Communicate an Effective Message

Giving a speech can be a trying experience, even for seasoned pros. Here’s some advice on how to make your speeches effective and memorable.

By Gene Rose

With your stomach tied in knots, your knees buckling, your heart pounding, you approach the podium. It’s time to give your speech, one of the most important yet intimidating aspects of being a lawmaker. Is there any way to be totally prepared? Yes. Here’s how.

1 Know your audience, and know why they invited you.

As any musician who plays at weddings will tell you, know your audience before you take the stage. Mozart will bomb with rock and roll fans. Get as much information as you can about the group beforehand, including their stands on issues, positions they have taken and their involvement in the community. Make sure you have a clear understanding of what they want you to address. You will be better received if you know and address what interests them.

Questions you may want to consider:

◆ How big an audience will it be?
◆ What is the audience’s attitude and knowledge about the subject of your talk?

2 Determine your best delivery style.

Some public speakers do best when they have a complete script in front of them. Others do better with index cards that have only talking points. Obviously all major speeches should be scripted, but for most that you deliver as a legislator, notes often work best.

The problem with notes is that it’s easy to ramble or get off course. Discover which system works best for you and perfect the style so that your speeches are clear and effective.

3 Have a message.

And stick to it. Don’t veer off into other messages, no matter how relevant they seem. You want your audience to leave the event with a clear purpose, not a smorgasbord of ideas that will quickly be forgotten.

“Consider this question: What is my speech about? Then answer that question in one sentence,” advises author Philip R. Theibert in his book, How to Give a Damn Good Speech.

Your speech, advises Peggy Noonan, former speech writer for Presidents Reagan and Bush, should go no longer than 20 minutes. In a short speech, she says, “You have to keep to the essential things.”

4 Keep a pencil handy!

If you are having trouble sitting down and writing your speech, don’t worry. Thoughts, ideas, images, arguments and analogies will come to you on the treadmill, in the shower, when you read the paper, while you talk to your kids at the dinner table or while you are trying to fall asleep at night. If you get an idea or think of an anecdote, jot it down.

When you finally do sit down to write your speech, some of these ideas will seem appropriate, others will not. File the unused ones for another speech. You may also con-
5 Make it catchy.
Begin your remarks with a startling or memorable statement. Get them sitting up in their chairs right away. It is best not to begin with a timid “thank you.” It sounds sincere because so many people start speeches that way. You can thank your audience for inviting you to speak, but do it in the middle of the speech or at the end.

Others like to open with humor, but this can be tricky and dangerous. Make sure your jokes are not offensive or set an inappropriate tone for the rest of your remarks. Use simple language and stick to one theme. Do not overload your listeners with data or statistics. Statistics are most effective when used sparingly. As you write your speech, keep in mind that it will be spoken aloud. Remember, you’re not writing a magazine article. The two forms of writing are different. “You must be able to say the sentences you write,” warns Noonan. “Read that sentence aloud.”

6 Avoid passive sentences.
Active forms of speech make your sentences more forceful and powerful. The passive voice sounds wimpy. Instead of “I was visited by a constituent,” say, “A constituent came by to see me.” Strong verbs help too.

Learn from the Experts
Want to read more? Try these speech writing books available through NCSL. To order, call (303) 364-7812.
✓ Smart Speaking by Laurie Schlof and Marcia Yudkin, $12
✓ Speak Up with Confidence by Jack Valenti, $12
✓ Secrets of Power Presentations by Micki Holliday, $13
✓ On Speaking Well by Peggy Noonan, $13
✓ Public Speaking for Dummies by Malcolm Kushner, $12
✓ How to Give a Damn Good Speech by Philip R. Theibert, $12
✓ The Power of Public Speaking by Marie Stutard, $10.95

7 Sight is the most powerful sense.
Tell a story by painting a picture. Visual images stimulate the listener’s imagination. A phrase such as “balancing the budget is time-consuming and frustrating,” is not as effective as “balancing the budget is like hacking your way through the jungle with a very dull machete.”

8 Do not be afraid to share close personal experiences.
Think of a time in your life — when you were deeply moved by an event or a person and relate that experience. Or share the story of someone you know who triumphed over pain or adversity. Need inspiration? Reader’s Digest is full of uplifting stories.

Even better are personal experiences that place you in the audience’s shoes. Personal anecdotes show that you are human. Think of a time when their interest, whether it be agricultural policy or environmental cleanup, was your interest. If it is a crowd that you know holds a different opinion about an issue, describe a time when you were listening to someone talk about something you disagreed with. What was that experience like for you? Be specific and frank. Getting the truth out on the table puts everyone at ease.

9 Choose your critics carefully.
It is not always smart to discuss your speech with family or friends beforehand. People like to be critics, and they may not react as constructively as you would like. This can undermine your confidence and shift your focus. Find trusted colleagues who understand the importance of speeches to give you honest feedback. You may want to tape or videotape your speech so you can see if your timing is on target, your jokes come off as intended and whether the speech is the right length.

10 End with something upbeat that will inspire.
Your closing gives you an opportunity to tie your speech together and give the audience a powerful impression to take home. Determine if you want to give your audience a call to action or if you want to leave them with something to think about. Try to leave your listeners with a positive last statement. Most important, be respectful of your audience’s time. Don’t ramble.

Getting the Words Right
Advice from Public Speaking for Dummies by Malcolm Kushner.
✓ Use conversational language.
✓ Read it out loud.
✓ Keep the language simple.
✓ Avoid long sentences.
✓ Use the active voice.
✓ Be specific.
✓ Use exciting verbs.
✓ Don’t say “we” if you mean “I.”
✓ Get rid of clichés.
✓ Vary the pace.
✓ Avoid foreign words and phrases.
✓ Be careful with abbreviations.
✓ Eliminate wishy-washy phrases.
✓ Put the speech aside and come back to it.

Keep your closing remarks focused. When you end your speech, ask for feedback. Have an evaluation form to distribute. You can get valuable information for your next presentation.

Theibert lists seven rules for a conclusion. He says it should:
✓ Be worded strongly.
✓ Never be ambiguous.
✓ Be a logical extension of the body of your speech.
✓ Cover all of the problems and assertions that your speech presents.
✓ Be as concrete as possible.
✓ Be something your audience can relate to.
✓ Be practical.

11 Practice, practice, practice!
Even the most seasoned performers practice their remarks. You should too. There is no substitute. You must become familiar with the words you are speaking, the timing and appropriateness of jokes, the effectiveness of stories. And make sure the speech is the right length. Running over your allotted time is disrespectful. Remember that every audience is full of critics. They may have paid or sacrificed time and energy to come to hear you speak. Be prepared to engage them and reward them for attending the speech.

It’s an investment. This may seem like a lot of work for a brief district appearance. But the investment in preparing an excellent talk will pay off. You will be able to use the same concepts over and over again, with only minor changes to adjust to different groups and events.