

Speak up or Sit Down

Last night the phone rang; my wife said, "I hope it's for you". When I answered, the caller asked, "Ray, would you speak to the Lions Club next month?" First my gut said, "No"; however, my head said, "Do it". So, one month from next Tuesday, I stand in front of 20 men and women as their evening speaker. They will have just enjoyed dinner with before and after dinner drinks. What a group: stomachs full and heads mellow. Just how will I do it?

These guidelines help me prepare, and may guide you when asked to speak publicly

1. Know your audience. When in graduate school, a professor posed this question, "Why this message to these people at this occasion on this subject?" What will I say to who they "are" about a subject they (and I) care about? The importance and impact of learning all you can about your audience and their reason for inviting you to talk cannot be overlooked. Their reason links you to what matters to them, and the trust they have in you to speak on a subject they care about.
2. Ask the question, "What made them invite me?" I asked this question last night when talking to the woman inviting me to speak. She said, "We want you to talk about the Town's finances". Since I am the chairperson of the Finance Committee in my Town, and our Annual Town Meeting is within a few months, I am their logical source, and this subject interests me.
3. Condense your talk to one sentence. This group wants one question answered, "Will the Town budget cause me to pay more in taxes?". This is a closed-end question, but they want me to elaborate on all the implications. Every speech topic demands more research than you have time to share (remember to limit your talk, in most instances, to twenty minutes). A speech should be facts and stories....facts and stories.
4. Write your talk, but don't read it. The minister of my church writes all of his sermons word for word, but does not read his sermons from the pulpit. Audiences want eye contact, so leave the script at your chair, stand up and speak up. Reveal the content and importance of your message through the voice and appearance of your personality. Even an unskilled speaker comes across well when the expression of their content comes from within. However, know your subject by delving deeply into each facet of your subject. You won't get a chance to say everything you know (nor should you), but you will infer that your knowledge exceeds your statements. This assures your hearers that you know what you are talking about, and they can relax while listening.
5. Tell a lot of stories. Budgets seem as exciting as an Excel spreadsheet. So, I'll tell them stories about what those line items mean to them and to Town employees. Whenever stories get told, emotion gets expressed. People like to think, to ponder, to evaluate, but not on a full stomach. So the facts will be interspersed with many stories. Whenever you speak, unless at a funeral (and even there laughter heals the sorrowing heart), get people to laugh.
6. Know when to speak up and sit down: Most people manage to listen for 18 or 20 minutes. Stomachs full of food washed down with a glass of wine causes minds to nod. So keep it simple by introducing your audience to what you will say, give them the facts (lots of stories), and tell them what you said. Then end it with a purpose driven suggestion. Since our Town needs elected and volunteer officials, I may challenge them to volunteer or take out registration papers for the next election. That ought to wake them up!

Finally, have fun; don't be overly confident if it goes well, or overly hard on yourself if it goes poorly. Every event provides an experience and each experience adds another dimension to your personality. Seneca (5 BC - 65 AD) wrote, "Speech is the mirror of the mind", so be sure to have something to reflect,. Oh, one last point, eat after you talk, and have a drink, if you want, when you get home.

Source: <http://www.articlecircle.com>

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