

Never Open with a Joke

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hether you're giving a pitch to your boss or a presentation before the town council, how you communicate your ideas can be as important as the ideas themselves. Unfortunately, mistakes by presenters are common and make it less likely that the audience will pay attention to or accept the message. *Here's what helps presentations succeed...*

■ **Open by telling audience members why they must listen** and reassuring them that you will be brief. If you can't come up with an attention-grabbing opening, try a version of the following...

"Listen folks, I've got only five minutes of your time, but there's something you really need to know because it could become a major problem (or opportunity) for everyone in this room."

■ **Never open with a joke**, which can make you look like a lightweight. Opening with a powerful anecdote relevant to the topic can be very effective.

■ **Prepare your presentation based on the person or people you are speaking to**, not just what you want to say. What topics interest your listeners? What are their greatest challenges? What's the personality of the key audience member (someone who can influence your career)? What statements or topics make this key audience member upset? What follow-up questions does he/she tend to ask speakers? Find out as much as you can before you even start to write your speech. The greatest sin in public speaking is giving a presentation without first developing a clear picture of your audience.

■ **Ask for advice from people who have made presentations to these individuals in the past.** Also, call the key audience member and ask what he most wants your presentation to provide.

■ **Make it shorter.** Shorter presentations are better -- always. Assume that your first draft is too long, and cut it... then do the same with drafts two through four.

Example: At General Electric, Jack Welch shortened the length of most presentations at general manager meetings from 20 minutes to 10 (although the CEO's "closing remarks" could be longer). The presentations were as informative as ever.

To keep presentations brief...

■ **Reread every paragraph**, asking yourself, *What will listeners take away from this?* Remove anything that isn't a take-away idea -- something the audience can remember and use.

■ **Eliminate most/all background information and explanations of methodology.** Few audience members care about these things.

■ **Avoid phrases that signal a long presentation**, such as, "Later I'll cover... " or "Today I'm going to discuss the 10 things... "

■ **Consider *PowerPoint* your enemy**. This computer program has become a standard tool for presenters -- and it always hurts them. Complicated, bullet point-laden *PowerPoint* slides distract from what you're saying and block the connection that you're trying to build with the audience -- particularly if you turn your back to read the bullet points. Use *PowerPoint* only to depict occasional and dramatic points. Once your audience has had a moment to absorb a slide, clear the screen to return the focus to you.

■ **Temper success stories**. When you give a speech about a big success, audience members' BS detectors start running on high. Add a paragraph about what you could have done better, and you will enhance your credibility.