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Using Speeches to Gain Voters' Trust

Why What You Say Is Not Always as Important as How You Say It

BY GARY GENARD

Every voter looks for a candidate in whom he or she can believe. And candidates can win voters' trust in many ways, some of which have more to do with whom the voter is than the candidate.

One principle always holds true, however, and that is that every potential constituent must be convinced that he or she is seeing a real person on the podium, in television interviews or campaign ads. You may make the ballot through extraordinary political insider skills, but the average voter cares little or nothing about that. What they want is someone who shares their values and is trustworthy enough to elect.

Being successful in business helps, as does being a well-known advocate for a cause; sometimes it's enough just to look trustworthy. When it comes to the real challenge — winning an election — every candidate must rely far more heavily on the ability to speak in public.

I've outlined three simple, yet crucial, rules for building trust with voters through speeches. These rules should be easy to follow, because they involve doing something any good pol already does: Respond to people's needs through conversations. Regardless of the number of listeners, a good speech essentially is a conversation in which every member of the audience thinks you're talking directly to them.

1. Establish a bond with listeners.

In a typical speech, a person transmits 55 percent of the message through body language, facial expressions and other visual clues, 38 percent from vocal quality, and a mere 7 percent from content.

So, 93 percent of what's getting through to the voter has nothing to do with what's

being said, and everything to do with how the speaker looks and sounds. The importance of appearance shouldn't surprise most politicians and their consultants, but the crucial matter of vocal quality might.

Actually, one's appearance and voice are almost inseparable. Politicians must take control of their physical space, while convincing the audience that he or she is worth hearing. All of this should start as early in the speech as possible; in fact, it really starts before. Listeners decide whether to pay attention before the speaker begins. The successful candidate compels the audience to listen by projecting enough physical and vocal energy that it's virtually impossible for listeners to resist sending some of that energy back.

It even works on camera, as I proved in one of my debate prep sessions with state Rep. Martha Fuller Clark (D-N.H.) in the 2002 race for New Hampshire's 1st Congressional District. Clark's closing statement just wasn't catching fire. I advised bringing some physical gestures to her remarks at the point where she promised repeatedly to "always work for [her constituents] in Washington."

She repeated the speech, this time pointing with her index finger every time she said, "I will always..." The effect was dramatic; in our video playback, it was obvious that this part of her closing statement was going to nail viewers' attention.

In other words, successful politicians use physical focus and verbal energy to give the impression of conversing with their constituents while simultaneously coming across as authoritative, empathetic and more concerned with the voters' needs than their own. If that sounds like keeping four balls in the air at the same time, you're right. Nobody

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ever said that convincing people through public speaking was the easiest part of campaigning.

Yet it's also easier than it sounds, because you already have one critical tool that should make these tasks as effortless as breathing: Eye contact. Just as real estate agents say location, location and location are the three most important factors in buying a house, politicians can adopt the mantra of eye contact, eye contact and eye contact.

Start a presentation by looking directly at the listeners (or into the camera lens) and never stop doing it throughout the speech. This is one good reason to practice beforehand in case a TelePrompTer is not available. Take a moment to look at and connect with the listeners before speaking. A smile, a nod or a look of recognition and respect should help establish that bond of communication with listeners.

Incidentally, you can probably take longer than you think both before and during your speech. One of my clients had a habit of flinging her eyes upward during a speech, nominally making eye contact but never really connecting with her listeners. I suggested that she establish eye contact with someone in the audience first and then say the phrase

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or sentence she'd just looked at in her manuscript. The warmth and honesty that suddenly came through made those who came to the practice session unanimously agree that it was like listening to a different person.

2. Reveal who you are.

This advice may sound a bit topsy-turvy in terms of traditional political wisdom. But think about the people you really trust in life. Do any of them seem to be hiding their true motives, wearing a mask, or pretending to be someone whom they are not? Constituents will believe in a candidate more if they think they're seeing the real thing on the stump or in front of the camera.

It's startlingly easy to try to be someone you're not when giving a speech in which you are the main selling point. We all feel — rightly so — that we need improvement in certain areas. But part of the beauty of public speaking is that the public doesn't want a perfect candidate. They're looking for an imperfect human being in whom they can nevertheless believe. A good part of the reason they can believe in you is because you are imperfect as they are. Ronald Reagan was our only actor president, but did any of us ever think we were seeing anyone other than the real man?

