

The Voice and Swallowing Institute Presentation Skills – Hints for Success

There are many reasons for “giving a talk”: a computer technician gives a training session, a sales person presents a new product, an academic physician presents a patient for review, a professor teaches a class, an accomplished professional in any field is asked to give a guest lecture, a job applicant is asked to give a presentation as part of the interview process, an attorney takes a case to trial. We all know people who are “naturals” at giving talks -- they always sound prepared, they present a topic clearly, they know when to add humor, they hold our attention, their slides are interesting, and they don’t appear nervous. The secret, of course, is that these “natural” presenters have invested considerable effort in acquiring excellent presentation skills and preparing their talk. And often they are quite nervous – they just don’t let the audience know.

If you need to give a presentation, it is probably for an important reason, and you want to leave an excellent impression on your audience. Here are some helpful suggestions for you. These suggestions cover what to do with your voice, your body, the environment in which you will speak, as well as a few suggestions about the content of your talk and how to handle the inevitable fear of public speaking!

The two golden rules of presentations:

1. Keep an eye on the time and don't run over your limit. **Ever.**
2. Practice your presentation. **A lot.**

YOUR VOICE – THE PRIMARY MEANS OF CONVEYING YOUR MESSAGE

The sound of your voice can help you convey your message to your audience, or it can be a deadly distraction (to both you and your audience). It is a common mistake of speakers to spend a lot of time preparing the *content* of the talk, but little time thinking about the *form*; in this case how the talk is conveyed – by voice and by audiovisuals.

The most common problems that speakers have with their voice are:

1. Having an increasingly difficult time keeping the voice clear as the presentation progresses, necessitating repetitive (and increasingly forceful) throat-clearing. This is *almost* as distracting and obnoxious for the audience as it is for the speaker.
2. Speaking too softly for the entire audience to hear easily. This can take the form of consistently being too soft throughout the presentation, or it can be frequent “fade-out”; starting a sentence sufficiently loudly and fading out by the end of the sentence (and repeating this pattern over and over).
3. Speaking with too rapid a rate of speech, causing the speaker to sound breathless, nervous, and unsure of herself. It is annoying (and therefore distracting) to the audience.
4. Using insufficient inflection (pitch, loudness and pausing variations), making the speaker boring to hear, even if the content is interesting. Add a darkened, overly warm room and you are guaranteed to hear snoring or side conversations from the audience.
5. Using insufficient articulatory precision (e.g. “mumbling”). At the most fundamental level, there are two things that you can do that will, to a great extent, overcome these

problems: hydrate and breath!

Hydration

Voice is produced at the level of the larynx (“voice box”) by vibrating vocal folds (sometimes referred to as vocal “cords”). The vocal folds are made up of muscle and a layered, pliable gelatinous tissue covering, the mucosa. The mucosa is the part of the vocal folds that vibrates rapidly open and closed to produce sound. Just as the gears of a car will seize up if they are not maintained with lubrication oil, so too the vocal fold mucosa will have considerable difficulty vibrating without lubrication. Although the exact mechanisms of tissue hydration of the voice production system are not completely understood, a number of related hypothesis have been put forward. It may be that during prolonged speech, such as would occur when giving a presentation, the increased airflow over the mucosa of the vocal folds, throat and mouth, increases the rate of evaporation. Contributing to the problem is likely a little nervousness about giving the presentation, which can increase activity of the sympathetic nervous system that in turn decreases oral mucus secretions and salivary gland secretions and increases overall metabolic rate, causing the body to use more water. All of this acts to further dry the mucosa of the larynx, throat and mouth. The end result -- your tongue is stuck to the roof of your mouth and your voice is creaking and cracking. A simple solution – drink a few glasses of water for the two hours prior to your presentation. And then you should have a cup of water with you while you are talking from which you sip frequently.

