

Grow Your Practice with Public Presentations

By Wells H. Anderson with Larry Bodine.

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Larry Bodine

Imagine you want to attract more clients in a new practice area. Effective presentations that illustrate your experience and services can reach people who will refer business to you. For example, what if you were an attorney interested in matters involving children and children's rights? You want to work on matrimonial disputes, on cases of children injured in auto accidents, and on situations involving child abuse. Larry Bodine, a business development adviser to law firms and an attorney himself, worked with just such a lawyer.

Bodine encouraged the aspiring children's rights lawyer to participate in an association of children's advocates. The lawyer joined the organization and later served on the board of directors. His participation in the organization turned out to be a great source of opportunities. The lawyer gave presentations to the membership on the subject of legal representation of children and how skilled advocates can help them and their families through extremely difficult situations.

In this article, you will learn about techniques and skills you can develop to connect with your audiences and build your business.

Glossophobia

Do you have at least mild glossophobia—the fear of public speaking? Lawyers may be less daunted by it than most people because of the nature of our profession. Yet the prospect of speaking to a group of people can raise the heart rate. A 1993 survey identified public speaking as the number-one subject of nightmares. As Bodine explains, he was no stranger to presentation anxiety himself, but he took a number of steps not only to overcome his hesitancy but also to become much more effective:

“When I was a young man, I was very shy and introverted. When I had to give a speech, I was very stilted and stiff. I was basically reading my speech off a piece of paper. But I did two things. One, I decided that if I was going to be successful, I needed to be good at making public presentations. Two, I went to a lot of speeches to study not so much what the speaker was saying, but how he or she was saying it. I noticed all the things the speakers were doing to capture the attention of the audience.”

The good speakers Bodine studied used varied techniques to connect with their audiences. They walked around the room and went up to people, sitting right next to them and asking questions. Or, if a person in the audience asked a question, the speaker would write the question on a flip chart so that everybody could see it. Over time, Bodine methodically incorporated the techniques that he thought would be good to add to his repertoire.

Lessons from a Coach

Bodine took lessons from a public speaking coach to build his repertoire and skills so that now, public speaking has become something very easy for him. From his coach, he learned a number of effective techniques. For example, you should always make eye contact with someone in the room while talking. When you finish a sentence, move to another person and make eye contact again.

Another great approach is to develop some closeness to members of the audience by standing on their level. A wireless microphone gives you the freedom to move about and approach the people in your audience. Maintain eye contact as you move. If you are on the left side of the room when you finish a sentence, look at somebody on the righthand side of the room. Then gradually work your way over to that person.

“It is like throwing a lure from a fishing rod and reeling yourself over to a position across the room,” says Bodine. “And then when you are in that position, stand there for a moment, then look at someone else. In an active fashion you are constantly moving around the room. I find this really keeps people focused on you.”

People who are fiddling with BlackBerrys or computers can be a distraction. “I always walk up to those people gradually and then when I am standing next to them, if they have not noticed me, I will ask them a question,” relates Bodine. “It is amazing how you see the laptops close up and the BlackBerrys go away when you do that. It really engages people in the presentation.”

Holding Audience Attention

If you are giving a PowerPoint presentation, try this: After you have made a big point, hit the letter B. That will blank out the screen. Now the audience has nothing to look at except you. When you are ready to move on again with the slides, hitting the spacebar will bring the screen back.

This is a very good technique. You should blank out the screen several times during your presentation so that the audience becomes accustomed to looking at you and not always at your slides.

The very best way to engage the audience, instead of just standing up and lecturing, is to pose a question every now and then. Use a slide with a visual to make this transition.

One that Bodine shows frequently is a picture of a person in a business suit. In the background is a sports track, and the business person is jumping over a high hurdle. The caption is: “What are your most difficult marketing challenges?” He turns to the audience and asks questions. On a flip chart he writes down all of their responses. This approach gets the audience participating in the program. It is much more interesting than standing at the front of the room just going on and on. The audience is thinking, “Whoa, he is asking questions. He might ask me a question, so I had better pay attention.”

Reaching Larger Audiences

The web extends your reach to a much larger audience than in-person presentations. Even if people are right in your city, many who would not come in person are willing to attend a webinar—attending in person requires more unproductive time to get to the presentation and return. Webinars can also reach people all over the country and the world, sparing you a large investment of time and money.

