Ref ram ing
Three Major Fears
About Public Speaking

Feel the fear and do it anyway.
Most speakers want unanimous approval, a standing ovation and all the advantages that accrue from a successful speech. Yet speakers often sabotage themselves in their quest to connect. Sometimes they inadvertently alienate or even polarize an audience through ill-conceived remarks or lack of sensitivity. The results? Lukewarm receptions, sparse applause and in the case of contests, a seat outside the winner’s circle.

Speakers often presume that audiences share their belief systems, values or political preferences. Sometimes it’s because their audience members look like they do, or because in their city, most people do share beliefs. But often looks belie reality. You cannot read people’s hearts or minds. When you presume, you run the risk of offending audience members without even knowing it.

I’ve listened to speakers who presumed everyone in the room voted for the same candidate in the most recent
national or local election, or that everyone in the club shared his belief about an upcoming holiday, or her stance on a war or national policy. It turned out the audience’s opinion was far from unanimous.

Speaking In the Lion’s Den
Sometimes we find ourselves speaking to an audience with different beliefs, perspectives or experiences. In the United States you might be:

- A lone Republican speaking to an audience of Democrats, or vice versa
- A manager speaking to employees
- A Northerner speaking in the deep South
- A woman speaking to an all-male audience

Internationally, you may find yourself across a fence from an audience for a variety of reasons:

- A Muslim speaking to a Christian audience, or vice versa
- An Aborigine speaking to Australians of English heritage
- A Korean speaking to a largely Japanese audience

In each case, there may be differing customs, values and even accents. To ignore such differences would be like ignoring an elephant in the room. The lack of acknowledgement would distract from your actual message. The wise approach is to acknowledge differences in a respectful way.

Inclusivity
Think for a moment about the way Toastmasters often open their speeches: “Madam Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters and most welcomed guests.” This opening is designed to include all who may find themselves in your audience, and it welcomes each. That’s good! We want to similarly cast a wide net when speaking to audiences who may be skeptical, doubtful or reluctant to embrace our message because of their own background, disposition or past experiences. Craft your opening to engage all, especially those who may be in the minority in terms of gender, religion, age or political preference.

Reputations Help and Hinder
I grew up and continue to reside in Berkeley, California – home of the University of California, and the free speech movement, protests and riots of the 1960s. Was I a part of the riots of the late ’60s? No! I was seven years old. I was busy selling lemonade on the corner like any child of my age. Yet some audiences presume that all people from Berkeley are long-haired hippies who are rebels, radicals and draft dodgers with no respect for authority. Some dislike me before I’ve spoken a word, based on reputation. (I dispel their fears with humor and self-effacement in my speech’s introduction.)

The Elephant in the Room
Speechwriter Tom Roberts of Oakland, California, hails from Arkansas, where as a college professor he taught public speaking, oral interpretation and broadcast journalism. Audiences always have two questions: “Why don’t you sound like you’re from the South?” And, “Do you know President Bill Clinton?” After 17 years as a national broadcaster, Tom has trimmed his regional accent, yet based on credentials, these questions color peoples’ introductory impressions of him. Tom anticipates the questions and answers them at the outset to refocus his audiences.

Dynamic professional speaker Mikki Williams of Chicago, with her big hair and big jewelry, has audiences pondering her resemblance to actress Laynie Kazan, or singers Barbara Streisand or Bette Midler. Knowing this, at the outset, she eggs the audience on: “OK, who do I look like?” She poses a little and the audience shouts out...
names. In her speaking school, she coaches all speakers to “go with the obvious. Call on your attributes. So you’re bald, pregnant or have a pronounced accent, reference it. Use self-directed humor to connect with your audience.” If you’re vertically challenged you might open with “Can you see me now?” Then, stand on your tip-toes and ask again!

Blues musicians Howlin’ Wolf and Willie Dixon long ago taught that “you can’t judge a book by lookin’ at its cover,” yet initially that is all audience members have to go on. Your mission is to help audiences get to know, trust and like you through your graciousness, inclusive engagement and appropriate disclosures. Especially at the beginning of your speech, these qualities help you bond with your audience, who will see you’re more alike than different from them.