Breath Support

We carefully regulate the amount of air in the lungs when speaking. (Think about what you would do if you were told to yell – you’d start by taking a deep breath.) A specific level of air pressure from the lungs is required to initiate and to maintain vocal fold vibration (depending upon the pitch and loudness level, among other factors) When we start out speaking on a lung volume that is above the resting lung volume level, then the natural tendency of the external intercostals muscles and diaphragm is to relax. This makes it rather easy to maintain adequate air pressure for speech. Once we begin to speak below resting lung volume, we must use active muscle contraction to force more air out and hence to maintain adequate air pressure. Therefore, speaking becomes more effortful. And speaking moderately loudly, such as during a presentation to a group, is even more effortful and difficult. There is a natural tendency, in these cases, to increase the rate of speech in an effort to “get the words out” before the speaker runs out of breath. This is a poor strategy that rarely, if ever, works.

The simple solution is to take slightly deeper breaths at the beginning of a phrase, and to take short “replenishing breaths” throughout the phrase. It will naturally allow you to keep your voice louder, prevent you from fading out as much, and indirectly, it will slow your rate of speech. Adequate breath support for speech will also provide the speaker with the flexibility to increase the range of inflections.

Achieving Increased Range of Inflections

Speakers who maintain the audience’s attention and interest are adept at using a variety of inflections in their voice. These inflections are made up of modulations of pitch, loudness, pauses, articulatory emphasis, and pace. Pitch – the musical tone of your voice – should never be constant and at the opposite end of the spectrum, it should not be overly variable (“singsong”). Loudness level cannot be decreased to the point where the audience is unable to

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hear the speaker, but the speaker can intermittently increase loudness, for a sentence or phrase or even a word, to add emphasis and redirect the audience's attention. Rate of speech should be varied with the judicious use of pauses. Slowing down a sentence by providing increased time between each word or drawing out syllables just a little is also an excellent means of adding emphasis to a key point. One of the easiest ways to practice increasing inflection range is to read children's stories aloud. When rehearsing the presentation, experiment with changing the inflection. Listen to how TV and radio personalities use a range of inflections to maintain interest and convey a message.

Vocal Warm Ups

Warming up the voice is important and helpful for professional voice users (singers, actors, and broadcast personalities), for occupational voice users (teachers, salespeople, for example), for those with injured voices, and for anyone who is preparing to give a presentation or wants to make a good impression with their voice. Allow approximately 20 minutes to perform a complete warm up. Ideally, warm-ups should be performed leisurely, but with good mental focus and attention to detail. Make sure you are well hydrated – drink lots of water before and during your warm-up exercises. Pay attention to your posture while you do warm ups. Good (but relaxed) posture is important for full and easy range of motion of the muscles of the articulators and full breath support. There are many vocal exercises that can be used for warming up the voice. A simple exercise for preparing for a presentation is to practice the talk – out loud and at the pace and loudness level you expect to actually use during the actual presentation.

YOUR BODY – LOOKING AT EASE AND NON-DISTRACTING

Posture

Stand up straight. Do not put both hands in your pockets. If you occasionally put one hand in a pocket, that's fine, but make sure there are no keys or change in the pocket. It's annoying to the audience to listen to jangling items in the speaker's pocket.

Gestures

Gestures are important for descriptive support and emphasis. The very first step in practicing use of gestures is to become aware of how you use them habitually. Incorrect use of gestures (too much or too little) is annoying to the audience. Annoyances become distractions. Pay attention to your own gestures in different circumstances (on the telephone, in casual conversation with one individual, etc.) and pay attention to how others use gestures. Ask a friend or colleague for their (honest) observations of your use of gestures. Watch other people's use of gestures. What do you like about their movements? What is distracting and why?

Facial Animation

Pay attention to your natural resting facial expression. For some people, the natural resting expression can be interpreted as sad or bothered. Except for slide presentations in which the room is darkened, audiences spend a great deal of time staring at the speaker's face. Even during slide presentations, eventually the lights come up for Q&A, and then the audience is staring at you, the speaker. The most common error of facial expression is looking overly serious. Using more gestures will help lighten up an overly serious face. Increasing awareness of your facial expressions is important, but tricky to do, since you will tend to change your

expression if you start watching yourself in the mirror. The best way to increase awareness of facial expression is to ask friends or colleagues for their feedback.