Bodine said that right now, “The state of the art in terms of online presentations is a web seminar.” As a speaker you prepare slides, give people a web address, and provide audio instructions and a telephone number to call in so they can hear your voice. They can follow along with your slides on their computers.

Most webinar services have a feature allowing people to type in questions that the presenter, or an associate, can answer instantly in real time. The audience hears your voice, sees your slides, listens to your answers—the only thing missing is your actual physical presence. That is often outweighed by the fact that you and the attendees do not have to travel.

Webinar Tools

GoToWebinar from Citrix Online (www.gotowebinar.com) is a popular service for giving presentations over the web. It simplifies the logistics of running a webinar by providing tools for inviting participants, sending them reminder notices, and managing questions and answers during your presentations. The controls for the webinar give you important options but are not overwhelming.

Presenting a webinar differs significantly from in-person presentations, so it is important for you to practice and to be comfortable with the controls. GoTo-Webinar has a mute button—vital if you need to cough or clear your throat—and a pause button that allows you to freeze the screen for the audience while you look something up or refer to another window on your computer.

The biggest difference between presenting live and leading a webinar is how you receive feedback. You cannot see or hear your audience all at once, so you rely on a box for text questions and answers and on selectively unmuting the phone or computer microphone of a participant. For a small group you may unmute everyone, but in larger

groups that can be acutely distracting. People forget they are unmuted, and everyone ends up hearing keyboard clicking, background noise, and “offline” conversations.

Text Q&As

The text question-and-answer box available to webinar participants actually has some advantages over an in-person or audio question-and-answer session. People who may be reluctant to ask a question in front of a group can take their time and pose a specific, detailed question in the text box.

When questions are submitted via text, you have the power to rephrase them to make them more understandable or to defer a question for a one-on-one follow-up when it is not of general interest. For each question, GoToWebinar keeps a record of the name and e-mail address of the participant and shows you whether they are now present or have left the webinar.

GoToWebinar also provides detailed reports with statistics that show how long each participant attended, the questions he or she asked, and how engaged the participant was. That information is important for following up after the webinar. A key to your success is your ability to contact individuals afterward, so these reports are extremely valuable.

Live Videoconferences

In the future, live streaming video presentations will become more common. Currently, it may cost \$10,000 an hour to go into a studio, sit in front of a camera, and present a live program that is broadcast over the Internet.

More accessible technologies are free videoconferencing services such as Skype (www.skype.com) and ooVoo (www.oovoo.com), although they are limited to four and six participants, respectively. You can purchase a webcam for \$25 to \$50, get a good headset, and plug them into the computer for live presentations. Watch for videoconferencing options to become more professional and affordable. As very high speed Internet connections become more widespread, expect that you will be able to connect to larger numbers of people without going into a videoconferencing facility.

Presenting on camera requires its own set of presentation techniques. For example, gesturing is important for any speech, but with a webcam you must make sure your gestures are seen in the frame of the camera. This means bringing your hands closer to your face as you gesture.

Movements that are too fast—a problem in any presentation—look even worse over the web. A good zoom feature on the web camera will help the speaker appear more natural. A webcam that is too close to your face makes your nose more prominent and creates a fish-eye effect.

Handouts and Downloads

Never give out a copy of your slides in advance if you can help it. Without handouts, people will be less distracted. They will look at you and will see your slides in context, under your control.

The apparent rationale for handing out the slides first is the assumption that people will use them to take notes. That is not what people generally do. They look ahead to see what you will say next. That takes away from the impact and the power of the presentation. Bodine explains to the attendees that he will distribute a copy of the slides after the presentation.

Providing the slides afterward rather than in advance is really a service to the audience because they are going to absorb more of the material and learn it better if they hear you present it to them. They will get more than if they are skimming through the material on their own.

Follow-Up

If you want to use public presentations to grow your law practice, you absolutely must follow up with your audience. Ask the event organizers whether you can get a list of the attendees' names and contact information. If you are not given that information, have a bowl near the entrance to the room. Invite your audience to drop their business cards into the bowl if they would like to receive an article or some other information on your topic.

A central goal of your presentation is to make a good impression, but for business development, your follow-up matters most. You need to give yourself a way to follow up. You need those e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and office addresses.

Conclusion

Good presentations require familiarity with presentation techniques and careful practice. By investing in becoming a better speaker, you can build your practice. From defining what people want to hear and see to choosing methods and materials, each step is significant. Take advantage of Bodine's pointers and pitfalls to guide you in your presentations. Get out there and start talking.

For more on this topic, call:

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