

Gain New Supporters with Dramatic Presentations

**“All the great speakers were
bad speakers at first.”**
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Don't think of it as public speaking — it's acting!
And it's a great way to win support for your cause.



By Bill J. Harrison

Tens of thousands of civic, social, fraternal, and business groups meet every week, usually with a speaker. If you're not speaking to such groups, you're missing a great opportunity to gain visibility, new donors, and support for your cause.

If the thought of speaking in front of crowds terrifies you, good! The best speakers know it's important to be scared. Fear releases adrenaline, increases the heart rate, and makes speakers tense and restless, itching to charge into

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action. Edwin Newman, long-time newscaster and sought-after speaker, suffered from stage fright. He summed up his feelings this way: "The only difference between the pros and novices is that the pros

have trained the butterflies to fly in formation."

Before you present your charitable message to organizations in your area, keep this fact in mind: Members of a group that meets 30 to 40 times a year have heard many speakers on a wide range of topics, including the need to donate to local charitable causes. To make an impression and stand out from the others, you need to be memorable. The best way to do so is to *think theatrical*.

continued on page 16

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Four Key Elements

To inform, excite, and motivate people to support your cause, you must do more than speak. You must perform.

Four elements contribute to the success of a theatrical play. These same factors can make your next philanthropic presentation a success. Let's look at these four essential elements:

1. A Great Script

"Out, damn'd spot! Out, I say!" paints a vivid picture of Lady MacBeth trying to wash imagined bloodstains from her hands. Shakespeare created this line to evoke an image that would linger in the mind's eye. You can do the same thing in your presentations. Your challenge is to create word pictures that will brand your charitable cause into your audience's memory.

As you develop your presentation, remember it must answer seven crucial questions about your organization:

- **Who are you**, and whom do you serve?
- **What makes your organization special?**
- **When** did you start?

- **Where** are you located?
- **Why** do you need support?
- **How** can contributions help your cause?
- **How much money** is needed?

Not having the answers to any of these questions will mark your organization as suspect and you as less than a credible speaker.

Great speakers put meticulous care into their presentations. Every word and phrase conveys the desired message. This may come as a surprise: Famous speakers, who look so relaxed and extemporaneous on stage, spend countless hours preparing their presentations. They know their careers and reputations depend on the message they convey and how it's received.

When preparing your presentation, place yourself in the seat of the person listening to you. What will excite that person? Dull facts and figures? Probably not. Exciting stories about how your organization saves or changes lives will capture people's interest and keep them focused on you.

Use powerful words to evoke the response you want. Don't just say your organization is dedicated to helping children. That's boring. Plenty of organizations can say the same thing. Instead, tell the gut-wrenching story of a little girl

who was snatched from the jaws of death and, through the efforts of your caring staff, is alive and prospering.

2. Excellent Staging

Directors move actors around the stage to accentuate critical lines of dialogue. They know that an actor close to the audience projects more authority than one farther away.

You can use the same principle to add power to your presentation. Never stand behind the podium, showing the audience only your head and shoulders. Step into the crowd. Move down aisles or between tables to talk nose-to-nose with individuals. Carry a microphone, and ask questions of the audience. These techniques will pull attention to you and away from the ice cream dessert that was just delivered.

3. Appropriate Props

When Prince Hamlet says, "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well," he holds a skull in his hands. The scene would not be nearly as memorable without the skull. It's a dramatic prop drawing the audience into the play.

You, too, can use props and visual aids to make your words — and your cause — unforgettable. A recent speaker on alcoholism is a

case in point. She placed a large plastic puzzle piece on each luncheon table. During her presentation, she asked audience members to fit their pieces onto a magnetic board. By the end of the presentation, all the pieces were in place, and the puzzle showed a happy, harmonious family. It was an indelible reminder of how her organization could help mend a family broken by alcoholism.

The possibilities for props and visual aids are nearly endless. Be creative but keep this in mind: Props must be large enough for everyone — all the way to the back row — to see. Slides, overhead projections, and PowerPoint presentations frustrate people if they're too small to read.

4. Believable Actors

In the Stephen King movie *The Shining*, Jack Nicholson was totally believable as a homicidal maniac. His exaggerated actions, horrific facial expressions, and wild gestures made viewers recoil as he rampaged through the film. You don't have to go to this extreme to convey your feelings or organizational mission, but you can emulate the actions incorporated in fine acting performances.

When you stand before an audience don't be afraid to raise your voice. Shout if need be to make a point. Are you shocked by the way pollution is destroying the environment? Don't just say it; show it. Pound your fist on the nearest table; kick a chair or a trash can. Don't just tell people you're angry. Grit your teeth, bug your eyes, flail your arms. Give your audience something to remember. You may not win an Academy Award, but you will enhance your chances of receiving a contribution.

And Don't Forget. . .

One final word of caution. Fred Astaire's advice about dance routines also applies to speeches. He said, "Get it 'til it's perfect, then cut two minutes." It's a proven fact that the mind can absorb only as much as the seat can endure. ■

Where to Find More

For more on making presentations work for you, see these previous *Nonprofit World* articles, available at www.snpo.org/members:

- **Fear of Feelings: Dealing with Emotions in Public Speaking** (Vol. 17, No. 2)
- **How Do Effective Nonprofit Leaders Communicate?** (Vol. 13, No. 1)
- **Face to Face: The Only Way to Make a Real Impact** (Vol. 14, No. 1)
- **Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication** (Vol. 24, No. 6)

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