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Reframing Three Major Fears About Public Speaking

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Conversation



Speech

One of the most important aspects of knowing your audience is knowing the number of people expected to attend.

Size Up By Cliff Suttle, ATMG/CL Your Audience

A while ago, I was helping Joe with his first International Contest speech. During our coaching session, he shared an observation that confused him. It seems that last fall, he watched me compete in the Humorous Speech Contest at my advanced club. I lost that contest. However, I eventually advanced through a different

club, and two rounds later at the division contest, I defeated the exact same person with the exact same speech. Joe wanted to know how that could happen. Was it due to a different set of judges? Was the other speaker just having an off day? Did I practice more? Did I make a lot of speech changes? What changed? The difference between the club contest and the division contest wasn't the speeches, it was the size of the audience.

Creating your first speech toward the International Contest is unlike working on any other speech. For most speeches, you plan your speech for the audience to



which it will be delivered. Whether your speech is for a Toastmasters club, a board of directors meeting or a chamber of commerce, you need to do your homework. You should research your audience and adapt your speech to be effective for that group. One of the most important aspects of knowing your audience is to know the number of people expected to attend. This is the key to answering Joe's question.

Different-sized audiences will respond better to different delivery styles. Here's the basic, breakdown:

- Talking to 10 people or fewer is a **conversation**.
- Getting up in front of 20 people is a **speech**.
- If there are 40 people in the audience, it's is a **performance**.
- 100 people or more is a **show**.

Size does matter. In the humorous speech contest Joe referred to, I designed my speech to win the district contest – not to win the club. My competitor, on the other hand, had created a speech to win the club. Whereas the opponent's speech did win the club, it did not translate well to the division stage, where the audience size had grown considerably. Therefore, with each level that the two of us advanced, my speech grew stronger while my opponent's speech declined in audience response. By the time we reached division level and competed in front of 60 to 70 people, my speech was nearing its peak. The crowd responded better, I earned bigger laughs, my big hand gestures and exaggerated facial expressions could be seen all the way at the back of the room. My competitor's speech looked flat and lifeless, especially to the people seated in the back. Hint: some judges do sit in the back.



Joe understood but wanted more details. "How do you tailor your speech to each audience?" he asked. So, for Joe and everyone else, let's look at each group and discuss the differences.

The Conversation:

A small group of fewer than 10 people isn't a speech at all. The best presentation for this size audience is more of a conversation. Highly planned-out topics don't work well here. Loosely organized talks that allow the speaker to change direction quickly work best to keep up with changes in the audience's interests. In a professional setting, a question-and-answer session is sometimes the best way to handle a small group. In a Toastmasters contest, you probably will not encounter this size audience except in the smallest of clubs.

The Speech:

Once you have an audience of 20 or more, this is where true, Toastmasters-style speeches begin. You can still have a conversational tone to your speech, but now there are too many people to have a conversation with each person. Use large hand gestures. Moving around the podium area to connect with different groups works well too. Eye contact should be limited to no more than

five-to-eight seconds on any given person. Eye contact longer than that will cause an audience member to feel singled out. This speech needs to be planned. The audience will no longer be interested in a conversation but

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will want you to lead them down the path to your message. Groups of 20 to 30 people are common at club and small area contests.

The Performance:

When the audience exceeds 40, you need to memorize your speech. Planned speeches can look very inauthentic to smaller groups, but at this point, you’re on stage. Your speech is now a performance. Slight hitches in your performance will be noticeable, especially in a contest speech. Pausing for more than four seconds, looking at the floor while you remember your next line, or using an odd hand gesture will be instantly noticed. Your gestures and facial expressions need to be seen by everyone, so they need to be bigger.

Eye contact on any one person is now limited to three or four seconds. Laughter is contagious; the more people you have, the bigger the laugh. Take time for these laughs to reach their natural conclusion. Pauses up to 10 seconds long can be expected to allow audience members to get their giggles out of their systems. You need to practice facial expressions to use during these long pauses to let the audience know you are still connected with them. Posture becomes more important. You need to appear completely confident.

The Show:

When your audience grows to more than 100, it’s time to raise the curtain and put on a show. Take the stage like you own it! Confidence is the number one effective skill on the platform. Minor glitches in your confidence will be seen from a mile away. A big audience can be like a big dog; they can smell your fear. Your gestures and facial expressions need to be huge. Have you ever seen stage makeup on an actor in a play? During the play they look great, but if you visit back stage after the show, the actors look like clowns. Giant red spots on their cheeks, crow’s feet that go half way across the sides of their heads. Stage makeup needs to be seen all the way in the back row, so the makeup has to be exaggerated. So if you want to be seen in the back row, your gestures and facial expressions have to stand out too.

This also applies to your vocal expression. More variations in volume and pitch are necessary to get your point across. Forget one-on-one eye contact. It is now about relating to the group. Because of the decreased angle

from your eyes to theirs created by the greater distance, everyone in a section of the audience will feel like you’ve made eye contact. Be well rehearsed, but try to make it look as if you just

thought it up on the fly. This is a tricky thing to accomplish; it takes a lot of practice.

The big question is, how do you design a speech that will knock them dead at the district level in front of 250 people, but still play well at the club level for as few as 15? This is the trick.

Here are a couple of ideas I’ve uncovered over the years:

- **First, plan for the big stage.** Go for the gold, play to win, reach for the brass ring, etc. It’s much easier to tone down a big speech than ramp up a small one. Work on your speech from day one as if you have already made it to the district finals.
- **Now, go back through the speech and tone it down for your club and area contests.** Make movements smaller, the inflection narrower and stage movement less dramatic.
- **Next, look for opportunities to work in one-on-one crowd interactions at the club level.** This will help to take it from a big-audience speech to more of a club-level speech. Be willing to ad-lib a bit, to coincide with the audience’s reaction. To do this, you will have to make sure the speech is well under the seven-minute and 30-second limit, so you’ll have plenty of time.

Some clubs and club contest judges already understand that they are looking to advance someone to the next level who can win at the next level. These clubs and judges may be looking for the big speech as apposed to the smaller, flatter speeches. This is a situation you will have to determine by knowing your club and anticipating the tastes of the people who may be selected to judge. It’s always a delicate balancing act. But for the most part, you’ll want to remember that people who play big, win big. **T**

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