Let listeners see and hear the real you. You may dream about sounding like your personal political hero. But it is to your great advantage that you don't look or sound like John F. Kennedy, Bella Abzug, Martin Luther King or Abraham Lincoln. They've been done before, and you have not.

In elections past, voters expected "speechifying" from their leaders. No more. Now we want to discover the candidate as he or she speaks, as much as we want to hear about the major issues of the campaign. Since you've kept company with yourself longer than you've lived with the issues of this election, you already possess the ideal vehicle for delivering to voters what they're looking for in this regard: The sound of truth in your voice. When you commit fully to the truth of what you're saying, your listeners will hear it immediately. Now you'll be talking to the voters you're trying to convince, not making a speech.

It's one of the things you can do to make your speeches as personal as possible. Voters

want to know that you share their experiences in life, the triumphs, foibles and pain that are common to us all. People love to hear stories and personal anecdotes in a political speech.

3. Connect your voice to your emotions.

The best way to tell your story is to let your voice reflect how you feel about the important things in your life and those of your constituents. Though one may think that the connection between how you feel and how you express yourself would be automatic, it is not. Getting a vocal style to reflect emotions can be among your most effective strategies as a candidate.

A current client, U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), introduced a bill recently on the Senate floor seeking a fair trade balance for America's salmon fishery. The legislation would make an enormous difference to the people and economy of Alaska, and Murkowski clearly felt strongly about its provisions. To bring home to Alaskans how fully she supported the fair trade policies of the legislation, I worked with her specifically on this connection between emotions and verbal expression. The bill couldn't sound like policy; it had to reflect the senator's deep personal commitment to the people who would benefit from the legislation.

Naturally, political communication requires a balance between expressing one's most heartfelt emotions and coming across as being too emotional for the job; Sen. Edmund Muskie (D-Maine) proved that point when his 1972 bid for the presidency ended after he wept openly in front of reporters in New Hampshire while defending his wife from a newspaper attack. But that's part of the point, too. Unlike 30 years ago, today's voting public considers a show of emotion, even in men, as a sign that politicians feel genuinely and deeply.

Learning how to vocally express emotional commitments to constituents is a luxury few of society's leaders have had a chance to indulge in on their road to office. Once they decide to run, however, an awareness of vocal dynamics becomes paramount. Anyone can start to pay attention to his or her vocal skills.

Begin by simply listening to yourself on a tape recorder. Is your voice expressive or do you speak in a monotone? Does your speech

include the essential peaks and valleys of pitch inflection that accompany changes in idea and mood, and keep listeners interested?

The longer the speech or question-and-answer session afterward, the more important such vocal variety becomes. A listener or television viewer's awareness needs to be kept interested by the subtle changes in the voice being heard. Otherwise audiences tune out, and your message is lost. What good is it to speak on issues you really care about if your voice doesn't convey that level of concern to your listeners?

Anecdotes and stories constituents can identify with are ideal vehicles for introducing such vocal variety, but they must have a different flavor from the policy issues in the same speech.

That's exactly the strategy I used in one session with U.S. Rep. Mike Capuano (D-Mass.), who tells a colorful story of a sailing trip during which the Coast Guard offered some unanticipated assistance. It was just the kind of rich personal connection that breaks up an official speech, and we worked to make sure it carried the necessary local taste that would both interest his audience and bring back their concentration to the other parts of his speech.

Your voice is an infinitely subtle instrument for expressing what you think and feel. It's the most valuable instrument of all, because you always use it in the presence of the person you're trying to inform or convince. Print simply can't match that level of immediacy and effectiveness.

If this happens to be a difficult area, find a speech coach. It's critical that your voice, like every other part of your political persona, reflects who you really are.

To build trust with constituents, establish a communication bond with them, reveal yourself and allow your voice to reflect how you feel. The best thing about this advice is that you already know, just from living and talking to people all your life, how to do each of these things.

Politicians have sought votes by these means for ages. They may have been called something different, but as principles they've never changed. As always, such principles come down to showing people that they are the reason you're running for office. ■