

# The *Obvious* Guide to Public Speaking

*Steve A Furman*

Whether you are an executive, in public service or just active in clubs, you will likely at some point be asked to speak publically. If you've been in the corporate world a few years you hear something like this.

“Great news. The President of the firm has requested you present your latest project at the all company meeting next month.” Or, “Would you represent our company on stage at the conference in Chicago next month?”

How do you react? Do you get a pit in your stomach or do you say, “This is a wonderful opportunity, I know exactly what I'll say.” If the first one rings truer, you will need to put in some extra practice. Yes practice is still one of the best ways to get better, and that includes public speaking. But practice only goes so far and is usually limited to memorizing talking points or an even an entire script so you won't freeze on stage.

Possessing solid presentation skills is an ante if you want to advance in today's corporate culture. You don't have to be a knock out speaker but you have to be good enough to clearly communicate your message, and do so in an interesting and persuasive manner. It's a skill that senior managers want when they are looking for people to groom.

Getting good at public speaking goes beyond practice. It's a combination of employing sound techniques and increasing the volume of speaking.

I am not a professional speaker, meaning I don't get paid, but I have made dozens of public appearances on large and small stages and in panel discussions. When I get the speaker feedback from my session at these events, my scores are top shelf. As a result, the number of speaking requests I receive each year increases significantly. Word gets around and demand grows.

Over the years I've kept detailed notes on why my talk went well, or frankly, when it bombed. I did this for self-improvement. Then it occurred to me to organize these notes into something more digestible. So here is my collection. I hope some of these help. If

they do, drop me a note and let me know.

## **It's Inevitable**

The corporate world requires us to make frequent visits to what many call PowerPoint Hell. That is a place where *decks* are created. We then take the deck and try to present it. That's a huge mistake. Decks are decks, not presentations. Decks are a collection of strategies, tactics, hypotheses, data, research and benchmarks, all positioned through the lens of company-speak. Deck creators typically try to fill every last pixel of the slide. In stark contrast, presentations are *performances*. One must create a script from a deck to effectively present it, make it come alive. Largely it's an exercise in stripping out what is nonessential, not engaging. Decks are addition; presentation building is subtraction. You will need the skills to do both, but when you present, less is more.

A great deck will not make even a good presentation in the same way a great novel can't make a good movie without a visual screenplay.

I'm not going to talk much about content strategy or what level of detail to cover. That must to be determined by you. After all, you're the expert. I'm focusing on building the presentation and delivering it so people will listen to you, retain something and use it later.

## **Three Acts**

Classic stories all follow the same emotional path; set-up, conflict and resolution. The story threads through awareness, commitment, challenge, danger and finally rebirth. This experience applies more to dramatic storytelling than a business presentation, but if you keep this framework in mind along the way, you will come off as a storyteller. If that's too much, think, beginning, middle and end.

## **Length**

How long to make your talk will be determined by the length of time you are allotted on stage. Sounds obvious, but timing is one of the trickiest elements. Here's my simple rule. It takes an average of one minute to clear a single slide. No matter what, it should never take you more than two minutes. If you loiter beyond that you will lose your audience. There should be one slide in each five that provides emphasis, wraps up the current act and serves as the catalyst to propel the audience into the next one. Build your presentation and rehearse your talk to take up 75% of your allocated time. This gives you some slack to ad lib along the way. For example if you have one hour, then you should end in 45 minutes. Thirty slides at one minute and six slides at two minutes equals 42 minutes. Perfect. You still have ample time to expand here and there and leave time for questions. You should also check with the event coordinator to see if it's informal, meaning questions along the way, or if you should leave time for questions. It's also a good practice to announce up front if you welcome questions during or after the talk. Everyone is more comfortable that way. People really do like rules.

## **Use of Personal Artifacts**

Personal accounts are terrific ways to humanize and bring to life what you are trying to communicate. This is most effective when delivered verbally. It's fine to have one slide that has elements of your personal side, photos of family or your environment, but keep it to one slide. People don't come to hear about your personal life, unless you are a celebrity, and if you are reading this you're not a celebrity (sorry). Always ensure your personal accounts are brief and if possible humorous. Don't cry on stage or make others cry. Don't sing. Don't dance. Yes I'm serious about that.

## **Tell Them. Tell Them Again. Then Tell Them You Told Them**

If your presentation is a mystery you have failed. I put my key points, of course 3 of them, up front. Then I refer back to them throughout the talk, finally returning to the sacred 3 at the end. Don't assume your audience is following you as closely as you

think. They are frequently backgrounding (checking email, surfing the net, texting, etc.) Don't talk down, but be clear.

