

How to Overcome the Barriers to Truly Great Presentations

Summary: It's the number one skill that's guaranteed to position you head and shoulders above the competition, so why do so many people avoid it? We examine the reasons behind public speaking fears, dispel the myths and show you how you can overcome your nerves and learn the skill that can increase your audience by over 90%

Gerald R. Ford said "If I went back to college again, I'd concentrate on two areas: learning to write and learning to speak before an audience. Nothing in life is more important than the ability to communicate effectively."

It's the top skill that will place you miles ahead of your competition, yet it's frequently overlooked.

My own take on having the ability to speak well in public is that it's probably the single most powerful thing you can learn to do that gives you the ammunition to say "If I can do that, I can do anything". Once you can confidently stand up in public and give a great presentation, you'll never fear anything again.

If you've ever marvelled at the abilities of a great presenter, the clever use of words to draw pictures, the confidence and charisma that exudes from the platform and the awe in which they are held, you'll agree with the above statements.

So why is it that when it comes to attending training courses, presentation skills are not the automatic first port of call? Could it be to do with that oft quoted (probably misquoted) statistic that speaking in public is feared more than death? Let's not go into an examination of quite how ridiculous that would be if it were true. After all, how many of you would really swap places with the guy in the coffin if you were asked to speak at a funeral?

There's no doubt that public presenting can get the palms sweating but, given the benefits you'll get when you know you can do it well, you can't afford to let this stop you. Let's examine what these barriers really are so you can lay your fears to rest and get this most important of abilities added to your arsenal of talents, shall we?

First, examine why you're nervous. There's always a reason for nerves. Examine what the reasons are so you can deal with the cause and go a long way toward eliminating the symptom. Note that I say "go a long way toward eliminating", the chances are that you'll always feel some nervousness which is when you need to remember that nerves are your friends because they keep your senses sharp & show that you want to do well.

Even seasoned performers suffer from stage fright, some had it so bad they could barely perform. Fortunately, the thought is usually worse than the task. Once you get started, you'll often find that your nervousness will disappear. I liken it to knowing that you're about to tackle a drive round London's Hyde Park Corner or Paris's Arc de Triomphe in rush hour. Thinking about it really freaks you out but when you're in the middle of it, you're too busy concentrating on not hitting anyone that it's only afterwards you get to think "Wow, I made it in one piece, and you know what... It wasn't as bad as I'd expected." It's true that the thought is always worse than the activity.

Some of the most common reasons I've found for people suffering from nerves are these:

- Worry about forgetting what you're going to say
- Worry that the audience will think you're a fraud

- Worry about saying the wrong thing and offending somebody
- Worry that someone will ask a question to which you don't know the answer
- Worry that you'll get a dry mouth or get tongue tied
- Worry that you'll finish too soon or run long

Some of the less common ones I've heard were "I'm worried in case there's a fire alarm halfway through my talk" and "I'm worried that the hem on my trousers will unravel in front of everyone whilst I'm speaking" and "I might fall off the stage."

I could dismiss all these as "silly" or "invalid" and tell you that none of them will ever happen, but the fact is that they often will. (Yes, even the trouser hem thing's happened to me and I watched someone tumble off the stage just last week!). Looking down the list, you can see that there's a lot you can do to avoid these situations occurring: being well prepared, stating your qualifications in your introduction, knowing your subject matter inside and out, timing yourself several times during rehearsals, and so on (sorry, I don't have a magic bean to disable fire bells during speeches).

But so what if any of them still come to pass? What's the worst that can happen? Well it's not life or death, you know. You have to learn to keep your fears in perspective. And remember, the audience wants you to succeed. Nobody enjoys sitting through a bad presentation.

Do what you can to be prepared and don't let fear of speaking stop you from gaining that most revered of all skills, the one that will impact every area of your personal and business life. Give yourself the very best opportunity of succeeding and you'll find the rewards are massive.

Maria Davies is the UK's most successful female sales presenter who trains others to overcome their public speaking fears and use presentation skills to increase the audience share for their product or service by around 91%.