What are your presumptions about people of other religions, a certain age or orientation? What presumptions might people have of you, based solely on your age, gender, ethnicity, orientation or occupation? Whether or not it’s accurate, it’s affecting how you are heard, seen and perceived. It also affects how you, the speaker, see and perceive your audience.

The Olive Branch

The best speeches are inclusive, bringing audiences together or else offering something for multiple perspectives, beliefs or preferences. In cases where you are speaking to a hostile or opposing party, praise them! It will disarm them. You can kill them with kindness. When you are conciliatory or otherwise generous with your acknowledgment, their respect for you grows. By being magnanimous, you show yourself worthy of further consideration.

A Toast to Differing Tastes

A great, if exaggerated, example of catering to multiple factions within an audience can be found in the famous “Whiskey Speech” of Judge Noah S. “Soggy” Sweat Jr. Delivered to the Mississippi legislature on April 4, 1952, this speech takes a stand on the controversial prohibition topic of legalizing liquor (then illegal in that state). In successive paragraphs he appears to be either pummeling or praising the effects of alcohol. He seemingly appealed to both sides while maintaining his neutrality. Though his speech takes political doublespeak to comic proportions, the lesson remains: Know your audience and give something of value to all.

Appealing to Our Commonalities

When speaking to audiences who appear to be different from you, seek out your commonalities and build upon them. For instance, you may be speaking to an audience comprised predominantly of people whose political beliefs are opposite yours, and this is known to all. Your opening greeting may begin “Good evening friends and fellow citizens...” Indeed you are all citizens. This is why many speeches given by United States presidents begin with, “My fellow Americans...” Other things you may have in common: you are all taxpayers, voters and survivors of that evening’s Chicken à la Firestone. Look for common ground to launch your speech and you and your audience will start the journey together.

When you speak to audiences from other countries, take the time to learn enough of their language to welcome them and help them feel at home. Whether you are using sign language for the deaf, colloquialisms that reflect the locality your audience is from, or you dress the part through a hat, tie, scarf or other sartorial garnishes, you are embracing the audience for who they are, and they will appreciate it – when it’s done with sincerity.
Insights on Inside Jokes

Another way speakers alienate their audiences is through excessive use of inside jokes or references to events or knowledge known by some— but not most— of the audience. Your goal is to help everyone feel like an insider. Too many references to people or topics not known to most audience members estrange them from the speaker. Help people feel included, not excluded. So leave the insider jokes out.

Speak to Win!

Professional speaker Simma Lieberman of Berkeley, California, is known as “The Inclusionist.” She trains organizations worldwide in how to succeed through inclusion. Lieberman knows the value of helping audiences feel better about themselves. “To be an inclusive speaker means that you know how to create community in the short time you are in front of people, by engaging them and making them feel like you are talking to [all of] them.” Simma takes great pains to learn as much about her audience as possible. Before the event, she asks questions. Then she greets everyone upon arrival and uses questions in her opening remarks to engage and include all members of the audience. As a result, she wins their attention, respect and admiration. You can too! When you unite your audience, your applause will be unanimous!

Craig Harrison, DTM, AL, founded LaughLovers Toastmasters 596430 in Oakland, California, to help speakers connect to their audiences through laughter. Reach him via his website www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com.

Tips for Better Knowing Your Audience

- Learn about your audience before you speak. Ask questions, meet them informally, use polls, surveys and questionnaires. Google “online survey service” to find companies that will help you set up Web surveys.
- Meet your audience members on the way into the room. Chat with them one-on-one and in small groups to learn more about them and identify commonalities.
- Use the technique of “Call and Response” to engage and include your audience. “How many of you have children? (Wait for response.) How many of you are children?” (Wait for laughter!)
- Include your audience through generous eye contact that shows you see them as individuals.
- Speak to an audience member in the front, the middle and the back; speak to people on the left, the right and in the center. Vary where you direct your remarks.
- Remember, the shortest distance between people is often a smile. When you smile at someone, they should smile back.
- If you’re from out of town, reference something local about the town, region or state.
- Topical references often connect you with your audience. Reference, for example, the local weather (which we all experience), the traffic jam on the way to the program, a recent event or other common experience. But be careful to reference something that’s truly universal within your audience.
- Remember, you’re not a speaker without an audience. They are the most valuable people in the room. Speaking is a collaborative experience. Share the spotlight with them and they’ll respond appreciatively!