## **The Slides**

No need for me to restate what Guy Kawasaki says so well; 10 slides, 20 minutes in length, using 30 point font. When practical, follow his advice. My contribution on slides relates to builds and transitions. Builds can be a very effective way to create suspense and make points more dramatically, and transitions help you advance your story with a sense of drama. PowerPoint gives one 32 ways to build your content and 34 ways to transition from one slide to the next. You will be tempted to experiment with lots of them thinking it will distinguish your presentation from others. Stop that temptation at all costs. Mostly it's flash over substance. If you change your transitions and builds from slide to slide or even deck to deck your performance will suffer.

*Transitions:* There is only one slide transition you should use and that's Fade Smoothly at Medium Speed with No Sound on Mouse Click. Just set that as the default in your presentation and you're done. People wrongly equate varying slide transitions to editing a film. It's not a film. You are not working with miles of celluloid on a Moviola. It's more like controlling the flow of a river of thoughts. Keep it smooth and let the content do the work.

*Builds:* There are two keys to successful builds. First, make sure you build your content the way your audience reads. Left to right, top to bottom. Builds that follow this rule vanish in the mind's eye and are essentially subliminal. The PowerPoint equivalent of persistence of vision. Second, don't overreach on execution. Keep it simple. The only animation build you should use is Fade In on Medium Speed. It's perfectly fine to use either on Mouse Click or After Previous (Very Fast). The choice is up to the presenter and should be determined by what content was created to communicate. Again, use this as your default and keep it there. Simplify.

## **Copy to Graphics Ratio**

A picture is worth a thousand words. A truer truism there never was. My rule on copy to graphics ratio is 50/50. Half copy, half graphics; they can be images, charts, or diagrams. The ratio for the presentation is less important than the ratio on a given slide. Some people put a graphic on a slide then surround it with words. The result is both get marginalized. They compete with each other for attention. The reason to use a graphic is because it does a better job communicating. Let it do the heavy lifting. Your audience will appreciate viewing and listening, than reading and listening. When I use graphics I work hard to have it be the only element on the slide and speak the words. The graphic should be BIG. If they can't see it they can't process it. Remember, fewer elements are more memorable and therefore more powerful.

## **Build Your Own Slides**

You don't have to be a wiz at PowerPoint to construct your own slides. It's acceptable to let a creative type actually make the slides, but you should design every aspect of them yourself. No one wants to spend their time and money watching you flash Forrester charts on a screen. That is insulting to your audience on many levels and tells them that in lieu of providing your own perspective you are showing off the fact that you can read other people's work and have mastered the use of screen grabs.

If you want people to remember what you said, then YOU have to say it. Original thoughts, fresh perspectives, this is what people remember and they will attribute the content to you, not walk away saying, "I should really subscribe to Forrester." If you can't come up with your own slides for the topic, then turn down the offer to speak. Everyone will be better off.

The last slide should contain your contact information. E-mail address, Twitter handle, Blog address, etc. That's the slide that will stay on screen for the longest.

## **Refine Content On Site, Real Time**

This is tricky and can't always be accomplished because you may be speaking early in the event. But if your time slot is late in day or on day two, you should observe the tone of the room and network with the attendees and other speakers and get insights on the vibe. If you catch a nugget or two, take the time to open your presentation and amend your slides to more closely address what the audience is hungry for. The effectiveness of your content will increase exponentially and so will your audience rating scores. The question is how do you get your edits to the presentation that is probably sitting on a laptop at the back of the room? Here's how I solve for that.

## **Friend the A/V Person**

When you enter the presentation room look closely at the set-up. If it's obvious that it's a super professional production you can breathe a sigh of relief. Probably no technical issues will arise. But if it's a smaller event then the first thing I do is locate the A/V person, introduce myself, recognize the tough job they have and thank him/her ahead of time for their upcoming effort. They will remember that when you take the stage and go out of their way to double check that your slides are good to go. Trust me. This is worth it. During a speaking event in Florida I wanted to adjust some of my content just prior to going on stage because I had heard some things in audience questions earlier that day. Since I already established a connection with Caesar (the A/V guy) it was a breeze. I even called him out by name during my talk. He said no one had ever done that before.

## **Clear the Slide**

Think about each slide as if it were the only slide in your presentation. Give it a beginning, middle and end. Remember, three acts make a story. Build each slide as if it was a critical part of your overall message (because it is), but present it as if it were a complete thought. This gives the audience even more to consume and each slide will be perceived as just as important as the previous one. If you don't think that one of your slides meets the criteria, can it.

