

7 Advanced Presentation Tips To Become a Great Public Speaker

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I recently met the head of sales for a publicly traded company who manages thousands of employees and had reached the top of his field. He wanted to know how to improve his public speaking skills.

“Bill, I’m a little surprised that you want my feedback. I just watched your video. You have strong messages, great stage presence, energy, and charisma. You’re easily in the top 5 percent of all business speakers,” I told him.

“Thank you, but I want to be in the top 1 percent,” he responded.

I’ve been studying communication for 25 years and in that time I’ve learned that great speakers are great because they’re never satisfied. They are constantly looking for ways to improve in the art of public speaking. Recently my new book landed on a list CNBC called, “What the rich are reading this summer.” The list suggests that the super-rich are hungry for information and are also “more interested in developing their minds than their beach bodies.”

This raises a challenge. Many of “the rich” who I meet are already very, very good public speakers. How do you transform an already good public speaker into a showstopper? Here are six advanced techniques I only offer to leaders who are already very comfortable and very good at delivering presentations. The top 5-percenters become 1-percenters because they do the following.

Talk like a thought leader. Good speakers have strong messages about their product, service, or brand. Great speakers are thought leaders who teach their audiences something about the industry, often things they didn’t know. These leaders read a lot of books, white papers, studies, and really think hard about the broader questions facing their respective businesses. See yourself as an educator and teach your audience something new.

Tell personal stories. Good speakers tell stories; great speakers tell personal ones. A good presentation includes customer stories, brand stories, and stories of other successful individuals or companies. These stories are fine, but if you’ve reached a high level of success it’s likely that people want to hear more about you. Remember Bill at the start of this article? He’s very good at telling stories of legendary coaches and how they built winning teams. Bill’s presentations were missing his story, which is relevant and inspiring to the young salespeople on his staff.

Show more pictures and use less text. I was invited to speak at Google headquarters a few months ago and a mid-level engineer approached me after my presentation. “I’m not sure if I would have the courage to show a slide with just one photo or just one word, but my boss does all it the time!” This statement tells me his boss is probably an above-average presenter because only strong, confident presenters would put one word on a slide. The average PowerPoint slide has 40 words. In a great presentation, you won’t see 40 words in the first 10 slides. Great presenters tell a story and use the slides to complement the story.

Speaking of slides, great presentations are artistically designed. Hire a professional designer to build your deck or delegate the task to someone who has expertise in designing websites, marketing collateral, etc. Just because you can insert a photo into PowerPoint doesn’t mean you’re the best person for the job.

Use an animated voice. Great speakers vary the pitch, tone, pace, and volume of their verbal delivery. They’re not afraid to use dramatic pauses. Dr. Jill Bolte-Taylor is a brain researcher who delivered one of the most popular TED talks of all time, My Stroke of Insight. While the talk is excellent, it’s another TED talk that shows the range of Dr. Jill’s verbal skills. In this presentation on how the teenage brain works, she begins at a leisurely pace of 165 words per minute. Within a few minutes Dr. Jill is demonstrating how the teenage brain gets flooded with hormones and she speeds up the pace of her delivery to 220 words per minute. Dr. Jill’s vocal delivery enhances the narrative.

Pay attention to your body language. Great speakers watch themselves on video and pay careful attention to their body language. They make strong eye contact. When appropriate they use hand gestures to reinforce their messages. I know a Silicon Valley leader—someone considered one of the great speakers in corporate America—who hired a body language coach about twenty years ago when he became the principle spokesperson for his company. What your body says speaks volumes. Great speakers don’t take their body language for granted.

Practice a lot, lot more. Great speakers rehearse for their big moment and they do it many, many times. I watched Rory McIlroy win the British Open. On the par-5 16th, he hit a drive 360 yards and on his second shot made the green from 220 yards away. He two-putted for birdie. Great golfers make it look easy because they practice ten hours a day. I’m not suggesting that you practice 10 hours a day for your next presentation, but I am recommending that you put in at least 10 hours of time rehearsing your presentations from start to finish.

As New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has noted, “The day of average is officially over.” Being an average speaker—or even a ‘good’ one—won’t get you the notice you deserve. These 6 techniques will help you make the leap from a merely good public speaker to a great one.