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Making presentations with confidence and control

George Jessel, late famed emcee and entertainer, once said, "The human brain is a wonderful organ. It starts to work as soon as you are born and doesn't stop until you get up to deliver a public speech."

It has also been said that death is most people's second greatest fear; the first is having to speak before an audience.

Certainly, speaking before a group is a learned skill. If you aspire to become a "golden throat," it will take years of training. But I strongly believe that almost anyone can make a good presentation if he or she knows the subject, sets high standards for the presentation and is willing to work hard in preparation. After all, each of us is equipped with the required tools — mind and voice. It's how we use them that separates us from the crowd.

Whatever business you're in, success depends upon your ability to communicate effectively. How many opportunities have you seen lost because of a poor presentation? How many times have you walked away from the podium unsure of how well you reached your audience? Was the topic of immediate use? Did it stimulate dialogue? Was the audience motivated to take action?

A good presentation can be very rewarding. The benefits for the audience can involve ways to save time or money, or to make their lives easier or more successful or more rewarding. Your organization can benefit in funding being made available or a contract that is won. And you, as the presenter, can benefit from the recognition that comes from making all this happen.

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula or potion for preparing a powerful presentation. If there were, I would have been rich and famous years ago. There are, however, a number of steps that will aid you in your efforts. Fortunately, none of them are extremely difficult. They do, however, require commitment, time and effort on your part.

Mark Twain once said, "It takes three weeks to prepare a good ad lib speech." And I'm sure you're familiar with Abraham Lincoln's immortal Gettysburg Address. Only 266 words were delivered from a few notes scribbled on an envelope during the president's train ride. Originally, the brevity of Lincoln's speech offended some people. Later, historians found many drafts in Lincoln's own handwriting that showed that weeks of effort went into that speech, which took only four minutes to deliver but will be remembered for hundreds of years.

So, the question is, "Where do you begin?" Well, you can begin here and now. Almost everything we come in contact with testifies to the importance of planning. At work, at home or at play, planning is everywhere. Planning, or the lack of it, is easy to spot. Why? The answer is quality. It's almost impossible to achieve quality without planning.

Why, then, do we often neglect that facet in presentations? Every talk is a unique experience and requires individual planning. Mistakes, misdirection or lack of attention at this stage will take you farther off course as you proceed.

Once you've been asked or told to make a presentation, begin immedi-

ately by letting it mull around in your mind. Don't set yourself up for the pressure of last-minute preparation. You can't do your best by waiting until the zero hour. Also, don't waste time by asking yourself, "What in the world am I going to say?" Instead of what, the question should be why.

What you need to begin creating a powerful presentation is an objective. Do you want to inform or instruct? Persuade or sell? Make recommendations or gain acceptance? