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Tips for Presenting to Young Audiences

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinction

It was my first year in business and I was 20-minutes into delivering a one-hour presentation skills seminar when it was becoming painfully clear that I was losing my audience fast. With this particular group, the early warning signs were all there. It started with some subtle multi-tasking activity followed by a pronounced loss of eye contact by a few individuals at first and then half the group. If you've ever had that experience you know that you only have a couple of options at that point. You can try to pump up the energy level and occasionally re-energize an audience; but, let's face it, the odds are pretty slim. Or you can always start summarizing, cut your loses and go for a well-scripted close. At least there's some hope that your audience will, at a minimum, hear a few crisp closing points and an interesting story to tie it all together. On that particular day, I didn't have a chance to do either. The bell rang at precisely 11:22 and Cheryl Bailey's third period PowerPoint class darted for the door and I was left standing there (unplugging my projector and laptop) wondering what the heck just happened. It was my first time presenting to a group of kids and since then I've had to revise my technique considerably for this unique audience.



Lest you think these opportunities are pretty rare, you'd be surprised. Recently a client of mine was asked to be a keynote speaker for an audience of 300 high-achiever type high school kids. He had a track history of turning around troubled companies and had spent the last three years creating a nationally recognized direct marketing powerhouse from a once struggling east coast printing company. As we scripted his one-hour address, we came across the writings of Dr. Kenneth McFarland, an International Speaker's Hall of Fame Award recipient and a strong advocate for the importance of sharing our very best thoughts with the youth of America. R.S Warn captured some of them in a paper called, *When Asked to Speak*. If you ever think you may be speaking to a group of kids (or perhaps are just wondering how to get through to your own), you will find these insights helpful as you attempt to communicate with today's toughest audience.

Have the Right Frame of Mind

Speakers should approach a young audience with one very important understanding – young people are genuine. Young audiences openly express feelings where adults often pretend. When young people don't like what's being said, they will never act like they do. They are not naturally rude: they just refuse to pretend. This instant and honest feedback is a sterling quality in young audiences, a quality that some speakers avoid like the plague.

Ignore Their Masks

Shallowness, insincerity and callousness are masks young people wear, but rarely indicate who they really are. Our youth will appear untouched on the surface while deeply stirred by stories with human and emotional elements. They will also rally around basic ideals faster than the average adult audience. They do want to build a better world and are grateful for any relevant insights you may provide.

Make It Come Alive

A common error made by business speakers is the attempt to breathe life into a dead script (theirs or someone else's). Unless your heartfelt feelings are involved, it is impossible to bring life to the words of another. Young people are not concerned with factual details of a letter-perfect manuscript, what they need to know is that the person standing before them is real. Hiding behind a script is a very fast way to lose them. The more of yourself you weave into the fabric of your speech the more "alive" it will become for them. When looking for ways to drive home a point, look for what you thought, what you found, what you felt, what you did and how you now feel. Inexperienced speakers, breaking every known rule of speech, have touched young people deeply by speaking from their heart.

Know You're On Stage

This audience is sizing you up from the moment you arrive. When required to sit on stage or at a head table, know that everything you do either "adds to" or "detracts from" the value of the program. Pay full attention to the other speakers on the program as well. When this is not done, it tends to discredit the value of what's being said. Kids can spot disrespect quickly and it will only impact their perception of you.

The True Power is in Simplicity

True power from the platform lies in using simple language to express meaningful ideas. Words are mental brush strokes we use to paint pictures in the minds of others. Uncommon and difficult words tend to leave people, especially youth, confused and insulted. A speaker overly impressed with a large vocabulary and insistent on demonstrating six syllable words is not a speaker at all, only a person who fills a room with confusing noise. (Noise that young people will always add to in very short order.)

Audience Participation

Audience participation helps hold the attention of young people. The younger the audience, the more important this device becomes. It can be as simple as a show of hands and as involved as your time, talent and ability contributed before and after the event. A participation device needs to tie directly with a major point in your message, however. Where this is not done, your audience becomes sidetracked. When asking group questions from youth, you can expect questions that adults would never ask. (How much do you make? How many hours do you work? Have you ever fired anyone?) Whatever the question, they must be handled as an important question and treated with respect.

Never Talk Down

They may lack wisdom that comes with maturity, but the average high school audience of today is better informed than they've ever been before. Young people watch the evening news

and are often more in tune with worldwide problems than some adults. Any speaker who stands before them with an attitude of being all wise will lose this audience in the first 60-seconds. Our young people encounter so much condescending speech in their daily lives that they naturally assume any adult who steps before them will deliver the same. You need to break that perception quickly.

Never Attempt to Be One of Them

The only way you can become like a child again is to become senile and these young people know it. When you earn their respect, they will accept you as an adult, but they will never accept you as one of them. Any attempt to be one of them, just one of the gang, will backfire in your face. Everything you do, your dress, actions and words should aim to project an image of an adult, the type of adult they may want to become.

I've only hit the highlights from Dr.McFarland's insights and I've thrown in a few of my own. From these pearls of wisdom, one thing is clear, the need to be genuine is never as important as it is with youthful audiences. What kids are looking for is often very different than what we may think. As the father of some great kids, I found some basic wisdom here as well. We rarely understand at the time how our words impact young hearts and minds. And as indifferent as they may seem at times, they desperately want to find adults in their lives who they can look up to and model.

Young people may be one of today's toughest audiences, but there will never be any more important.

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