

Genuinely Speaking: YOU Can Make Your Message More Memorable

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“Do it Well. Make it Fun.”

Is your information memorable? Do your colleagues, staff, or constituents get what you're trying to convey? Do people see you as fun, funny, or interesting? If not, you should consider tapping into your unique gifts, skills, stories, and humor to make your messages more memorable.

First Lady Barbara Bush was asked to speak at Wellesley College's graduation ceremony. Being an all-female college, many of the students complained about having Bush as their speaker because they felt that she had not achieved success by her own means but rather on the coattails of her husband. Knowing that some students were opposed to her, Barbara Bush started her presentation with this statement: “Somewhere in this audience may sit an individual who will one day preside over the White House as the spouse of the President. And I'd like to wish *him* well.”

With one simple humorous comment, Mrs. Bush endeared herself to the audience and overcame any resistance to her message. The power of her unique perspective and her humor connected to those who were not initially receptive to hearing her.

In the work environment, conveying information is critical to successful delivery of services. Whether the information is for customers, your staff, or the general public, one way to make your information more memorable is to augment your best self with stories and humor.

First, You Have to Be Genuine to Be Good

One of my favorite speakers is DeWitt Jones. DeWitt is a former National Geographic photographer who now speaks all over the country. The focus, so to speak, of one of his presentations is “There is Another Right Answer.” In this program, he shares the story of one of his National Geographic photo assignments. As he tells the story, he shows photographs of the journey. Then, he gets to the pinnacle of the story and shows the central photograph for the story. The audience is speechless. But then, he explains how he waited, moved positions, and took another photograph. When he shows the next picture, the audience gasps in awe. It's better than the first one.

DeWitt is using his unique perspective to share an important lesson with his audience. By showing that he can take an extraordinary photograph only to discover that an even better one was possible, he helps the audience get out of single-minded thinking. There is another right answer. DeWitt's coupling of his unique skill of photography with his experiences at National Geographic give him an angle that no one

else has. That is the essence of Genuinely Speaking. It's tapping into the best that you have to offer - that which sets you aside from everyone else.

So, as you're developing your unique speaking voice, consider what you offer. Think about your background, your family, your jobs, your talents, and your gifts. Draw on each of these items and you will find your unique self. Once you discover that, you can add stories and humor to take your presentations to a whole new level of success.

It's More than Just a Story

I am a huge fan of the Showtime drama Dexter. While I'll be the first to admit that there is very little redeeming social value in the plot of this show, it is absolutely captivating television. Dexter Morgan, the main character, is a serial killer who works as a blood splatter specialist for the Miami Metro Police Department. So essentially, the focus of the show is blood and death.

In contrast, I am not a huge fan of PowerPoint® slides. In case the relationship between PowerPoint® and Dexter escapes you, let me explain. Recently, the CEO of a large healthcare association opened a conference by addressing his concerns about the industry. He discussed the challenges facing the association, the need for more advocacy on a national level, and how the association needed to address the challenges. His slides were brilliant. There were charts, graphs, and beautifully designed, multi-colored diagrams. Yet, had I not been the next speaker on the program, I would have slipped out into the hallway and shoved needles in my eyes.

So why, you may ask, would I sit glued to a show about a serial murder but would be unable to tolerate fifteen minutes listening to perfectly good workplace data?

Well, in a weirdly random yet connected way, I believe it's all about the story – or lack thereof.

Dexter is a good story. Both the plot and the characters are very well developed. As the show progresses, viewers begin to understand more and more about each character and ultimately, they develop a connection to both the heroes and the villains. Amidst all the gore, we're hooked by this intricate web of plot, characters, and the characters' relationships with one another.

With PowerPoint® slides, however, the story is usually missing. It seems that many leaders today have lost the ability to tell the story. The story of the organization. The story of the customer. Even the story of the employee. Instead, they tend to focus only on the data. Along the way, they've left the stories behind.

A few years ago, I helped a CEO with his presentation skills. Several times a year, he gave a presentation for the new employees. He talked about the mission, the vision, the structure of the organization, the goals for the year, and his idea of a world-class organization. After the presentation, he received polite applause and then the

participants left the room to shove needles in their eyes (OK, not really, they shoved coffee and donuts into their mouths. But you get my point).

I suggested that this CEO consider incorporating more stories and humor into his presentation. I reminded him that he was speaking primarily to staff and most of them really didn't care about his flashy pie charts. Instead, they were interested in how they could make a difference in the lives of the people they served.

So, this CEO made some adjustments to his presentation. The next time he spoke to the new employees, he had removed some charts, added a few patient stories, and incorporated a funny slide showing his feeble attempt to water ski. The result was dramatic. He received substantial applause and a dozen new employees came up front to shake his hand. Ironically, his water skiing slide had connected where his pie chart had not. Foible defeats flashy.

The power point of the story is this: A story and a bit of humor will communicate a message far better than any chart, graph, or statistic. So, the next time you need to deliver some information, consider ditching the slides, pulling up a chair, and telling a good story.

Humor Is the Missing Link

Humor researchers (yes, there is such a breed) have found that when teachers and professors use humor to illustrate a point, the students not only remember the point longer, they also can recall it more easily. A January 2004 article in *USA Today* reported that most successful ad campaigns in 2003 had some element of humor. And my hope is that my article will stand out among all the others because it has some humor sprinkled throughout.

One way to make your message stand out is to add humor that makes a link to the message and to your "audience." Starbucks created a hilarious ad using the '70s rock group Survivor. The band created funny lyrics to the tune of "Eye of the Tiger" and sang them as they followed a businessman to work while he drank his canned coffee drink. The humor here connects on two levels. It causes you to remember the ad for Starbucks, and it connects you to all the baby boomers and Gen Xers who like '70s music. I will certainly remember that ad long after an ad that says, "Starbucks has a rich and full-bodied flavor."

Below are some simple ways to add humor to your message:

1. Use funny quotes as illustrations – especially if you're not good at coming up with your own funny quotes.
2. Tell funny stories or anecdotes to support your points. People love to hear about your own foibles (that means the stupid things we all do).

3. Use tried-and-true jokes as long as they are clean and not offensive. The cornier, the better.
4. When doing a presentation, create a funny introduction to give to your introducer rather than using your normal uninteresting (sorry) resume.
5. If you're using visual aids like PowerPoint during presentations, use funny pictures or clip art to enhance your boring charts and data.
6. Add quotes, cartoons, or clip art to any printed materials you provide.
7. Use fun "physical" humor like juggling or magic if you can do these things.
8. Give away fun "prizes" that accompany your information.
9. Develop funny responses to typical questions you might get during the Q&A period. For example, in healthcare: "Most of our physicians are board certified. Those that aren't have been required to watch all the episodes of *ER*."
10. Use props to illustrate your message. This is called the Flight Attendant Technique.

In her book, *The Story Factor*, Annette Simmons wrote, "People don't want more information. They are up to their eyeballs in information. They want faith – faith in you, your goals, your success, in the story you tell. It's faith that moves mountains, not facts."

That's Genuinely Speaking.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP is a former hospice social worker, middle manager, and senior manager who helps mission driven organizations tap into the power of combining excellence with humor. Ron is the author of ***Do it Well. Make it Fun.***, ***Is Your Glass Laugh Full?***, and ***My Kneecap Seems Too Loose***. Find out more by visiting www.RonCulberson.com.