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Great Speaking? – It's About Performance over Content

By Gary Genard

Are you married to your content instead of your true love, your audience? Too many public speakers are guilty of this crime of passion. To be in love with your information instead of your listeners is to ruin the marriage of content and influence that makes any presentation a success.

Like many hopeless lovers, speakers can be too easily dazzled by the obvious and the pretty: the selling points and bullet points that they've tenderly selected for their presentation. "But this is a labor of love," we can hear them saying. – "This proposal is *exactly* the way I want it to come out!"

But audiences don't want perfect information delivery. They want a meaningful relationship with the speaker, and ideally, a positive outcome from the encounter. Regurgitating information in the face of this need is simply an embarrassment. We need to *move* listeners when we speak. Yes, our content is part of that equation. But there's infinitely more needed in terms of rapport and emotional connections than can be supplied by our PowerPoint slides.

Think of it this way (and this distinction is critically important if you speak in public): A speech or presentation is a shared experience, a small example of community, in which you and your listeners make an interesting journey together.

You need to prepare for that journey by thinking about how to project such a relationship. When you spend all your time sharpening your information recital, you're leaving that relationship up to chance. Doesn't this sound like a recipe for disaster? After a certain point, in other words, you must forget about gathering and shaping content, and begin to rehearse your performance.

Here's a simple formula to keep in mind: Rather than spend 100% of your time amassing content and 0% time (or close to that) practicing, make the ratio something like this:

40% creating content, 60% practicing

This sounds radical to you, doesn't it? But remember this: You are already extremely strong on your content. It's the reason you were hired for this position; that you spend every business day working on these issues; that you've been selected to make this presentation, in fact. Whether you're aware of it, you already have content coming out of your ears!

What you don't have if you're a typical speaker is a maximum level of comfort on your feet, and a knack for conversing with audiences as if that's the most natural thing in the world. You're up there to give an oral performance, for goodness sake, not to recite facts and figures like a recorded voice on a GPS!

Strengthen the area where you're probably weakest. Your strengths won't disappear in the process.

Spend quality practice time—and a quantity of it as well—learning to be comfortable with audiences. Stand and move in space. Try out gestures. Solidify your eye contact. Use stories and illustrations to give your concepts a human dimension. Sometimes those stories will come to you on the spur of the moment. Use them! Develop your ear to the point where the casual conversational you (the interesting-sounding one) sounds no different from your presentation persona.

The more comfortable you are talking to people, the more you'll feel like yourself saying the things you're passionate about. In no time at all, you'll find yourself loving your audience instead of your content.

Guess how your audience will respond.

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