

Give Zing to Your Presentation Openings & Closings!

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Recently, I gave a different kind of talk on presentation skills. Periodically, I stepped out of the speaker role and explained why I said or did what I did.

Since speaking in front of people is the number one fear, I'm sharing information on two vital presentation parts that I covered: the opening and the closing. After all, those are the most remembered parts whether you are presenting at an in-house meeting, an "after-meal" talk or a conference workshop.

Get Comfortable With Your Opening

Rehearse your opening until you can carry it off with ease no matter what happens. Since it makes your first impression, be sure it doesn't contain any "ahs," "ums" or pauses in the wrong places.

- *Tell a story.* This is one of my favorites. Hopefully, it has humor and a good punch line so you can build up to the climax. One of my favorites for my "speak easy" talks is this one.

The Roman Gladiator Androcles developed quite a reputation for staying alive. He was frequently thrown to the lions, and, just as frequently, he returned alive. He always used the same approach. Just as the lion was about to eat him, Androcles would whisper in his ear, and the animal would appear to lose his appetite and slink away with a defeated look. Finally, the Roman emperor called him to his court. "Androcles," he said, "I can take it no longer. I need to know your secret." "It's this way, your highness," Androcles said. "I merely remind the lion that when he has finished dinner, he'll be asked to say a few words. I'm living proof that lions don't like to give after-dinner talks!"

The key is to make sure the story fits your topic and can lead right into it. After this story, I say, "I know a lot of *people*, too, who don't like to make after-dinner talks, or after-lunch talks or before lunch talks ..."

- *Use a quote.* One that than be easily adapted to many situations is this one by Abraham Lincoln:

"Things may come to those who wait, but only what is left behind by those who hustle."

Then, you can easily move into your topic by adding, "And, today we're going to talk about the kind of hustle we need to make us the number one real estate agency in the state."

- *Ask a question.* When I speak on effective communication skills, I often ask how many people have read Shakespeare. (Most hands go up quickly.)

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Then, I say, “Good. I bet you can help me complete these lines from Hamlet’s famous soliloquy: ‘To be or not to be ...’” People quickly respond with “... that is the question.” Then, I go on to say that when I talk about communication skills, I like to paraphrase Hamlet and say, “To be is to communicate, and there is no question. You cannot not communicate.”

- *Relate a personal experience.* This gives your talk a flavor all its own and one that cannot be duplicated by anyone else.
“When I was a little girl growing up on a farm in the outskirts of a town of 83 people, I used to stand on my porch and pretend the fields were filled with people who were listening to the stories I made up. Those were my first rehearsals!”
- *Other effective openings can be to:*
 - Summarize the main points of your presentation.
 - Ask a rhetorical question.
 - Make a dramatic statement or give a startling statistic.

Prepare Your Ending

Don’t just let it happen! The mark of professional presenters is that they end on time (even when they have to start late) and make it sound as if the audience got the entire message with a planned close.

- *Tie it back to the opening.* Using my first opening as an example, I say:
“I hope that many more of you will now have the confidence of Androcles when you need to give what you used to think of as a near-death experience.”

It can help you reinforce a good beginning and give you two shots at making your point in the most remembered spots.

- *Use a quote.* One I like when I am speaking on polishing your professional presence is from Ralph Waldo Emerson:
“What you are speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying.”
- *Summarize what you have said.* This is one of the most popular. It goes along with the three-point theory many people use:
Tell you audience what you are going to tell them; tell them; then, tell them what you told them.
- *Use a personal experience.* Again, you can use your own experiences to sum up the points you have been making. However, curb your desire to ramble on about yourself. Say just enough to peak interest and close your subject appropriately.

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- *Call people to action.* You've told them how great your new widget is. Now, ask the board for more funds to produce and market it, i.e, close the sale!"

And, in conclusion:

One important warning: An ending is just that: an ending. It is *not* the prelude to an ending! Here's one more story to make the point:

- One evening the person introducing Thomas Edison for his after-dinner talk went on and on and on. One of the things he said was that Edison invented the talking machine. When Edison finally got the podium, he said he needed to clarify a point the announcer had made: "I didn't invent the talking machine. God did that. I just invented a way to turn it off."

I am now turning off my "talking machine!"

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