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Beauty and the Beast

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Reframing Three Major Fears About Public Speaking

An Inconvenient Truth:

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Who's YOUR Audience?

Ways to win your audience through inclusion.

By Craig Harrison, DTM

Most speakers want unanimous approval, a standing ovation and all the advantages that accrue from a successful speech. Yet speakers often sabotage themselves in their quest to connect. Sometimes they inadvertently alienate or even polarize an audience through ill-conceived remarks or lack of sensitivity. The results? Lukewarm receptions, sparse applause and in the case of contests, a seat outside the winner's circle.

Speakers often presume that audiences share their belief systems, values or political preferences. Sometimes it's because their audience members look like they do, or because in their city, most people do share beliefs. But often looks belie reality. You cannot read people's hearts or minds. When you *presume*, you run the risk of offending audience members without even knowing it.

I've listened to speakers who presumed everyone in the room voted for the same candidate in the most recent

▲ Toastmasters Accredited Speaker Anne Barab, DTM, wows the audience during the 2007 International Convention in Phoenix, Arizona.

national or local election, or that everyone in the club shared his belief about an upcoming holiday, or her stance on a war or national policy. It turned out the audience's opinion was far from unanimous.

Speaking In the Lion's Den

Sometimes we find ourselves speaking to an audience with different beliefs, perspectives or experiences. In the United States you might be:

- A lone Republican speaking to an audience of Democrats, or vice versa
- A manager speaking to employees
- A Northerner speaking in the deep South
- A woman speaking to an all-male audience

Internationally, you may find yourself across a fence from an audience for a variety of reasons:

- A Muslim speaking to a Christian audience, or vice versa
- An Aborigine speaking to Australians of English heritage
- A Korean speaking to a largely Japanese audience

In each case, there may be differing customs, values and even accents. To ignore such differences would be like ignoring an elephant in the room. The lack of acknowledgement would distract from your actual message. The wise approach is to acknowledge differences in a respectful way.

Inclusivity

Think for a moment about the way Toastmasters often open their speeches: "Madam Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters and most welcomed guests." This opening is designed to include all who may find themselves in your audience, and it welcomes each. That's good! We want to similarly cast a wide net when speaking to audiences who may be skeptical, doubtful or reluctant to embrace our message because of their own background, disposition or past experiences. Craft your opening to engage all, especially those who may be in the minority in terms of gender, religion, age or political preference.

Reputations Help and Hinder

I grew up and continue to reside in Berkeley, California – home of the University of California, and the free speech movement, protests and riots of the 1960s. Was I a part of the riots of the late '60s? No! I was seven years old. I was busy selling lemonade on the corner like any child of my age. Yet some audiences presume that all people from Berkeley are long-haired hippies who are rebels, radicals and draft dodgers with no respect for authority. Some dislike me before I've spoken a word, based on reputation. (I dispel their fears with humor and self-effacement in my speech's introduction.)

The Elephant in the Room

Speechwriter Tom Roberts of Oakland, California, hails from Arkansas, where as a college professor he taught public speaking, oral interpretation and broadcast journalism. Audiences always have two questions: "Why don't you sound like you're from the South?" And, "Do you know President Bill Clinton?" After 17 years as a national broadcaster, Tom has trimmed his regional accent, yet based on credentials, these questions color peoples' introductory impressions of him. Tom anticipates the questions and answers them at the outset to refocus his audiences.

Dynamic professional speaker Mikki Williams of Chicago, with her big hair and big jewelry, has audiences pondering her resemblance to actress Laynie Kazan, or singers Barbara Streisand or Bette Midler. Knowing this, at the outset, she eggs the audience on: "OK, who do I look like?" She poses a little and the audience shouts out

The Case For – and Against – Whiskey

Noah S. "Soggy" Sweat Jr. delivered this famous "Whiskey Speech" on April 4, 1952, at a banquet while the prohibition issue was before the Mississippi legislature:

"My friends,

"I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this particular time. However, I want you to know that I do not shun controversy. On the contrary, I will take a stand on any issue at any time, regardless of how fraught with controversy it might be. You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. All right, here is how I feel about whiskey.

"If when you say whiskey you mean the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the evil drink that topples the Christian man and woman from the pinnacle of righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, and despair, and shame and helplessness, and hopelessness, then certainly I am against it.

"But;

"If when you say whiskey you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips, and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christmas cheer; if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in the old gentleman's step on a frosty, crispy morning; if you mean the drink which enables a man to magnify his joy, and his happiness, and to forget, if only for a little while, life's great tragedies, and heartaches, and sorrows; if you mean that drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars, which are used to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitiful aged and infirm; to build highways and hospitals and schools, then certainly I am for it.

This is my stand. I will not retreat from it. I will not compromise."

names. In her speaking school, she coaches all speakers to "go with the obvious. Call on your attributes. So you're bald, pregnant or have a pronounced accent, reference it. Use self-directed humor to connect with your audience." If you're vertically challenged you might open with "Can you see me now?" Then, stand on your tip-toes and ask again!

Blues musicians Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon long ago taught that "you can't judge a book by lookin' at its cover," yet initially that is all audience members have to go on. Your mission is to help audiences get to know, trust and like you through your graciousness, inclusive engagement and appropriate disclosures. Especially at the beginning of your speech, these qualities help you bond with your audience, who will see you're more alike than different from them.

What are your presumptions about people of other religions, a certain age or orientation? What presumptions might people have of you, based solely on your age, gender, ethnicity, orientation or occupation? Whether or not it's accurate, it's affecting how you are heard, seen and perceived. It also affects how you, the speaker, see and perceive your audience.

