

7 Habits Of The Best Public Speakers By G. MORAN

Want to nail that next presentation? Use these seven tips.

Whether it's a keynote speech for thousands or a sales meeting for a dozen, we've all seen speakers who keep the audience hanging on every word—and those who have their audiences counting the minutes until they can leave the room. Some folks at the front of the room are charismatic and engaging while others leave us dreading the next time we have to listen to anyone speak.

Public speaking, whether it's on a stage or in a conference room, isn't some magical, innate skill, says renowned speaking coach Joan Detz, author of **How to Write and Give a Speech**. When you look behind the curtain, you'll see that many great speakers have similarities in how they present and perform.

1. THEY GET IN THE ZONE.

"The single most important thing a great presenter does is carve out a quiet space before stepping out onto that stage or platform," Detz says. You need some time to mentally rehearse and get ready so you're energetic and focused instead of frazzled and distracted, she says.

2. THEY MAKE SURE TO NAIL THE FIRST AND LAST 30 SECONDS.

Even before that, you need to spend time understanding and organizing your material, says Ruby Newell-Legner, president of the **National Speakers Association** and founder of 7 Star Service—a "fan experience" consultancy. The better you know your material, the freer you are to engage with the audience and be yourself. Newell-Legner pays particular attention to the first and last 30 seconds of her presentations.

"They're deciding whether they like you or not in the first 30 and you want to plant the seed for the most important thing to put in their heads in the last 30," she says.

3. THEY TAILOR THEIR MESSAGE FOR THE AUDIENCE.

The best speakers tailor their message for their audiences, Newell-Legner says. Sure, you have information that you want to get across, but why should they care? As she designs her speech or presentation, she keeps three questions in mind for after the end of the speech:

- What do I want them to know?
- What do I want them to feel?
- What do I want them to do?

In order to hit the mark in all three areas, she says she gathers information before the talk to find out about the audience, what their concerns are, and what motivates them. If you put some of this legwork into even a small gathering, you're going to be a more effective speaker because people will see that you understand their perspective and aren't just talking at them, she says.

4. THEY PLANT THEIR FEET AND USE THEIR BODIES.

Body language is important for speakers, Detz says. Once she's in front of her audience, she plants her feet to give her a physical sense of balance, which gives her more confidence. Feeling unbalanced by standing on your toes or shuffling your feet can make you feel less confident and will often make you look less confident to your audience, she says.

Speaker and consultant John Paul Engel, president of Sioux City, Iowa-based Knowledge Capital Consulting, began his speaking career by briefing members of the Clinton administration about employment numbers and economic data. Over the years he says he's learned that an enormous amount of the message is transmitted through non-verbal cues. Using some of the same body language cues that you use in conversation, but in a more exaggerated way, can be useful to reinforce what you have to say. For example, move when you're transitioning to a new message. Step forward and bend slightly toward the audience as if you're telling them a secret when you're delivering an important point. Use appropriate gestures like holding up three fingers when you have three points to make.

5. THEY AREN'T AFRAID OF SILENCE.

A bit of silence can be a speaker's best friend—embrace it, Detz says. If you're nervous, pause for a minute. Slow down and take a beat to gather your thoughts or to let a bout of nerves pass.

Engel says that silence can build anticipation for your next message and get people to refocus if their attention has started to drift. "Most people are afraid of the silence, so they fill the silence with vocal pauses(words like "and" and "so"). Instead of using those vocal pauses, if you can use an actual pause, that accomplishes a couple of things.

"First, you're drawing in the audience on an almost subconscious level because you're going to get their attention if you just don't say anything for a little while...they're going to wonder what's going on," he says.

6. THEY MIX UP THEIR PRESENTING STYLE.

If you're giving a lengthy presentation, mix up your presenting style. You don't want to be a talking head for 30 minutes or more. Newell-Legner has what she calls a 20-butt rule. The brain can only absorb what the butt can endure—and if you're pontificating for more than 20 minutes, you've lost your audience, she says. Ask your audience questions or have them ask you questions, get them moving, or otherwise change up how you're interacting with them based on how long you feel you can keep them engaged.

7. THEY DON'T PRETEND TO BE SOMEONE THEY'RE NOT.

Whatever you do, don't be a phony, Newell-Legner says. People will sense when you're pretending or adopting a style that really isn't you. Instead, be the best you possible when delivering your message.

"The authenticity you bring to the story lets you relate to the audience," she says.