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Ten tips for creating memorable speeches

Some thoughts on creating one of the most old school, powerful and daunting forms of content there is... the humble speech.

They're long, complicated and can have you pulling your hair out.

They sometimes lead to uncomfortable conversations with senior executives.

And they're a source of angst for many communicators.

But speeches are one of the most powerful communication tools we have. There's no better way of building your impact, influence and writing skills than mastering the art of speech writing.

Here's a few thoughts that might help you.

1. Remember who's speaking

To begin with, there are two things every professional speech writer needs to remember:

- First, you're writing someone else's words... and they're going to take those words very personally.
- And, second, your job isn't to write a speech, it's to empower a speaker.

You may have just written the speech of your life. But if your speaker doesn't like it, you need to swallow your pride and move on.

Sure, have the debate. That's your job.

But know when to pull back.

It's not you standing alone on stage. If the speaker is half-hearted about your speech, the audience will be too.

2. Understand how your speaker communicates

One of the most important things any speech writer can do is understand the speaker's communication style... not just what they want to say but how they want to say it. The best way to do that is to study them. Get your hands on any of their past speeches or ask them about speeches they like. Watch them in action. Study them closely and try to understand how they communicate.

In my younger speech writing days, I found myself having a major issue with a new CEO. To put it simply, he wanted his speeches scripted, was very particular about the words and hated what I was writing. To the point where, frankly, I'm surprised I kept my job.

It wasn't that my speeches were weak or badly written. My Head of Comms was quite happy with them and even the CEO acknowledged that everything he needed was there.

But, he just couldn't read what I'd written. My words didn't make sense to him.

It took a while (and an extremely patient CEO), but I finally worked out why. My CEO, like most people, was a deductive communicator. I'm an inductive communicator. The easiest way to explain the difference is:

- A deductive communicator gets straight to the point... headline then detail.
- An inductive communicator tells the story first... detail then punchline.

That's all it was. I understood perfectly what he wanted to say, but I didn't understand how. And that seemingly innocuous difference in style caused a huge gulf between us.

3. Understand how they prepare

Some speakers just want a few prompting words. Some want bullet points. Some want full scripts. Some want to see the full script first and then break it down to bullet points.

Right up front, you need to know how your speaker likes to work.

Similarly, some won't practice (although you should always cajole them in this direction). Some will practice like crazy.

A Chairman I once worked with took his speech so seriously, he decided to deliver it word for word from memory... with nothing more than about 20 words to prompt him on an autocue. I've never seen an executive practice a speech as much and I've certainly never seen anyone deliver a 40 minute speech verbatim without notes.

But I'll tell you this... his people were still talking about that speech a year later.

4. Research… and research some more

You might be digging deep into market statistics or financials to find the right theme or a 'zinger' key message. You might be researching the experience of others or looking for testimonials or quotable quotes. Or you might simply be seeking an interesting, engaging or funny way to start a speech.

It doesn't matter what your topic is, you can always research your way to a better speech (or any other form of content).

At the same time, keep your eyes open. I once began a speech with a Benjamin Franklin quote I happened to see in the window of Myer (a department store in Melbourne).

You never know where you'll find inspiration. So, go 120% on your research. You, your speaker and their audience will be glad you did.

5. The speaker… not the slides… is the star

Whenever I give a Powerpoint workshop, I always start with the same slide. It's a slide awash with 10 or 12 point words and sentences. The words mirror what I'm talking about… until you get about half way down the page, where you'll find this sentence…

"If you're still reading this, you haven't heard a word I've said."

Not surprisingly, the audience starts chuckling about one minute into my workshop… every time. Point proven.

I don't subscribe to the 'death by Powerpoint' meme. Powerpoint is a brilliant speaker (and audience) support. When used badly, however, it does the opposite. It detracts from the speaker and it can bore and confuse the audience.

That's the last thing you want.

The speaker needs to be the centre of attention. The slides are only there to emphasise the key points or simplify their delivery.

Few words. Simple images or charts. Hard hitting. And try to use as few slides as you can… just when they really matter.

Oh, and axe the on-screen Twitter feed. It might seem 'cool' but it's a shocking distraction from the main game.

6. Get the foundations right

One of the toughest aspects of speech writing is getting the structure right. You're writing something lengthy and it's sometimes hard to stop it meandering.

What are the key points? What order should they be in? What are the transitions between one point and the next?

You can save an enormous amount of time (and produce a better speech) if you carefully map the structure up front.

I use a simple three-column table to do this:

- What's the point? The main message.
- What's the proof? The supporting data, anecdotes etc.
- What's the picture? The slide content (if there is any).

Using a map like this makes it far easier to get the structure right before you start. And it works incredibly well as a basis for the first discussion with your speaker. If you can confirm this map between you, writing the rest of the speech should be relatively straightforward.

7. Forget the rules

You may have noticed quite a few grammatical errors in this article. In particular, you'll see a lot of sentences starting with conjunctions (like 'and' or 'but').

That's the speech writer in me. To be honest, I'm more concerned with tone and meter than I am with grammar. Rules like this might be the way the textbooks tell us to write, but they don't reflect the way people speak.

You're writing something to be spoken, so let natural speech guide you… whether it breaks the rules or not.

8. Think beyond the speech

Good speeches are full of content that can be used to empower all sorts of communication. So don't create your speech in a silo.

Share the speech with your team and challenge them to tailor it for their channels, like media, social, investor or internal. Create a video, audio or slide cast (on Slideshare) and share it across your business and the broader community. Blog it and use snippets in social media.

At the same time, think about other channels when you're writing the speech. A good example here is your key messages… the 'headlines' of your speech. Make sure they're quotable and that they really resonate. That will help your external comms colleagues get more bang for buck.

9. Be human

In 2015, we were all treated to something truly extraordinary. A US President closing his speech (a eulogy to Charlestown shooting victim, Clementa Pinckney) by singing Amazing Grace. Have a look at this video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN05jVNBs64. Listen to the audience reaction… and note your own reaction while you're watching it.

I guarantee you that, in fifty years-time, there will be one Barack Obama speech remembered above all others. This one.

He may not have the greatest singing voice in the world but, my goodness, he knows how to inspire people.

Never forget the humanity of a speech. It's a person standing on a stage sharing personal thoughts with people.

Yes, you'll have all sorts of corporate messages and facts to incorporate, but it's the emotion behind a speech that drives its success… not the facts.

So always try to find that emotional context… the words that really connect with the audience. Try to 'feel' the speech as you're writing it.

And if your speaker's uncomfortable with emotion, work with them. Help them build that comfort step-by-step. Ultimately, you'll help them become a better speaker.

10. Be proud

In these days of ones and zeroes, it's easy to dismiss the old school forms of communication.

But there really are few communication tasks that are more challenging, meaningful and influential than speech writing.

And there are few experiences more satisfying for a communicator than seeing your work nailed on stage.

So, be proud of what you do… and take pride in every single word you write.

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