



Stand out whenever you Speak

Is Anybody Listening ?

How To Speak With Impact And Engagement

He was captivating. As the senior marketing executive of a major global social networking company, I held on to his every word. But that was at the reception, 20 minutes ago. Now, talking to 1,500 people he seemed so different. The audience came with great anticipation, as did I, but you could see that now they were bored to tears, getting caught up on their texts. Some were even walking out.

Why couldn't he be the same person he was at the reception, confident and engaging?

Likely because he thought that when standing in front of an audience he had to be somebody he's not: an orator, someone with proper grammar who speaks in long, flowing sentences, someone who pushes information out to his audience and pauses appropriately at commas and periods. That's not what his audience wanted. They wanted the man I saw at the reception, a genuine, experienced marketing leader simply having a conversation.

This pattern is not unusual. In fact, 9 out of 10 marketing executives are terrific conversationalists, yet they are terribly boring when they speak in front of an audience.

But the man on stage today was a marketing professional speaking to a room full of 1,500 individuals. Engaging an audience, any audience, should have been his strong suit; clearly it wasn't.

It is not enough to have the best product, the best brand or the best idea, or even to be the best at marketing them. It is equally, if not more important, to be able to speak about that product, brand or idea. This requires a depth of understanding about spoken communication and the ability to project your product and yourself in the most impactful way. This can be especially important for business career success and advancement:

According to Herman Holtz, author of "The Executive's Guide to Winning Presentations" several studies have found that an effective presentation can become a decisive step toward career success.

An Avery-Denison study of 725 managers reported in an article, "Critical Link between Presentation Skills, Upward Mobility" in The American Salesman, revealed that 75 percent of those surveyed considered presentation skills to be three times more important for career advancement than writing ability.





The Audience Remembers

This white paper provides you with some food for thought about how to be an impactful and engaging speaker. Before we continue, it's probably a good idea to define what constitutes success in speaking to someone else. The definition is straight-forward, and it's true whether it applies to one-on-one conversations or speeches to thousands of people. Here it is:

Success in speaking means the audience remembers both you *and* your message.

Simple, right? In fact, it is simple, and it can be easily achieved *if* you have the right tools and techniques. The problem is that most marketing executives lose sight of this definition and their presentations take on a life of their own.

It's Not That Difficult

Here is something to keep in mind:

A survey of executives reported in Slesinski's Supervision article "Giving a Top-Notch Executive Presentation," found that "only 29 percent [of presentations executives were given] got a rating of 'good to excellent' for the overall quality of presentations delivered to them."

Here's the good news - speaking with impact at any time or, in any environment, is not as difficult as it might appear. In fact, the principles are simple and straight-forward.

Because presentation skills can be learned, the opportunity to become an impactful speaker is very achievable. A key first step is to understand how we, as humans, naturally achieve success in communicating.

Relaxed Conversation

If you think about it, you're at your best in relaxed conversation where your listener can hear the real you talk. It's also during relaxed conversation that the listener best remembers what you said. Think of a time when your best friend described an exciting adventure as you sat together in a coffee shop. Weeks later, you could probably have repeated most of that conversation to another friend.

There is no argument that relaxed conversation is a person's best or more effective communication style. So, if relaxed conversation is your best speaking style, we need to examine what you're doing that makes it the best - because if you change from the best, you will be worse. You can't get better than best.

The Dynamics of Conversation

Go out and have some fun listening to people in conversation. You'll find that the more relaxed and engaged the conversation, the more difficult it is to find any complete sentences. Incorrect grammar and sentence fragments abound. Thoughts stop in mid-flight, veer off in new directions, or get reiterated in a different way. Sentences get chopped up into pieces. Highly educated or not, this is how we talk.

English teachers might be horrified, but this hodgepodge delivery is precisely why conversation works so well. The speakers are *interacting* with each other. Each one is speaking AND listening, providing corresponding understanding or agreement with each other.

If you ever find yourself in a conversation with someone who talks with a seemingly deliberate emphasis on perfect grammar and complete sentences, you'll likely feel a bit uncomfortable. The other person's speaking would seem incredibly odd and stilted, if not pretentious. You'd also find that you are not fully listening.

Most of what our ears take in during a typical day is conversation - imperfect, unrehearsed. Therefore, this is the type of information that our brain is best adapted to process. Understanding conversational style is intuitive and effortless for all of us. We have grown up with conversation as a primary means of communicating with the people and world around us.

