



How to Give Political Speeches that Don't Suck

One of the most excruciating experiences in life is sitting through a badly prepared and/or badly delivered political speech. No wonder the fear of public speaking ranks right up there with root canal surgery and an IRS audit.

But it doesn't have to be that way. By simply avoiding two common mistakes and following a few simple secret techniques, any candidate can deliver a speech which won't cause your audience's ears to bleed - or put them to sleep.

First, two of the most egregious mistakes most novice (and many experienced) candidates make are:

- 1.) Transparent pandering. It's one thing to seek common ground with your audience or extend sincere flattery to establish rapport. It's another thing altogether to suck up to them like some kind of political Eddie Haskell. People see right through this kind of crass flapdoodle. And they don't appreciate it. In fact, most will find it insulting and offensive.

2.) The “I” Disease. All too many candidates, experienced and novice, spend most, if not all, of their public speaking time speaking about...themselves. “I did this. I did that. I believe in this. I believe in that. I have a job. I have 26 kids and 83 grandkids. I went to pre-school. I had a puppy. I, I, I, I, I.”

If you truly want to win over your audience, talk about what interests THEM, not you. If you’re talking to the PTA, talk to them about education. If you’re talking to senior citizens, talk to them about health care and Social Security. Don’t go to a gun rights group and talk about abortion. Don’t go to a tax group and talk about environmentalism.

Here’s a quick little tip for evaluating your speeches and inoculating against the dreaded “I” disease. Take a red pen and circle all the instances in your speech where you find the words “I,” “me” or “my.” Then take out a blue pen and circle each use of the word “you” or “your.” If your speech shows more red circles than blue circles, you have a problem. Go back in and try to reword it from the AUDIENCE’S point of view.

OK, beyond that, here are some additional tips for delivering truly effective political speeches.

In a Campaigns & Elections magazine article a few years ago, Jacob Maor - a speech writer and political consultant in Israel - shared the secrets to his success in writing political speeches which connect with voters. “Most campaign speeches are merely presentation of a message and a platform,” writes Maor, “which doesn’t work well with the audience. It doesn’t resonate. It’s heavy, and frankly, it’s boring. In most cases, members of the audience forget what was said within two or three days.”

Sound familiar?

The most important rule Maor says to remember is that you must communicate your message with your heart as well as your brain. “(Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu taught me that people are not quick to forget a good feeling, even after the content of the speech fades away,” Maor says. “It is critical that a speech squeeze a smile out of the audience. You need to show

people ‘a good time.’” Which is why Maor’s speeches always open with something humorous. He notes that at the outset of a campaign, he gathers a dozen or so jokes and has the candidate use only one of them at each speech.

Next, the speech must be local. The candidate is instructed to say something such as, “I am happy to be here today in your hometown of (fill in the blank) and see (fill in the blank).” The thing he or she is happy to see is something local and identifiable, “be it a new shopping mall, business opening, school event, etc.” This is an integral part of building rapport with your audience...to make a connection...before delivering your political message.

Maor then advises the candidate to evoke some nostalgia from the audience by graphically describing a particular problem and a project which fixed the problem. This part of the speech would end with something along the lines of, “Three years ago we started to change things to your benefit. Give me the power to continue to create additional projects like this one. Give me the opportunity to improve your quality of life.” (Note the emphasis on the word "YOUR." Not "I.")

People vote for people they like...and people like people who solve problems for them. Be a problem-solver and the electorate will beat a path to your door.

The next part of the speech is something Bill Clinton perfected in office. Identify, in advance, a local hero. It might be a “football player, an author or a child who had won a chess tournament,” but preferably someone who would not be identified as being very political. At this point in the speech, you ask, “Is Mr. So-and-So with us today? I would like him to come up and stand next to me.”

Of course, you should make sure “So-and-So” is in the audience before using this in your speech.

Once “So-and-So” takes his or her place next to you, put your hand on their shoulder and say something along the lines of, “For me, So-and-So is a source of pride. The immediate political problems are dwarfed in comparison to an ordinary boy from your home town who has achieved such prominence.” Maor says he’s not always able to find such a local hero, but does find a large number of them by mailing a questionnaire in advance to local activists seeking such information.

