

7 Reasons Why Executive Speakers Flop

by Mark Sanborn, CSP, CPAE

Few things create a more vivid perception of an executive than his speaking ability. The higher execs rise in an organization, the more frequently they are called upon to address others. Ironically, little or no training is given hapless executives to develop this skill. If they become good at public speaking, it is either a gift of genetics, they get lucky, or a combination of both.

Increasingly leaders are realizing their need for skills development that falls outside of what is typically offered by their organizations. That is one reason why executive coaching has become so popular. Often one of the primary areas coaches focus on is communication, both interpersonal and public.

As a professional who makes his living giving speeches and seminars, I've sat through hundreds if not thousands of executive presentations. More often than not, the speeches I've heard businesspeople make were less than memorable. And far too often the presentations were painful, not only for the speaker to give, but for the audience to feign interest through.

The majority of executive presenters, even those who flopped dramatically, were well-intentioned. Nobody sets out to destroy her credibility with a bad presentation. So why do people fail in spite of noble intentions?

Intention requires technique to be successfully communicated. It doesn't matter how well you want to hit the golf ball. Only good form and practiced skill allow you to consistently do so. Public speaking is no different.

I am puzzled why so many seem to think that speaking well in front of an audience is a natural skill. Public speaking, like all skills, is developed. The more often one speaks, the better one becomes if--and this is a big if--he focuses on eliminating undesirable behaviors and developing needed ones.

The fastest gain that can be made in improving your ability to speak well is to eliminate those things that cause disaster. While I've observed great creativity in flopping, there are seven common reasons why executive speakers fail. I'll explain those reasons and what to do about them.

1. A disregard for time

History has no record of anyone who gave a speech that was too short, but we've all been in audiences when the speaker stopped speaking on what seemed like a different day than he had begun.

This problem--speaking too long or taking more time than allotted--seems to be epidemic among high level business leaders. Most meeting planners value their job too

much to be candid with an executive and tell him that he completely destroyed the agenda by speaking for an hour when he was scheduled to speak for 15 minutes. And no employee is going to complain to the executive's face about talking way too long.

Being self-employed allows me the luxury of being totally honest: speaking longer than planned is rude. It suggests to the audience that the speaker and her presentation are more important than anyone or anything else on the program. The length of a presentation shouldn't be a function of title or power, but a function of how long the executive agreed to talk. If you say you need 10 minutes, quit after 10 minutes. If you need more time, negotiate for it *in advance*. But don't take the next three speakers' time because you either don't pay attention to your watch or you are too arrogant to realize that the high point of the meeting just might not be listening to you speak twice as long as expected.

Start on time and stop on time. Not only will your audience respect you for it, but it will prove that you respect your audience.

2. Unclear purpose

Here's the million dollar question of any presentation: what's the point? Executives who don't have clear objectives for their presentation usually achieve little.

Heaven help you if your objective is "to inform." Duh? Every speech informs, whether by design or by default. Attempting only to inform is aiming too low.

Why not use the opportunity to motivate, inspire or encourage? Why not take advantage of your chance to share a vision or create camaraderie?

Design your speech the way the pros do. Begin by asking, "At the end of this presentation, what do I want listeners to think, feel and do?" Good presenters speak to the head, the heart and the hands. Challenging people with lots of information of limited practical application is more frustrating than inspiring.

If you can't clearly identify a worthwhile purpose for the presentation, you probably shouldn't be making it.

And it doesn't hurt to begin with an overt statement of purpose: "The reason I'm speaking to you today is..." It may not be clever, but it will significantly increase the odds that you'll fulfill your purpose if you enlist the audience early on.

What about speeches that someone else writes for you? It is critically important that a speech writer have access to you and your ideas. Even the best speech writer isn't clairvoyant. Your speech will only be written as well as the input you provide. This is not the time for "hands-off" delegation.

3. Inadequate preparation

There is no excuse for “winging it.” The best speakers are always--and I mean it literally--prepared for what they say, even if their demeanor suggests otherwise.

That brilliant toe-in-the-sand presenter you heard who came up with the wonderful analogy and spectacular quotes “on the spot” really didn’t. She planned carefully not only what she was going to say, but how she would appear “off the cuff.”

Here’s how to tell if a speaker hasn’t prepared: he doesn’t say anything important. To make best use of your time and the audience’s time, think through and practice what you’ll say.

If you saw a Broadway show where none of the actors had practiced in advance, you would demand your money back.

Too bad audiences don’t get the same privilege.

And please don’t ever begin by saying, “I really haven’t thought about what I’m going to say...” There are no bragging rights to that. If you ever find yourself tempted to make that statement, at least be honest and say, “I’m a goober and I’m going to waste your time.”

Henri Nouwen, the Catholic mystic of the late twentieth century, was once frustrated as he prepared for an important speech. His insight? Live prepared, rather than simply trying to prepare. Maybe this is what Tom Peters was alluding to when he instructed managers to have a “stump speech” with the same three or four most important messages ready to give and give again at every opportunity.

4. Failure to capture attention

The scarcest resource in the world used to be time; today it is attention.

The average listener is bombarded with messages from many different sources. From email to radio to voicemail to cell phones, everybody is trying to tell us something, and your attempt to give a speech is just one more bombardment.

