

Your speech - brilliant or boring

 By [Marion Scher](#)

2 Oct 2015

We've all had that moment, whether at a wedding, presentation, conference or the boss's announcement, when our heart sinks at the mention of the word 'speech'! Because let's face it, very few people, Obama excepted, can really give a knockout speech.

In fact these days it's become even harder competing with everyone's mobiles and tablets, conveniently held out of eyesight on their laps. For many, speeches mean catch-up time on their mobile, checking out social media and possibly tweeting about how bad the speaker is.

I remember a number of years ago before social media was a thing, going to cover a conference for a client of mine, who had been named one of South Africa's best employers. The first problem was that it started later than announced, at 6.30pm instead of 5.30pm, which meant everyone was sipping lethal cocktails for an hour before even entering the conference room. The keynote speaker was announced and produced his death by Powerpoint presentation.

During his 45-minute, that felt like 45-hours long presentation, I glanced around the audience to find at least six people dozing off. Today those six have turned into sixty on social media or catching up with emails.



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Just two weeks ago I attended a very large conference which must have cost the organisers massive amounts of money. This culminated in a gala awards evening where the surprise entertainer was a top South African singer. Nothing was spared to produce something special for their clients, except for one small point, their speeches and their MC for the evening, who was so bad I can only imagine she was one of their own employees. Saved money there...

The MC, who only had a few linking words to say whilst introducing various people, consistently stumbled over her words, reading from a piece of paper what she easily could have memorised. As the evening wore on and the wine flowed, her performance deteriorated further.

And then there was the boss's speech. Once again his 'heartfelt' words were being read. You'd really think he could speak from the heart about his company and how much the gathered assembly meant to him.

Just yesterday whilst running speechwriting training with a major SA company I was asked whether a) could anyone give a good speech given the right material and b) are good speakers born with this gift or can they be taught.

The answers aren't cut and dried. To answer the first question, it really helps to have the right mix of words and visuals to work with. The second answer is yes and no. Great speakers definitely have a built in gift of connecting with an audience, as does someone like Trevor Noah - but can they be taught? Well, as someone who's worked with many people on presenting I have to say that you can definitely improve anyone's performance but to what level? Some people unfortunately should never take the stage.

Here are some tips on speech writing and presenting:

- Use good, short visuals (video, photos, podcasts)
 - Keep the speech as short as possible - don't let people reach for their mobiles
 - Never try and get more than three key points across
 - Don't tell people what you're going to talk about - just talk about it
 - Know who's in your audience and speak to them
 - Tell them things they don't already know
 - Don't use overcrowded slides
 - If you're using visuals let someone else run them for you
 - Use real stories that relate the topic of the speech
 - Find these stories from within your organisation
 - Almost never start with a joke - not everyone in our vast array of cultures will appreciate it
 - But do use humour - be a little self-effacing
 - Make your speech personal - talk about what happened to you recently that has relevance to the speech. Even a funny family story. Something your wife/husband/kid did or said.
 - Get the audience involved - ask them a question. 'How many years have you been 29/40?' Who has the perfect life?
 - End on a high note - give them something to think about/take away
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- Above all, rehearse, rehearse and then rehearse some more...

ABOUT MARION SCHER

Marion Scher (www.mediaamentors.co.za) is an award-winning journalist, lecturer, media trainer and consultant with 25 years' experience in the industry. For more of her writing, go to her Bizcommunity profile or to Twitter @marionscher.

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