He also subscribes to all the local newspapers and maintains files of local stories he might find useful in the future. “I have archived details about every achievement that the local population is proud of,” writes Maor. “I have the names of the important people in every town, the names of the local amusement spots and the important workplaces in every region. I have collected amusing anecdotes that have occurred in every town in the country.”

At this point, you move into the meat of your speech, where you talk about a specific problem or problems and explain your solution to it.

Later, you provide contrast by outlining your opponent’s “solution” to the problem and “what is wrong with it.” Contrast, contrast, contrast. In fact, Maor specifically writes into every speech a section which “focuses on criticism - and, at times, mockery - of the opponent.” The objective, he says, is to “take recent pronouncements by the opponent and show how absurd they are.” Maor admits this is often easier said than done.

At the end, Maor’s speeches include a reference to “some current event that was in the news that day” or bring up a new issue for the first time. This part of the speech would start with something along the lines of, “I’d like to share some confidential information with you...” Not only does this flatter the assembled crowd, but it gives any reporters in the audience a “scoop” which would make headlines.

Finally, the wrap-up almost always includes a quote that in some way relates to either the audience or the locale. “As Ronald Reagan once said...” Maor prepares a number of quotes from various sources covering different topics, using the most appropriate for the occasion.

Piece of cake once you know what to do, huh?

Writing a good political speech isn’t something you whip up on a napkin over coffee at the local Dunkin’ Donuts one morning. It takes time, research and thoughtful consideration. You owe it to yourself to invest the time necessary to do it right...and your campaign will benefit immensely. And so will the poor saps stuck in the audience who now won’t be listening to you telling us about how

winning the high school badminton tournament prepared you for a life of public service as an elected city councilman.

So let it be written. So let it be done.

Part 2: 10 Quick Tips to Better Campaign Speeches

There are simple, easy-to-implement ways to greatly improve your speeches even if you're a novice at giving speeches (and especially if you're a veteran who nevertheless delivers boring, painful speeches).

Here are 10 quick tips to immediately improve the "listenability" of your speeches.

(Hat tip to speech coach Amy Ayoub, who contributed unwittingly to portions of this report!)

- 1.) Have your introduction pre-written and keep it short and to the point. Do not let the person introducing you "ad lib" it if at all possible....**ESPECIALLY** if it's a frat brother. Lord knows what he'll say!
- 2.) Do not start with "Thank you for inviting me here today." **EVERYBODY** starts their speech thanking the audience. If you want your speech to be memorable, be different. I'm not saying not to thank your audience; just don't **OPEN** with the thank you.
- 3.) OK, if you don't open up with a thank you, how **DO** you open up? Well, one good way is to open up by asking a question. "Have any of you here have ever heard the phrase...?"
- 4.) Or you could start by asking for some kind of activity. "Raise your hand if..."
- 5.) Or you could start by citing a powerful fact or statistic. "The odds are, four out of five of you here today will/are..."
- 6.) Or this one is great, but can make both you and the audience just a tad uncomfortable. Start by simply standing there for several seconds and...say nothing. I watched Herman Cain do this once, and the one or two minutes of

saying nothing seemed like an eternity. But by the time he spoke, he had every audience member sitting on the edge of their seats. I'll never forget it. Powerful, powerful opening.

7.) Or make a big promise. "By the time you leave here today, you will..."

8.) During your remarks, tell a story or an anecdote. Make it personal. Add dialogue to make it even more powerful. "And then the little boy said to me..."

9.) Include an analogy. "Serving in the Legislature is like..."

10.) And finally, consider basing your speech around an acronym. "What I'm going to tell you about today is J-E-W...Jobs, Education and Welfare." OK, using "J-E-W" probably isn't a good acronym to use (unless you're Jewish and speaking to a Jewish audience!), but you get the idea.

Bonus tip: Don't end your remarks with a Q&A session if Q&A is allowed. Do the Q&A...and THEN do your prepared ending after the Q&A is finished.

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