

Don't Just Present: Call for Action!

By Andrew Bass, Ph.D.
BassClusker Consulting

*When Aeschines spoke, they said, "How well he speaks."
But when Demosthenes spoke, they said, "Let us march."*

David Ogilvy *in Confessions of an Advertising Man*

When I first started to present regularly it was as a University lecturer, and truth to tell I was pretty bad at it. In the absence of any better guidance, I emulated the lecturers who had taught me when I was a student. The outcome was predictable – my own students were bored rigid, and I got more and more nervous as I regularly experienced that awful feeling of losing my audience (if I ever had them!). I noticed that a disturbing number of my senior colleagues resorted to a quick scotch before they gave a lecture – and I didn't fancy going the same way. I resolved to learn how to handle an audience properly and started to attend drama, public speaking and trainer-training courses, then trying the ideas out in my lectures. Pretty soon I started to get results, my sessions became lively, attendance was up, and presenting eventually became my favourite part of the job. I started speaking outside the Business School, and then running courses, first at Adult Education centres, then for public service organisations and businesses.

My talks and trainings were well received, But I was still missing one key element.

I only discovered what it was when I left the Business School to consult full time. Now my presentations had to do more than entertain and educate – they had to inspire action!

It wasn't enough any more to receive good 'happy sheet' feedback, enthusiastic applause and a bottle of wine or a pair of cufflinks as a "Thank you" from the organiser. I needed business results – credible, interested enquires with a high probability of leading to sales.

The three (and a half) stages in the development of a speaker

I have observed the following stages in the development of business speaker (I am excluding formal speech-making, which is a distinct skill).

1. Few skills, just grit

Most new or occasional speakers fall into this category. People at this stage – although often displaying considerable personal courage – are typically boring and/or uncomfortable to listen to. They are often nervous and apologetic, and their talks have too much information,

with insufficient structure for the audience to be able to grasp a message. This is perfectly understandable when they are young and inexperienced, but pretty inexcusable (although common) in regular experienced speakers such as business bosses, lecturers etc.

2. Basic competent presenter

With some basic training, or careful thought, a speaker may arrive at this second stage: they can give a well organised talk with confidence, stick to time, answer questions - all without too much fuss. This is about as far as most speakers get. These talks may be competent, but they are rarely very inspiring. They tend to rely too much on PowerPoint rather than using it for illustration (heaven help them if the projector breaks down), be very rigid, and include too many technical details. Because they try to fit everything they know into their talk, these speakers may well end up skipping slides or rushing to fit everything in.

3. a) Entertaining, engaging storyteller

Few people reach this stage, because it requires sustained motivation and/or experienced guidance to develop the skills and style required. Speakers at this stage need few if any notes or slides (although they might choose to use them if they think it will help the audience), will tell engaging stories rather than show you lists of bullet points, and may also employ humour, interaction and demonstrations to involve and stimulate the audience. They are comfortable and natural in front of the audience, and get great satisfaction from presenting. At the high end, they may be paid simply for their ability to entertain.

3. b) Inspiring speaker with a strong call for action

I started with a quote about Demosthenes: *when he spoke, people marched*. Speakers in this category go even further than entertaining, amusing or educating, they build the motivation of the audience to take some specific action. It might be to buy a product, set up a meeting, vote a particular way, give a donation, or put their effort and support behind a specific initiative. In addition to performance skills, they put a lot of thought into their objectives and their plan for how they will take the audience from initial polite attention to positive, strong enthusiasm for the desired action.

Ready to move up to the next level?

The first step is to identify at which stage you are now (perhaps you recognised yourself in the descriptions above), and the second is to decide where you want and need to be in order to achieve the desired results. Then it's a matter of selecting the best development activities to close the gap: this could include 'platform skills' training in a group, personal coaching, working together to design presentations and construct stories, video feedback etc as required. Call Andrew Bass, 0121 427 7217, or email info@bassclusker.com to learn more. Alternatively, you can visit us at www.bassclusker.com.