**Better Public Speaking: 6 Tips, 6 Sins and 1 Golden Rule**

My brain was under assault. Productive thought had long since vanished. I stopped taking notes two hours ago. More coffee was out of the question -- my eyes already were twitching from too much caffeine. My mind wandered. In three hours I knew I would be at a baseball game with my family – but how would I pass the time until then? I couldn’t escape by playing with my mobile device because it couldn’t get a signal. I’m not actually in this photo, but I could have been.

I left the conference feeling drained and disappointed. It had been a disaster – two days of my life I will never have back. What happened? The conference focused on energy industry issues I knew were important. The session descriptions piqued my interest. The speakers boasted solid credentials. I had secured a complimentary registration, so my disappointment wasn’t a question of buyer’s remorse. The quality of the speakers doomed the event for me.

At this energy conference, some of the worst talks were given by people responsible for marketing or business development – people who should **know** how to speak in public. I won’t name the conference organizer or topic because I believe the quality of the event was anomalously low. I had attended several of this group’s events in the past and typically left feeling energized and enlightened, but this particular event was a clunker.

Let’s be honest – bad speakers also find their way into utility conferences, don’t they? In fact, the plague of poor public speaking is not limited to specific industries, issues, titles or even [genders](http://skillcrush.com/2013/05/28/why-women-need-good-presentation-skills/?goback=%2Enmp_*1_*1_*1_*1_*1_*1_*1_*1_*1_*1). **Great public speakers are rare**. I don’t claim to be one. But I aspire to become one. I speak at industry conferences. I coach people that want to improve their public-speaking skills. And I have sat through numerous less-than-electrifying conference sessions and PowerPoint presentations during my 25 years in the utility business.

There’s an important distinction between public speaking and using PowerPoint to deliver a speech. Perfectly fine, even terrific, talks can be delivered without the use of PowerPoint. A recent article in *Harvard Business Review*, [“How to Give a Killer Presentation,”](http://hbr.org/2013/06/how-to-give-a-killer-presentation/ar/1) effectively makes the point that great public speaking need not involve PowerPoint.

Today, I won’t focus on how to use PowerPoint more effectively. That’s a worthwhile topic, and I expect to cover that in a future post. I prefer to start at a more strategic level: what to do, and what to avoid, if you want to deliver a great public speech.

6 Tips for Great Public Speaking

* Have something meaningful to say
* Practice delivering your talk verbatim at least three times
* Create a personal connection with your audience within the first 30 seconds of your talk
* Tell stories to illuminate problems that are relevant to the audience
* Check in with your audience from time to time
* Seek to delight and inform

6 Sins Commonly Committed by Public Speakers

* Start your speech by apologizing
* Hide behind the podium
* Spend your time reading bullet points on PowerPoint slides
* Try to cover too much, and in too much detail
* Rely too heavily on words to tell your story, at the expense of art and anecdotes
* End your speech without concluding

1 Golden Rule:

* Don’t be boring.

An article in *Harvard Business Review*, [“The Kinesthetic Speaker—Putting Words into Action,”](http://hbr.org/2001/04/the-kinesthetic-speaker-putting-action-into-words/ar/) changed my view of public speaking. Maybe you will find it similarly illuminating.

Do public speaking skills matter if you are not on the speaking circuit? Yes! Public speaking is just one form of oral communications. Regardless of your specific function within your utility, to a large and increasing degree, your professional success depends on effective oral communications. And public-speaking tips can easily be used in many other communications settings.

Think about the strategic challenges facing your utility – reorganizing, deploying new technology, introducing a new service or redesigning a business process. Most of these initiatives are being implemented via cross-functional teams. You may be asked to lead one of those teams. Many of those initiatives fail, often because of poor communications skills. If you are a skilled oral communicator, you are more likely to succeed.

Your job may not require being interviewed by the news media. And you may not have to regularly lead large, all-hands meetings at your utility. But if part of your job involves influencing others, **strong oral communications skills will make you more successful.**