

Your audience needs to know who you are

This past summer, at the Graduate School of Banking at Madison, two students--one from Asia and the other from the Caribbean--asked for help with a problem common to many who are required to speak in public and whose accent, pronunciation or use of English has proven to interfere with understanding.

“While I have lived in the U.S. since age 19, I still have pronunciation and accent issues. I’ve sensed comprehension problems during presentations that I am required to give. My boss tells me to say nothing about where I am from, nor to make an issue of my language skills but, I feel it is important to give the audience an accurate picture of who I am, and why I sound the way I do, and especially for them to feel free to speak up if I seem unclear. When I have done that, it has made for a very pleasant atmosphere,” Susie stated.

Her colleague related similar experiences. Their question: “Should a speaker address culture, language usage, and even national origins openly, to help the audience understand not just the words we use, but who we are and why we speak the way we do?”

National origin, religion, culture and especially clarity of language all have the potential to directly influence the impression a speaker leaves with an audience. If ever there was an area requiring awareness by the speaker or management who puts that person in front of an audience, this is it.

“Audiences really appreciate having relevant background information about speakers. It helps them more realistically define their responses to presenters,” Dr. Tim Plax commented when I discussed these issues with him. Dr. Plax is a Professor of Communication Studies and Administrative Director of the Hauth Center for Communication Skills at California State University, Long Beach, and a recognized authority on Intercultural Communication.

English from all over

“Today, companies across America have employees from all over the world, speaking the English language with varying degrees of clarity. We can easily imagine a presentation by a banker originally from Nigeria, speaking in Texas to an audience composed of people from India, Pakistan, Malaysia, the Caribbean, and the U.S. They all grew up speaking, and educated in English, but none of them will speak the same English,” Dr. Plax points out.

As this column has discussed on more than one occasion, well-prepared speakers try to find out as much as possible

about their audience well before the presentation. It's called Audience Analysis. Here, we are looking at the reverse—an audience analyzing the speaker.

“Where a speaker is aware, or management knows of real issues of accent, pronunciation or some other possible infringement on comprehension, then it might be a good idea to bring these things right out in the open, in a positive way, to show the audience they care about being understood,” Dr. Plax stresses.

Management needs to decide if they are going to put their own reputation at risk, as well as potentially embarrass an employee, by having someone deliver a presentation who clearly lacks the necessary verbal skills. Not everyone is a competent public speaker, and some people—otherwise highly skilled—should never be called on to speak in public unless objectively they can be understood at some reasonable level.

Ask yourself honestly...

If you see yourself described in this article, or perhaps one of your staff members might be asked to speak in public, then a threshold question must be answered: “Am I difficult to understand? Am I asked to repeat or try to clarify what I've said? Do I get facial expressions which show confusion??

Audiences are supportive of most speakers, realizing that it takes guts to stand up there and address a group. But research shows where they listen to a speaker who is objectively difficult to understand due to poor language skills or terrible pronunciation, they can easily become angry with the speaker or whoever put that person on stage.

So, it all comes down to a matter of degree. If understandable, but with some language issues, by spending a moment to share life history, and admitting at times it might be a little bit difficult to follow, credibility will be enhanced.

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