



Article 202

August 15, 2011

Don't Risk Business Success with Poor Presentation

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Entrepreneurs looking for startup capital, expansion funding or customers are often the best spokespeople for their business or idea. Knowledge of their business plan or product is deep, and they are passionate about their business.

But not all entrepreneurs are good communicators. And when it comes to speaking in front of a crowd, few are born with the skills needed to keep an audience engaged. Fortunately, effective public speaking can be learned.

Preparation increases confidence

Good preparation before a speech removes many of the potential surprises that can undermine confidence and throw a speaker off course. When solutions to obstacles such as equipment failure, audience disturbances or difficult questions are anticipated, they can be handled with ease. Unanticipated issues, if they arise, can be given more focus, making them easier to deal with on the spot.

There are many ways to prepare:

Rehearse. Practicing while speaking out loud and using the same equipment that will be used during the presentation will allow changes to be made ahead of time. Pauses can be inserted at appropriate intervals, speaking pace can be adjusted, and filler words can be eliminated. A rehearsed presentation is more likely to end on time.

Know the material. Presenters should know more about their topic than what is included in their speech. Notes can be used, but humor, personal stories and conversational language creates a natural flow that often makes notes unnecessary. Presenters should avoid reading from a prepared script.

Know the audience. Speakers who have background knowledge of the group to which they are speaking can anticipate likely questions. Greeting people when they arrive turns audience members into friends; it's easier to speak to a group of friends than to a group of strangers.

Know the room. Arrive early to become familiar with the stage or speaker's podium. Last-minute testing of the microphone and any visual aids removes initial fears of inoperable equipment and

increases confidence. If tools aren't working, there's still time to make changes or react before all eyes are on the speaker.

If a problem arises or nervousness becomes an issue, don't apologize. The audience probably never noticed, and an apology shifts the focus away from the speech. Pick one or two friendly faces out of the audience and concentrate on delivering the message to them.

Practice builds skill

Speaking skills can't be learned in isolation, and speaking before an audience becomes easier the more often it's done. Even the best speakers were once terrified novices.

Toastmasters International is a non-profit organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills. Members belong to clubs where they practice giving speeches in a safe and supportive social environment. Weekly meetings provide continuity and promote continual growth. Mentors provide feedback and encouragement.

To learn more about Toastmasters, go to www.toastmasters.org. To find a club in New Mexico, visit www.district23.org.

Finance New Mexico is an initiative of the New Mexico Small Business Investment Corporation (NMSBIC) and its partners to assist individuals and businesses in obtaining skills and funding-resources for their business or idea. To learn more, go to www.FinanceNewMexico.org.