## Contrast Please

I see this rule violated nearly every week of my life somewhere. Why is this so hard to understand? Your audience can't read black text on dark blue background. You go to all the trouble to make these slides, why wouldn't you want people to easily read them? White letters on a black background or black letters on a white background are great examples of contrast. It may seem boring, but people will not have to strain. Remember they are checking email and worrying about how things are going back at the office while sitting in the audience. Most are there to absorb and learn and take copious notes. Make it easy for them. Frequently the slides are available after the event, but how many times have you gone back and downloaded them? I will randomly approach people after my talk and ask to see their notes. The length of notes taken will correlate to their value and what they refer to first when they get back home.

Please, please ignore the sensitive designers who love grey on grey. It's not a master class in art. I typically go with white combined with orange on a solid black background. Everyone else will use either white or another background color, so this is another way you can distinguish yourself. By the way, Steve Jobs uses mostly white text on a black background. Why not copy the master?



Photo Credit: © International Business Times

## **Movement and Gesture**

If you stand behind a podium for the entire length of your talk you are missing a huge opportunity to make an impression on your audience. Movement is an important part of presenting. You occupy space in the universe so use it. You don't have to dance (please don't dance, or sing), but you should at least roam or glide. How much you move will be dictated in large part by the stage set-up. Ask for a wireless microphone so you can keep your hands free. Holding a microphone while trying to present requires extra concentration that in my opinion is a waste of energy. The goal is to be comfortable, natural, as if you were having dinner with the entire room. Move slowly, but purposefully. Moving across the stage (left to right to left) allows people in a wide room to get a better look at your physical features. If you move toward the audience you are breaking the imaginary barrier between yourself and the spectators. My rule is do this sparingly, when you want to hammer home a point, or when you are answering questions after the presentation.

## **Eye Contact and Smile**

Look your audience in the eye. Leverage the confidence monitor. Never look at the screen behind you. Divide the room into four quadrants and give each quadrant equal time with your eyes. I start front left then move clockwise, then repeat. Pick out a person in each quadrant that looks interested (not on their smart phone) and make extra eye contact with them. Don't forget to smile. I remember when my wife and I took dance lessons. The instructor would always have to remind me to smile. Not because I wasn't enjoying the experience, but because I was so focused on trying to get the moves right that I forgot to smile. People will retain information longer from someone who appears to be enjoying speaking to them.

## **Take a Test Drive**

Get to the venue early and walk every part of the room. Practice your stage mount and dismount. Check out the lighting. Have someone sit in the front of the room, the center and the far back of the room as you speak. Then ask them to speak to you. This gives



you a sense of the acoustical qualities of the room. Ask to hold the slide clicker and memorize the button functions and locations. How many times have you see someone go forward too many slides or backwards when they wanted to go forward. Have them put up some slides, any will do, and press the buttons to gauge the timing or any latency. Ask them if they plan on playing music as you take the stage. Request that they play your song. You have a song don't you? Of course you do.

## **Handling Hecklers**

I have never had any one heckle me during a presentation, so I can't help you much in this department. Probably the best advice I can give is don't be boring or insulting or too theoretical or too basic. If you are none of those things and compelling, engaging, brilliant and personable, you should be just fine.

## **Keeping Score**

Event coordinators hunger for feedback. They will be collecting scores from all the sessions and pass your scores along to you. Read the feedback carefully. Remember, you are presenting to them, for them. If they don't rate you as valuable, you aren't. Here are some other ways you can tell if you were effective.

Get 5% of the people who hear your presentation to use something from your talk within 30 days of returning to their job. At the end of the presentation, while your contact information is on the screen, ask them to ping you if they put any of what you showed to use. One of the most gratifying feelings is to get one of those Tweets or emails, or the best is when you are at a later event and someone tracks you down and gives you their experience of how they put your idea or concept into action. That's gold.

Find out how many times your presentation was downloaded post event. If someone goes to the trouble to do that, your presentation made an impact.

Another measure is if audience members suddenly follow you on Twitter, or post a

comment on your blog, or subscribe to you blog.

Have you been asked to come back and speak at the next event? Are you getting more offers to speak? If yes, then you are effective and provide value to your audience.

## **The Voice**

It's called *speaking*. You are presenting, but first and foremost you are speaking. I think that the voice is an identical twin to the sense of smell. It is visceral, emotional, influential and primal. You are usually asked to speak. People come to hear a speaker. Project your voice. Record it and listen to it. Get a speech or voice coach if you are happy with what you hear. Your content reveals what's in the mind, but the voice gives life to your passion.

Here's to your voice and ultimately, influence.

---

*The abandonment of the comprehensive and abbreviated, and selection of the essential.*

Blog: [expedientmeans.com](http://expedientmeans.com)

Twitter: [@stevefurman](https://twitter.com/stevefurman)