Eye Contact

Eye contact with the speaker brings an audience “into” your talk quickly. Maintain eye contact with one person at a time as you complete a sentence (or a thought) and then move on to another person. You don’t have to go in order from person to person, but don’t jump from one end of the room to the other, back and forth. Appropriate eye contact helps control pacing of a talk and contributes to a sense that the speaker is genuinely interested in conveying information to the audience. Mentally divide your audience into “eye focus” areas; quadrants of groups of people. The number of people in each eye focus area will depend upon the overall size of the audience. Maintain eye contact with one member of an eye focus area for a sentence, then move on to the next person. When you have “visited” each eye focus area, begin to move back again over the quadrants, selecting a different person in each eye focus area.

Movement

Do not stand in one place for the entire presentation, if at all possible. Move about the “stage” area (slowly - no zinging back and forth) so that you can address different parts of your audience. In an audience of 20 or more people, spend three to four sentences’ worth of time in each “eye focus” area of the audience. The movement helps the speaker maintain contact with the audience, and it prevents the speaker from becoming locked into a rigid body position.

PRACTICE

PRACTICE IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO TO ENSURE A GOOD PRESENTATION.

There are right and wrong ways to practice. The wrong way to practice is:

- not taking your practice session seriously
- always starting from the beginning of your talk. (You end up with a great beginning and a weak middle and a confused ending, because inevitably you will stop your practice session when you get to the rough parts.)

So, some tips for practicing correctly:

1. Every other practice run: start in the middle of your talk.
2. Take the “dress rehearsal” seriously. Make yourself run through the talk from beginning to end, no matter what, regardless of errors. Once you are actually giving your presentation, you cannot stop or start over, so practice the presentation all the way through from beginning to end.
3. For short presentations (under 12 minutes) at large meetings where there are many talks, one right after the other, it is permissible to read from a script, but make sure that you have read and practiced the presentation so many times that it is practically memorized. It is absolutely essential that you rehearse so that you can look up very frequently. It is very boring to listen to someone read a talk. You must make extra effort to use your voice, body and slides to add interest.

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4. If you keep having trouble at the exact same spot in your talk, over and over, then you will most assuredly have trouble at that spot during the actual presentation. Change the wording or the slide or reorganize that part of the presentation – whatever it takes to overcome the problem.
5. Be aware that the written word and the spoken word are different – what reads well may be impossible to speak.
6. During multiple practices, you will end up changing what you say slightly. That's fine. You are not memorizing lines of a play.

ANXIETY / FEAR ABOUT PRESENTING

Part of the anxiety and fear associated with public speaking may come from lack of self confidence, or negative prior experience. Most however, is due to a common though irrational fear that something absolutely terrible will happen during the presentation and the audience will forever think you are ignorant, foolish or worse. Fear is a physiologic reaction in which the sympathetic nervous system is activated and contributes to the discomforting physical symptoms commonly experienced – especially accelerated heart rate and difficulty breathing. Lots of experience will help abate those nerves somewhat, but even professional actors get “stage fright” – they just manage it and turn it into positive energy.

Many of the suggestions provided in these pages will help you gain confidence and partially allay your fears. There are a few things you can do to help manage the anxiety of public speaking. The first and largest thing is to be well prepared.

Memorize the first few opening sentences of your presentation. This will allow you to get into the presentation and allow the physiological reaction of fear to begin to settle down, without your having to think about what you need to say.

As you are being introduced, focus upon your breathing; slow deep inhalation through your nose, slow exhalation through narrowed lips (to keep the rate of airflow slow). Know that the audience wants to like you. People go to a presentation hoping or expecting it to be good. Most of the time, the audience is with you, not against you.

Don't Apologize For Being Nervous - Most of the time your nervousness does not show at all. If you don't say anything about it, nobody will notice. And if your voice is shaking or it is clear in some other way that you are nervous – calling attention to it or apologizing for it does not help move the focus off of the nervousness, but rather focuses the audience upon it even more.