

Keep Your Audience from Checking Email: 5 Legal Talk Tips

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We've all sat through lots of boring speeches. We are quiet, polite and respectful. But, five minutes into the speaker's presentation, we're checking email. That's because most legal talks are — let's be frank — less than fascinating. So, how can we keep our audience's attention if we're the one on the podium? Why do the majority of speakers get polite claps at the end of their talks while a few select others receive rousing applause?

Having given over 375 presentations to legal groups, bar associations, Fortune 500 companies and corporate gatherings in the U.S., Canada, and England, I've learned a few things about what not to do.

Tip 1: Don't Use a Boring PowerPoint

What do three-year-olds learn from watching television? They learn that everything on the screen continually moves and shifts. Nothing is static for more than seven seconds, and often for not more than three. You don't believe this? The next time you watch television or a movie, see if you can find a camera that doesn't move, or an angle that doesn't change, or the absence of a cut-away to a reaction shot.

We spend thousands of hours watching carefully produced movies and television shows, and what we all have learned is that talking heads are downright dull.

So, if your PowerPoint presentation consists of black text on a white background, if everything comes up at one time, if the audience can read ahead while you're talking, and if you have to use a laser pointer to tell the audience what point you're speaking about, you've already lost them.

The most successful speakers know that nothing should be static on your PowerPoint presentation for more than seven seconds. That means if you have a slide with six bullet points, don't have them come up together — have them appear one at a time, as you're talking about each item.

Tip 2: Avoid Using Lots of Text With No Pictures

We're lawyers. We love words. Lots of words. The more words, the better. Courts just don't "order" something; they "order, adjudge and decree." The sales contracts that lawyers write don't merely "sell"; they "sell, transfer and convey."

Think of your PowerPoint as a billboard on the side of the road. How much time do drivers have to see and internalize what is being advertised? Three seconds. Effective billboard advertisers know that a picture and a few easily legible, memorable words are all that's needed.

So, create PowerPoints that are as effective as catchy billboards. Use color. Use pictures and graphics, making sure you have the copyright permission to do so. Use easily readable text — if the font is smaller than 25 point, you're putting too many words on the screen.

And remember tip 1; have items appear separately. If you want to emphasize something, don't use a laser pointer. As you're speaking, program your PowerPoint to have animated arrows, circles or squares fly onto your page and point out the words or items that you want to emphasize. These graphics are far more effective, interesting and precise than a laser pointer.

Tip 3: Don't Teach the Details

Every successful novelist and playwright knows that showing is always more effective than telling. You can't teach anything substantive in an hour-long presentation. Great speakers don't teach; they inspire their listeners to investigate further and learn on their own.

How do the great speakers do it? By having thought through what the issues are or the traps to be avoided and then serving them up to the audience.

Great speakers don't tell "war stories." They don't even give examples from their own practice, because these tend to be too specific. Great speakers figure out a way to simplify an issue or problem and make it universal, applicable to as many members of the audience as possible.

For example, what would you rather hear: (a) a detailed discussion of the language of and the interplay between ABA Model Rules 5.5 and 8.5 on multijurisdictional practice issues; or (b) a quick example of how a lawyer's use of social media might lead to the attorney being accused of the unlawful practice of law in a state where the lawyer isn't licensed to practice but where he has a large social media following?

If you can capture your audience's attention and focus them on an issue, they will be more likely to research and figure out the rules on their own. It is even better if you've also provided the audience with a paper containing citations to all the detailed reference materials they'll need.

In other words, use your paper to teach, but use your presentation to inspire the audience to go back to your paper to learn the specifics of what they need to know.

Tip 4: Don't Wing It

Sure, you know your subject backwards and forwards. That's why you've been asked to make the presentation. You've prepared a detailed paper on the subject, full of footnotes and learned discourse. And, you have an outline of what you're going to say. So, all you need to do is to quickly review the outline, stand up and present. Right?

No actor would ever appear in a production without weeks of rehearsal, no matter how well the actor knows the script. This is because actors are aware that they are giving a performance that must hold the audience's attention. Every speech is a performance. Not a performance of a memorized script, but a performance nonetheless.

Audiences want to be entertained and inspired. They want to be captivated, enticed to pay attention to what you're saying, and they want to be inspired to do something with the information they have gotten while spending an hour or more in your presence.

Every speaker must determine what mode best fits his or her style. Some speakers are natural comedians, not by telling jokes but by saying things in wry, humorous ways that keep the audience smiling. Some have the ability to tug at the heartstrings; they move us emotionally. Others remind us of our favorite professor, the one whose class we didn't want to miss because of the unique experience in store each time the class met.

Once a great speaker has figured out what his or her natural presentation style is, he or she rehearses so that the talk can be delivered in a way that captures and keeps the audience's attention, from the first word to the last.

Tip 5: Avoid Running Out of Time and Not Having a Wrap-Up

Part of not winging it (tip 4) is rehearsing enough to know exactly how long your presentation will take to deliver. If you have been given an hour to speak, rehearse it so that you can finish in 55 minutes. Remember what the most successful vaudeville entertainers knew — always leave the audience wanting more.

Great speakers never run out of time. Great speakers never close with: "If there are no more questions, I thank you, because I've run out of time." Great speakers have a closing prepared, one that wraps up the issues. Or one that ends with an emotional wallop. Or one that leaves them smiling. Or, best yet, one that combines all three.

Parting Thought

Every presenter has the ability to be a wonderful, engaging, sought-after speaker. We just have to learn what not to do.

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