



How to Speak Easy

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat e-update on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

Earlier this month, U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner appeared before Congress to present his department's plans for the much ballyhooed gazillion-dollar stimulus package aimed at reviving the country's freefalling economy. As you may recall, both Republican and Democratic pundits lambasted the speech for its lack of specific details.

Less publicized but more damning, in my opinion, were the critiques of Geithner's amateurish presentation skills. Mike Barnicle, a frequent co-host on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" news show, said the new appointee looked like a frightened teen-ager being quizzed by his angry parents about arriving home past curfew. "Geithner seemed like a kid with no idea what to say," the TV pundit said. Barnicle's television compadres, including host and onetime congressman Joe Scarborough, vigorously agreed. They chimed in with references to Geithner's darting eyes, wrinkled forehead, and twitching chin.

I felt such empathy for Geithner that I actually hoped that, at the time of the comments on the early-morning program, he was busy brushing his teeth rather than watching television. The "Morning Joe" participants, who come from various political persuasions, were universally scathing.

To be frank, I think the treasury secretary suffered greatly from subconscious comparisons to his new boss President Barack Obama. He, as you undoubtedly know, has developed a reputation as a world-class orator. If the truth be known, however, Geithner's lackluster performance in a high-stakes presentation was more the norm than the exception. How do I know? I teach presentation skills. And, generally speaking, the business executives I work with come off as either stiff automatons or nervous wrecks.

Because of the rigors of educations that often focused on technology, few of my participants have had the time or inclination to get professional coaching to upgrade their communications skills. But there are plenty of opportunities. My next open-to-the-public presentation skills class, for example, is from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Friday, April 3, at the Associated Business Contractors' training room in East Norriton, Pa., just outside Philadelphia. To get more information or to sign up, simply contact jjudge@abcsepa.org or check out www.abcsepa.org.

Meanwhile, here are some free tips on improving your presentation skills:

Study the performances of good speakers. In my DVD library, I have collections of speeches by the famous and not-so-famous, including U.S. Secretary or State Hillary Clinton, former New York Governor Mario Cuomo, and professional trainer Kathy Long. Pay close attention to nuances such as the length of time these people pause before making a key point. The little things count.

Identify your strengths. When I started speaking professionally almost 20 years ago, I thought I needed to appear extremely authoritative. Over time, I realized that my round face, slim body, and 5'4" stature doesn't lend itself to that image. So now I usually unleash my natural warmth and



Dr. Kathleen A. Begley
The Write Woman
KBegley@writecompanyplus.com
610-429-1562

offbeat humor on unsuspecting audiences. The real me seems to go over much better than the one who feigned being the smartest women on earth.

Engage your listeners. Without exception, I've found that the sooner I get audiences to do something – even if just raising their hands – the better my presentation goes. In small groups, take the attention off yourself by dividing people into teams and giving them hands-on practice. You should cultivate a style that demonstrates that you consider yourself not the sage on the stage, but the guide on the side.

Improve your nonverbal skills. Only 7 percent of human messages come from the words. An astonishing 93 percent is the result of body language, vocal quality, spatial use, respectful timing, and physical appearance. Rather than memorize speeches, you may want to videotape and critique more important factors such as your ability to make and hold eye contact as well as emphasize spoken words with hand gestures.

Avoid over reliance on technology. In this era of fancy PowerPoint slides, you may be prone to make the common mistake of thinking a screen full of sound, motion, and color will compensate for your poor presentation skills. Nothing could be further from the truth. If computer-assisted visuals were the be-all of communication, your audience could learn your ideas on their office computer. While pictures enliven most live performances, they are a poor substitute for an energetic human being.

Embrace the unexpected. Computers go down, lightbulbs flicker out, equipment crashes to the floor. Once, about halfway into class on handling difficult customers, I discovered that I was wearing my slacks inside out. Instead of fainting in horror at my clothing gaffe, I pretended I deliberately had dressed oddly to test the audience's powers of observation – an excellent skill when dealing with the disgruntled clients.

Accept occasional failures. As skilled as you become, everyone has their off days. Although I have given more than 3,000 talks, I still occasionally bomb – which is why I may have been the only taxpayer in the country to feel truly sorry for Tim Geithner when he flubbed his announcement of the largest government expenditure in world history.

Dr. Kathleen Begley owns and operates Write Company Plus communications training. She has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody. If you feel you've become too busy to ever read this free, opt-in e-update, please tell us to remove you from our mailing list. We'll cheerfully delete you.