That’s why what you say and how you say it had better grab the audience’s attention right out of the shoot. You don’t have time to “warm up.” (“Thank you for inviting me to be here today. It is indeed my pleasure to address you. What a great meeting it has been so far. Blah blah blah blah blah.”)

As my friend and high-powered speech coach Ron Arden says, “In the theater, you’ll never see an actor warm-up on the audience. They warm-up backstage.”

So forget the hackneyed concept of warming up the audience. Hit them square between the eyes with something that will break their preoccupation with what they need to pick

up at the grocery store on the way home from work.

Most importantly, make your remarks relevant. Postmoderns are less interested with the question “Is it true?” and more interested in the question “How does it affect me?” Sure, you need to be intellectually honest to prove your points, but never forget to prove that your message matters to the listener.

5. Pomposity

Ego-driven leaders are more concerned with what followers think about them than they are with what followers do because of them.

But you don’t necessarily have to be arrogant to be pompous. Sometimes it happens accidentally when a speaker confuses impressing a listener with influencing her.

Impressing people is, for the most part, a head-game: it changes what they think of us. Influencing people is a behavioral game: it changes what people do because of us.

A preoccupation with self is deadly. Self-absorbed speakers present to get their needs met, rather than meet the needs of the audience. The audience instantly recognizes it.

One of the best kept secrets in speaking is this: the audience wants you to do well. Everyone knows how painful it is to watch a speaker bomb in front of others, so instinctively, the audience is pulling for you. And they’ll cut you a lot of slack--allow for mispronunciations and other mistakes--if you are sincerely interested in them.

If you speak down to them or try to blatantly impress them, they’ll turn on you like a pack of rabid dogs. It won’t be as obvious as the rabid dogs, but beyond their polite or at least neutral non-verbals, they’ll be mentally dismantling you for being a pompous ass.

You wouldn’t be asked to speak unless someone believed that you have credibility and something to say. That is enough. Don’t undo that assumption through efforts to prove your status to others.

6. Boredom

“Isn’t life a thousand times too short to bore ourselves?” That wasn’t uttered by a tired audience member, but it could have been. Helen Keller said it.

An audience today contains many people who were raised on MTV. That means they spent formative years watching music videos that often contained 150 images in the course of a minute. Watching a talking head is, for them, about as stimulating as watching software load.

Nobody ever flops who entertains. Don't get me wrong: to be simply entertaining is not in itself a worthwhile goal for an executive presenter, but it sure beats the alternative, which is to be boring. Sell the sizzle and the steak.

Great restaurants know that the presentation of cuisine is as important as its preparation. Presentation and perception go hand-in-hand.

"Amusement" comes from two words meaning "not to ponder." "Entertainment" on the other hand, is engaging. The value of entertainment for a speaker is that it mentally engages listeners. I've found the best way to educate is to slip good ideas in on the wings of entertainment.

By the way, telling a joke is risky. When it works, it works well. When it fails, nothing fails worse. The best way to avoid groaners is to use humor in such a way that it illustrates your point. If the audience doesn't laugh, the illustration is still of value. And if they get a chuckle out of the humor, that's just icing on the cake.

7. False endings

Remember this variation of a familiar acronym: FEAR is False Endings Appearing Real.

I've seen it a hundred times. A speaker starts to conclude, even tells the audience of his intent, and then tells a pithy, witty story. The audience responds favorably. The speaker gets a rush. "Wow, they liked that. I've got an even better story," he thinks to himself. And then he ends again, with another story/quote/challenge/admonition/etc. Like a junkie who has just had a good fix, the speaker keeps ending, until there is no positive response, but rather visible signs of disgust. By then, it is too late.

You can only effectively conclude once, yet I've seen executives conclude over and over. Each false ending weakens the message that was in front of it.

The false ending nightmare usually begins with these words, "In conclusion...." That triggers hope in the audience's mind. "Hey, it's almost over!" They expect you to wrap up quickly.

In my mind that means either summarizing or making a final point. Several points, or the introduction of new points, is not a conclusion.

A simple rule to remember: a good ending happens only once.

The beginning of excellence is the elimination of foolishness. You can bump up your speaking performance by analyzing your last presentation by asking these seven questions:

1. Did I stick to my allotted time?
2. Did I develop and present purposefully?

3. Was I thoroughly prepared?
4. Did I capture attention at the very beginning?
5. Did I positively influence listeners?
6. Was I appropriately entertaining, or at least not boring?
7. Did I end only once?

An affirmative answer to each of these questions virtually guarantees that the next time you make a presentation, you won't be a flop. Not only will you be flop-proof, most likely you'll be perceived as an articulate and effective speaker.

Mark Sanborn, CSP, CPAE is president of Sanborn & Associates, Inc., an idea studio for leadership development. He is an award-winning speaker and the author of the bestselling books, The Fred Factor: How Passion In Your Work and Life Can Turn the Ordinary Into the Extraordinary, and You Don't Need a Title to be a Leader: How Anyone Anywhere Can Make a Positive Difference. His latest book is Up, Down or Sideways: How to Succeed When Times are Good, Bad or In Between which was released October 2011. To obtain additional information for growing yourself, your people and your business (including free articles), visit www.marksanborn.com.

For information about having Mark speak for your group, call Helen Broder at (703) 757-1204.