

Lawyers: Use public speaking To reinforce your professional reputation

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Clients want to hire lawyers and other professional service providers who are thought leaders within a specific area of expertise. One of the best ways to establish yourself as a thought leader is to make a compelling presentation -- on the right subject -- in front of the right group of clients, potential clients or referral sources.

Your presentations can be intimate (face-to-face in a conference room) or public (to a large group in an auditorium) – or somewhere in between. No matter the size of the venue, the principles behind making an effective presentation are the same.

“Just think of Viginian Patrick Henry's 'Give me liberty or give me death' speech,” said Steve Hughes. “What if Henry had put the whole thing on PowerPoint (complete with schematics) and just read his speech off slides to the patriots assembled in St. John's Church that day back in 1775? Would his speech have had the same impact – enough impact to spark the American Revolution? Probably not.”

Hughes discussed presentation skills before members and guests of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain) at a program held Nov. 11 at Maggiano's Little Italy restaurant in downtown Denver. Hughes is president of Hit Your Stride (www.hityourstride.com), a St. Louis-based communications consultancy that helps clients create and deliver world-class presentations. His seminars have been featured on National Public Radio.

“With a bad presentation, a lawyer's best ideas will die a painful death on the conference room table or in the hotel meeting room,” said Hughes. “They will never have a fighting chance.”

Always remember that content is king. “When people think about presentation skills, they tend to think about how they will stand, and speak, and make eye contact and gesture,” said Hughes. “These physical skills are important, but not nearly as important as having something useful to say. Delivery is forgivable. Wasting the time of your audience with bad content is simply unforgivable.”

As you prepare your presentation, consider three things. “First, consider *what* you would like the audience to do, think or feel as a result of your presentation,” said Hughes. “Be specific. Do you want them to take action to update their employee handbook, to think about a new change in mining law or to feel worried about the new ADAAA – so they will follow up with you for additional information?”

“Second, ask yourself *why* they should want to do, think or feel this way,” said Hughes. “What's in it for them? Third, combine *what* and *why* into a single theme sentence. If you can't state your theme in one sentence, you won't be able to discuss it in one hour.”

Once you know *what* you are going to say, and *why* it is important to your listeners, you can work on

how to say it. “It is always a good idea to 'open big',” said Hughes. “You only have a minute – three minutes at the very most – to 'hook' your audience and get their attention. If you waste those first few minutes on generic niceties like thanking the sponsors, as many speakers do, you risk losing audience interest. You'll see the Blackberries start to come out. Make a strong start -- you can always insert the niceties later.

“I use the acronym 'SPARQ' as a reminder of ways you can 'spark' up your opening and the interest level of your audience,” said Hughes:

- **Surprising statement:** Spark your listeners' interest by opening with an interesting fact or a surprising statistic – something with an “ah ha!” effect. If a number is big, break it down into something easier to understand and more meaningful (like how much the federal bank bailout would cost each worker). If a number is small, project what its impact would be if you multiplied it by many people (like how a few drips of gas spilled in the course of each gas-station fill-up add up to many thousands of gallons).
- **Picture:** If you are using visual aids, spark your listeners' interest by opening with a good picture or chart (supporting your theme) – and talk about it.
- **Anecdote or story:** Spark your listeners' interest by telling a story or anecdote that grabs their attention and indicates the importance of what you are going to say.
- **Real life example:** Spark your listeners' interest by opening with a real life example. Think like a news reporter on television, who opens with a specific situation or individual, uses that to introduce the general issue, and then closes by referring back to the opening situation.
- **Question or quote:** Spark your listeners' interest by asking a question. This engages their brains in trying to come up with an answer and, by extension, in what you are saying. The question can be actual (call on them for answers) or rhetorical. An interesting quote (especially from an expert in the subject you are discussing) also works well.

In the body of your speech, focus on the clear development of your theme. Focus on providing the information that your audience needs to know in order to reach a conclusion about what you are saying. “Keep your information straightforward – especially if you are trying to persuade,” said Hughes. “According to a study by Stanford research, a confused mind always says ‘no’. In Missouri, the number-one complaint about CLE presentations was that they went into agonizing detail with no logical flow.”

Hughes recommends the use of PowerPoint for presentations – as long as it is used to clarify and focus listener attention on what you are saying rather than confuse and distract listener attention from your message. “When listeners see a lot of text on a slide, they stop listening to you -- and start to read the slide,” said Hughes. “In that split second, you've lost their attention. Never, never use prose as a visual aid.

“Use words or phrases on your slides, not sentences or paragraphs,” said Hughes. “Put important words in bold and use a lot of white space. Don't make everything equal; use layout and font size to indicate hierarchy. Slides should be speaker-dependent – featuring just headings or images and relying on the speaker to fill in the words. If you want to leave listeners with more information, put it in the form of handouts to be distributed *after* your presentation.”

Hughes also cautions against the common practice of ending a presentation with a question and answer session. “Save a strong statement for last so you can 'stick the landing' – and leave your listeners with a rousing call to action (what they should do, think or feel). Do not abdicate control of your presentation by ending with a flat Q&A session that could potentially turn negative or veer off topic.”

To accomplish this goal,” said Hughes, “position your question-and-answer session second-to-last in your presentation. “Say something like, 'I have one more important point to make – but first, I'd like to know what questions you have.' If there are none, be prepared with, 'A lot of times, people ask me “x.” Here is what I tell them.' Follow up with 'What other questions do you have?' This simple tactic helps you avoid the dread deafening silence after a call for questions – when folks start gathering up their materials, checking their Blackberries and starting to leave the room.”

Prior to any presentation, be sure to think about the “three S's” – slides, speech and souvenirs. “Check your PowerPoint slides for clarity and simplicity and practice your slide navigation,” said Hughes. “The strategic tactic of hitting the 'b' key on your keyboard to temporarily blank out the screen, for example, can help focus attention on your spoken words. Hitting 'b' again refreshes the slide – as well as audience attention. There are many similar and equally useful tactics.”

Practice delivering your speech out loud until you are comfortable – preferably in front of a small, friendly audience of colleagues who can be trusted to provide honest feedback. Finally, prepare a useful print-out of your presentation (to hand out at the end) that includes not only your slide headings, but also your spoken comments – as well as any additional supplementary materials your listeners might appreciate.

“Your listeners are there for a reason,” said Hughes. “Even before you open your mouth – they believe that you will have something interesting to say. Don't blow it. Make sure your content is clear and useful, and that your presentation skills are engaging and well-rehearsed.”