of his star players, Lorenzo Charles, and how he instructed him about protecting the ball in the waning minutes of the championship game. [video clip]

That was a humorous story, but it was told in 1987. I bet there are some people in the room who didn’t get some of the references. An entertaining story can certainly help make a point. But I would just suggest we be careful with humor. And if your presentation is being translated, the context, the timing, and the idiom can be completely lost on the audience.

What about AV, or audiovisual aids? I’m using some in this presentation. Visuals and sounds can be essential elements of any presentation, but they can be overdone and sometimes dirty up the message. This happens most often with slides. Let me show you an example. [visual]

This slide has too much print on it. It doesn’t help the audience.

Wouldn’t a slide like this convey the same message and be cleaner? Be more memorable? [visual] I think a good rule is to use as few slides as possible and only use them when your words alone don’t add to your message as compellingly. Or when you really need to expand on a point.

Videos are great, especially when you are trying to convey an emotion. And, generally, the shorter, the better. Let’s take a look at a clip from an MDRT presentation by Dr. William Magee, the founder of Operation Smile, a foundation that goes all over the world to surgically correct facial anomalies of people, mainly children. I want you to pay attention to his “authentic voice” as he relates the story of a young man he helped, a young man whose facial distortion never allowed him to show affection for his father. Dr. Magee has told these stories for over 20 years, but listen to the sounds he makes as he catches himself emotionally, watch his chin, see how he feels what he is saying—and I think you will sense the emotional power of videos. [video clip]

What about your body language? What visual message is it giving off? How important is body language? Well, according to an expert named Mark Bowden, 55 percent of our message is conveyed visually, with just 38 percent conveyed by our voice and, amazingly, only 7 percent by the words we use. So how we look and the way we move send the biggest messages of all. It isn’t so much what we say but more how we say it with our bodies and our voices. That’s where the lasting impression is generated.

Because this is such a huge part of presenting, let’s take a look at some of Mr. Bowden’s reference points for your body and what those reference points convey. [visual]

Generally, if you have your hands above your head, you are perceived as being emotional about something. Maybe you’re a little frustrated. Maybe you’re a little preachy. Have you ever found your hands up here when you’re yelling at your kids?

If you drop down a little, beneath the shoulders, you are in the passionate zone, which, when you think about it, is where most hugging happens! When we speak, this is where we can express energy and excitement.
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A little lower, and you are in the truth zone—just sharing your beliefs, the facts, and how you honestly feel. In fact, let’s look at a short clip from a presentation by Dr. Ken Dychtwald, one of the world’s greatest social demographers. Watch his hands as he tells us how he “feels” about where our opportunities as advisors lie. And then watch where his hands go when he finishes the presentation and acknowledges the applause of the audience. [video clip] See, this stuff really works.

When your arms are straight down, you are in the passive zone, the neutral zone, where not much is happening. Here you may be a little dismissive, maybe a little disappointed.

When we’re up in zone 2 there, we can get bigger or smaller, depending on the size of our audience and how much we kind of want to “invite them in.”

I think it’s generally a good idea to be “bigger” because our own perception of “big” is a lot bigger than what the audience thinks is BIG.

How about movement? That’s one I always have a problem with because I like to move. It’s one of the reasons I don’t like to use a podium.

The experts tell you that it’s fine to move around, especially when you’re making a point. Moving to a different part of the stage can add emphasis to what you’re saying. Moving again can assist you in transitioning to a different part of your presentation. If you have a big audience, moving to different parts of the stage can give everyone a better look at you—so everyone feels you’re kind of talking to them!

But sometimes you can get so passionate and excited about what you’re saying that it almost looks like someone is using a cattle prod on you! That’s when your movement becomes a distraction and takes away from your presentation. And these days presentations are often videotaped. So if you’re running all over the stage, the videographer will want to kill you!

Speaking of videotaping, how you look can make a difference. Let’s take a look at a gentleman who fashions himself to be speech expert. He may be a good teacher, but I kind of think his clothing makes him look like an unmade bed. [video clip] What do you think? Do you agree?

Here’s another suggestion—dress up! [visual] If you need help with your clothing, get some help. Things like big stripes and loud colors are generally a distraction. These days lots of presentations are videotaped or projected on a large screen. The color of your shirt or top can change the effect you project. Let’s use me as an example.

I have to be careful with white shirts. The color of my hair kind of makes me look like a Q-tip, and lighting can wash out my face on a screen.

How about eye contact? That’s an important consideration, both to connect and to be believable. Let’s look at two videos, and you tell me who makes the better eye contact. [video clips]

I don’t know about you, but I think Colin Powell made much better eye contact. And he was believable, even from behind a podium with a large audience.

What if you’re out front, and the audience is just a few feet away. Maybe they’re at tables, and you can even walk around to the tables. What should your eye contact be here? Well, you don’t want to stare at people! You don’t want to scare them. You don’t want them squirming in their seats. You don’t want to burn a hole in them with your laser look.

The experts tell us we should just lock on for three to four seconds. That’s it. Just long enough to connect.

I think there’s some study out there that says that public speaking is the number one fear of most people. That same study says that death is number four! So I guess most of us, if we were asked to give a eulogy, would prefer to be the dead person! But I really don’t think things have to be that way.

When we started out about 45 minutes ago, I made a reference to the movie Rocky. The lead character, Rocky Balboa, had his good days and bad days. He was a club fighter who never had much focus, and he was pretty content to just hang out with everyone—until he had a chance to mix it up with the heavyweight champion of the world.

If you really want to become a better presenter and have some fun in the process, first get focused. Then start training. Do some roadwork. You will make mistakes—we all do. Your presentations won’t be perfect. But the good news is, they don’t have to be perfect to work. And fear—I guarantee that fear will start to disappear every time you “step into the ring.”

Get the “eye of the tiger” and have some fun. I hope to see you someday speaking from the Main Platform of the Million Dollar Round Table.