

Opening Options: How to Grab Your Audience's Attention

Six great ways to begin a presentation

THE BEGINNING MOMENTS of a presentation are the most difficult moments both to create and to deliver. Audiences tend to make up their minds about speakers within the first minute or two—so the pressure is very definitely on. You need to start with something clever enough to catch everyone's attention, but you're at your most nervous, and thus it's hard to shine like you want to.

So how do you get started?

The traditional advice—still followed by many business speakers—is to begin with a joke. As we have told our readers many times in these pages, for everyone except the professional comedian, this is bad counsel indeed. You're at your worst in terms of nerves. Don't compound the problem by setting for yourself one of the most difficult public speaking chores of all right off the bat: Delivering a punch line with brilliant comic timing. It's extremely difficult to do under the best of circumstances—even for seasoned professionals.

Instead, you might want to take the advice of James Wagstaffe, a successful trial attorney, in his book on public speaking, *Romancing the Room: How to Engage Your Audience, Court Your Crowd, and Speak Successfully in Public* (Three Rivers Press, 2002). In it, Wagstaffe offers no fewer than eight ways to get started—and none of them involves telling a joke.

What are the other options? Try the "Grabber." That's where you say something surprising or do something shocking to grab everyone's attention right at the outset.

Wagstaffe says, "I knew of a criminal defense lawyer who employed the Grabber technique at the beginning of his summation to the jury. He started by handing out airsickness bags to each member of the jury. He announced, 'I know you'll need these after what you have just heard from the prosecution!' The jury certainly wanted to know what came next."

Or try the "Curiosity Arousal." If you start with an unusual thought or image, one that piques the curiosity of the audience, you'll have them from the start.

Wagstaffe offers this example: "A student in my class started off her speech the following way: 'Lines. There are lines all around us. As the wall meets

Pique your audience's interest by offering a hint of what's to come.

the ceiling, that forms a line. As the door meets its edge, that forms a line. And there are lines in your hand.' The speaker then went on with a fascinating description of the meaning of lines in the hand and how one reads palms."

Here are Wagstaffe's half-dozen other ways to begin a presentation:

The problem to solve

The idea here is to present the audience with a problem that you then solve together. You have to convince the audience that the problem is sufficiently intriguing or important such that it is worth solving.

For example, instead of merely announcing to your internal sales force that numbers are down for the year, and then exhorting them to go out and work harder, ask them right from the start to help you solve the problem. Get their suggestions and creative input first, before you exhort them to go out and work harder.

The "Hey, yeah"

The "Hey, yeah" opening means telling audiences something they haven't thought of before but that they recognize as the truth once it's pointed out to them.

This one is easier to create than it might first seem. There is a deluge of bad news in the media—bad news sells—so look for something good. A trend, perhaps, that others haven't spotted. Or a development that we all take for granted. There's lots of good news out there—find a bit of it, and tell your audience.

The "Whoa" introduction

This opening looks to catch the audience off-guard with a surprising bit of information that causes them to sit up and take notice.

For instance, think of people from the World War II generation, born in the early part of the last century. They may well have gone from living with gaslight and candles to the VCR and computer. That puts any kind of change we've experienced in the past decade or two into perspective. We think that the Internet is a huge change—but going from candles to voice-activated electric lights?

Presuming audience involvement

Here, the speaker starts right in the middle of a story and lets the audience do the work of filling in the beginning from the clues that you give them as the speech goes on. Audiences put in this situation work hard to fill in the picture, and that work means that they stay involved in your presentation.

Think of a movie that begins with the hero in a mysterious situation where the rules aren't clear. You are much more likely to sit on the edge of your seat trying to get oriented in the story. I once heard a speaker enthrall his university audience with the following opening: "Flames were shooting out of my hands as I walked down the pathway to my afternoon class." Don't you want to know more?

The room reference

The goal with the room reference is to personalize your talk in a real, authentic way by relating your topic to something that is directly relevant to the

audience in front of you. Do you know some members of the audience personally? Do you know something about the history of the space you're in or the company you're talking to? Do you know something about the professions of the people in the audience? All efforts at personalization richly pay off in audience interest.

The movie preview

Finally, you can pique your audience's interest in what's to come by promising them something that they will get out of the talk—a bit later on. Will they learn how to do something valuable? Will you give them some

insight that will help them run their businesses better? Will they know how to see the world in a new way once you're done? If you have something exciting to share, don't share it fully at the beginning. Rather, tease the audience with a hint at what's to come.

If you lose your audience at the top of your speech, it's very hard to get them back. So use one of these openers to engage your listeners from the start and keep them with you till the end. □

Nick Morgan can be reached at nmorgan@hmcl.harvard.edu

