

Review: Rocky Mountain LMA July 2006 Program

When engaged in public speaking, Eliminate "noise" to improve communication

By Janet Ellen Raasch

Chamber of commerce meetings. Industry seminars. Professional conferences. Public speaking at events like these is a great way for lawyers and other professionals to establish themselves as experts within a chosen field of expertise.

"While some lawyers consider speaking a number-one fear, most can usually stand up and deliver to some extent," said Brigid O'Connor, MBA. "However, the ability to impress points on an audience with verve or at least consistent clarity isn't the norm."

O'Connor is a presenter for At Ease, LLC (www.At-EaseLLC.com), where she uses speaking and training engagements to help executives communicate with efficiency and purpose. She delivered these remarks at the monthly meeting of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association, held July 11 at The Oxford Hotel in LoDo Denver.

"Communicating effectively is tough," said O'Connor. "There is a lot of existing 'noise' in the channel that can serve as a barrier between you and your audience. To communicate effectively - to be heard - we must eliminate any extra noise we ourselves might add to the fray."

"All speakers have at least a few noisy characteristics," said O'Connor. "Identifying and eliminating them is the first step to better public speaking."

According to a study that was published at UCLA in 1967, what a person says accounts for only seven percent of the success of any communication. Vocal quality accounts for 38 percent. An impressive 55 percent of the message is communicated via the person's appearance as he or she addresses a group.

Easy ways to improve content

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"When you are preparing your content, remember that specific, concise and vivid language 'rules,'" said O'Connor. Practice ahead of time to make sure that these qualities are coming across when you actually make your presentation. Have someone listen and provide honest feedback. Consider practicing your speech in front of a video camera and then reviewing it carefully yourself.



Specificity means using numbers and statistics instead of generalities. "Instead of stating that 'The deposition took a long time,' state that 'The deposition lasted four hours,'" said O'Connor. "Concise language means 'less is more.' Keep sentences short and make sure that each word carries its weight. Vividness requires active verbs, a moderate number of colorful adjectives, and well-crafted stories and descriptions that your listeners will be able to visualize."

It is also important that your language be powerful. "Avoid typical non-power phrases such as disclaimers, tag questions and hesitations," said O'Connor. Avoid disclaimers before you make a statement - like 'I'm not certain, but...'. Avoid hesitations within a statement like 'um' or 'ah.' And eliminate all 'tag questions' after you make a statement such as 'Don't you agree?' All of these habits indicate uncertainty, which makes you less powerful and less credible as a speaker.

Easy ways to improve vocal quality

Your vocal quality accounts for 38 percent of your ability to get your message across. If you want to make a quick assessment of how you sound, O'Connor suggests you consider the volume, pace, enunciation, pitch and tone of your speaking voice.

"To validate your credibility and conviction, you must speak with sufficient volume to be heard easily throughout the room," said O'Connor. "This tends to be a problem for women in particular. Volume is about breath control, so breathing deeply can assure that you project your voice without strain."

Pace has to do with speaking neither too slow nor too fast. In addition, pace is used for variation. A pause can spark the attention of the audience. A faster pace indicates passion; it can also be used to refresh the attention of an audience. If you are going to use a fast pace, you must pay close attention to enunciation. If your enunciation is not clear, you should slow down.

Most of a presentation should be given at a normal pitch that is comfortable to the ears of the listeners. Practice your presentation to make sure that your tone is infused with appropriate emotion. If you are going to say that you are enthusiastic, you'd better sound enthusiastic.

Easy ways to improve appearance

Your appearance accounts for 55 percent of your impact on an audience. "This strikes many people as frustratingly superficial but, given the research, there is no denying that it is real," said O'Connor. "The way you look and the way you carry yourself provide important clues to the audience before you even open your mouth -clues regarding your confidence, competence and credibility."

When speaking before a group, consider the venue and dress appropriately. One rule of thumb is to determine what audience members will be wearing and dress 'one step' above this level. In general, your attire should look 'sharp' - featuring good lines, strong colors and a good fit. It should be clean and pressed. Remove any objects that might serve as a visual distraction such as your name tag or dangling jewelry. What you wear should contribute to, not detract from, your message.

Body language is also important. "Posture should be squared off and strong - whether standing or sitting," said O'Connor.

Avoid clutching the lectern, fiddling with pocket change, turning your back on the audience (especially when referencing audio-visual aids) or obviously riffling through your notes. Gestures should be used purposefully to illustrate a concept, to emphasize a point or to indicate a transition.

Maintain a facial expression that is open and approachable. "Adopt an expression that tells your audience that you are 'present' and 'on' - especially during the question-and-answer period," said O'Connor. "You can look quizzical during Q&A, but not puzzled. There is a difference.

"Finally, eye contact is essential," said O'Connor. "Research shows that audiences will automatically judge you more knowledgeable, competent, friendly and kind if your eye contact is stellar. Maintaining eye contact 40 to 60 percent of the time when you speak with others is ideal. Speakers who maintain eye contact less than 40 percent of the time can be perceived as shifty. Those who maintain it more than 60 percent can be perceived as intimidating."

Practicing a presentation will help with what you say, how you sound and how you look. It will also help you relax. "However, it is good to be a little nervous when you are giving a presentation," said O'Connor. "It keeps you in high gear and helps you convey enthusiasm for your subject.

"When you practice - either in front of someone or in front of a video camera - you learn to eliminate the 'noise' that can interfere with your communication,"

said O'Connor. "This helps you master your nervousness and use it to your advantage."

With these few tips, most individuals can greatly improve their public speaking skills either on their own or with the assistance of a public speaking coach.