In your observations about conversation, you may also notice that people pause many times when they're speaking. Obviously, each person's biggest pause happens when the other person is talking, but even the speaker pauses for a variety of reasons.

Some of the speaker's pauses will be quite long, others quite short. One interesting thing you may note is that pauses occur anywhere. There is no grammatical reason for when or where people pause in conversation. You may even hear some people pausing in the middle of a word! Such instinctual speech patterns make nonsense of the traditional advice about "pausing in the appropriate place." There is no such thing as an appropriate place to pause in conversation.

That is why conversation works. It's perfectly imperfect.

In his early days, this contortion of grammar is what President Obama did naturally when he spoke, and he was regarded as being "really genuine" because of it. Today his speaking workload is much greater. As a result, unfortunately, he now uses teleprompters much more and follows texts that are perfectly grammatical. He has become smoother but not necessarily more genuine.



Letting The Listener Drive

The most enlightening instruction for a marketing executive comes from watching a conversation between just two people. You'll see that one is talking and the other is listening, and the roles switch frequently. The one who is talking tends to be watching the one who is listening - not all the time, but frequently. The one listening is watching the one talking pretty much all the time.

The speaker (the transmitter) needs to observe reactions from the listener (the receiver) as he or she talks. In fact, if the receiver were to get up and leave the room, the transmitter would stop talking. The conversation is two-way. The most important thing to note, however, is that the receiver controls the pace of the transmitter. Nods, puzzled expressions or other verbal or non-verbal signals coerce the transmitter into slowing down, speeding up or stopping. The conversation is what we call *Receiver Driven*.

The concept of being Receiver Driven is of utmost importance to spoken communication. The delivery of a message must be controlled by the listener for it to be properly absorbed. However, in practically all formal presentations, the speakers are entirely *Transmitter Driven*. It rarely occurs to them that they should be controlled by their audience, and that is the single biggest reason why speakers are so ineffective.

When a speaker is Transmitter Driven, the audience cannot stay properly tuned in. If you're in the audience, you might sit there wondering what is wrong with you, that you can't stay focused on what is being presented. You may be glad to learn it's not your fault. The speaker is doing something your brain is not adapted to do. As a speaker, therefore, your challenge is to always appear Receiver Driven, whatever the circumstances.

Conclusion

We've all been there. We've been asked to make a presentation to leadership, clients or staff on a new brand, product, proposal or idea and we want to be really good...but how? It's not as if there isn't much advice. There are literally thousands of articles and books on the topic. If you search online for 'presentation skills' you get millions of entries.

So then, why are so many speakers boring or certainly not as good as if you chatted with them in a personal conversation? It's because the advice they get is most often just plain wrong. Most of what is written and taught today on public speaking reinforces the notion that a person must be an orator when he or she speaks.

Speaking conversationally shouldn't be difficult since we do it every day. In fact, speaking well is an indispensable life skill. The ability to speak - to verbally communicate thoughts and ideas effectively - is essential to anybody's success and particularly to a marketing executive's success.

Dedicating the time to learn how to speak with impact is time very well spent.

Key Points to Remember

1. Success in speaking means the audience remembers you and your message.
2. A natural, conversational style is best for public speaking. And conversation is not perfect, it is impactful because it is perceived as being genuine.
3. The listener - your audience - always controls the conversation.
4. Remember "Receiver Driven." It is the most important principle of good communication. We will see it again and again.



Next In The Series

Since we speak best in relaxed conversation, it would be useful to know how to apply the principles of relaxed conversation when speaking about your company and your brand. In our continuing series, learn:

- How to control the *pace* of your message.
- Some very simple but effective approaches to making sure the audience is quickly able to grasp the points you wish to make and is able to follow your reasoning in a well-structured way.
- How to develop and use notes properly so that you deliver a more coherent message, safeguarding against needless rambling or the nightmare of “losing your place.”
- Four guiding principles that will forever transform your use of visuals.

About Barry Kuntz

For over 20 years, Black Isle has been recognized for teaching leaders how to stand out whenever they speak. It has a distinctive and radical approach to communications training that gives leaders both the skills and confidence to approach the most daunting presentations with the knowledge that their message will be understood, remembered and acted upon.

As a senior executive with General Motors of Canada, Barry was faced with making hundreds of presentations upward, downward and among his peers. In 1992 he took a speaking program with Black Isle, a global consultancy with offices in Toronto, Hong Kong and London.

He liked the program so much that he joined Black Isle as its Managing Director and has embarked on a journey that has been uplifting, inspiring and rewarding.

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