The Olive Branch

The best speeches are inclusive, bringing audiences together or else offering something for multiple perspectives, beliefs or preferences. In cases where you are speaking to a hostile or opposing party, praise them! It will disarm them. You can kill them with kindness. When you are conciliatory or otherwise generous with your acknowledgement, their respect for you grows. By being magnanimous, you show yourself worthy of further consideration.

A Toast to Differing Tastes

A great, if exaggerated, example of catering to multiple factions within an audience can be found in the famous "Whiskey Speech" of Judge Noah S. "Soggy" Sweat Jr. Delivered to the Mississippi legislature on April 4, 1952, this speech takes a stand on the controversial prohibition topic of legalizing liquor (then illegal in that state). In successive paragraphs he appears to be either pummeling or praising the effects of alcohol. He seemingly appealed to both sides while maintaining his neutrality. Though his speech takes political doublespeak to comic proportions, the lesson remains: Know your audience and give something of value to all.

Appealing to Our Commonalities

When speaking to audiences who appear to be different from you, seek out your commonalities and build upon them. For instance, you may be speaking to an audience comprised predominantly of people whose political beliefs are opposite yours, and this is known to all. Your opening greeting may begin "Good evening friends and fellow citizens…" Indeed you are all citizens. This is why many speeches given by United States presidents begin with, "My fellow Americans…" Other things you may have in common: you are all taxpayers, voters and survivors of that evening's Chicken à la Firestone. Look for common ground to launch your speech and you and your audience will start the journey together.

When you speak to audiences from other countries, take the time to learn enough of their language to welcome them and help them feel at home. Whether you are using sign language for the deaf, colloquialisms that reflect the locality your audience is from, or you dress the part through a hat, tie, scarf or other sartorial garnishes, you are embracing the audience for who they are, and they will appreciate it – when it's done with sincerity.

Lisa Jeffery, speech professor from Miami Beach, Florida, explains: "Consider a female health care professional speaking to Baptist ministers on the controversial topic of abortion. She's got to start out on common ground. Likeability is important. She should strive to garner some 'amens' early in her speech through praise, respect and a focus on what is shared by the speaker and audience."

She coaches her clients and students to focus on achievable goals. In this case, getting the ministers to open their minds enough to consider the validity of a divergent point of view may be attainable. Converting them through her speech alone to change their belief system is far less likely.

For the Benefit of a Few

You may speak about an event, experience or phenomenon that most – but not everyone – knows, understands or is familiar with. Consider the phrase "blue moon." Rather than assume everyone knows it, or worse yet, asking: Is there anyone here who *doesn't* know what a "blue moon" is? Explain if for all: "For those of you unfamiliar with expression 'once in a blue moon,' it refers to the second moon in a month, a rare occurrence." You might phrase it simply: "...it was as rare as a blue moon."

That way you don't embarrass, demean or ostracize the person who doesn't understand or hasn't been versed in your history, points of reference or colloquialism. Few people wish to admit in a crowd that they don't understand something. Yet it may inhibit their ability (or desire) to follow your speech, embrace your argument or support your cause.

Insights on Inside Jokes

Another way speakers alienate their audiences is through excessive use of inside jokes or references to events or knowledge known by some – but not most – of the audience. Your goal is to help everyone feel like an insider. Too many references to people or topics not known to most audience members estrange them from the speaker. Help people feel included, not excluded.
So leave the insider jokes out.

Speak to Win!

Professional speaker Simma Lieberman of Berkeley, California, is known as "The Inclusionist." She trains organizations worldwide in how to succeed through inclusion. Lieberman knows the value of helping audiences feel better about themselves. "To be an inclusive speaker means that you know how to create community in the short time you are in front of people, by engaging them and making them feel like you are talking to [all of] them." Simma takes great pains to learn as much about her audience as possible. Before the event, she asks questions. Then she greets everyone upon arrival and uses questions in her opening remarks to engage and include all members of the audience. As a result, she wins their attention, respect and adoration. You can too! When you unite your audience, your applause will be unanimous!

Craig Harrison, DTM, AL, founded LaughLovers Toastmasters 596430 in Oakland, California, to help speakers connect to their audiences through laughter. Reach him via his website **www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com.**

Tips for Better Knowing Your Audience

- **Learn about your audience before you speak. Ask questions, meet them informally, use polls, surveys and questionnaires. Google "online survey service" to find companies that will help you set up Web surveys.**
- **Meet your audience members on the way into the room. Chat with them one-on-one and in small groups to learn more about them and identify commonalities.**
- **Use the technique of "Call and Response" to engage and include your audience. "How many of you have children? (Wait for response.) How many of you are children?" (Wait for laughter!)**
- **Include your audience through generous eye contact that shows you see them as individuals.**
- **Speak to an audience member in the front, the middle and the back; speak to people on the left, the right and in the center. Vary where you direct your remarks.**
- **Remember, the shortest distance between people is often a smile. When you smile at someone, they should smile back.**
- **If you're from out of town, reference something local about the town, region or state.**
- **Topical references often connect you with your audience. Reference, for example, the local weather (which we all experience), the traffic jam on the way to the program, a recent event or other common experience. But be careful to reference something that's truly universal within your audience.**
- **Remember, you're not a speaker without an audience. They are the most valuable people in the room. Speaking is a collaborative experience. Share the spotlight with them and they'll respond appreciatively!**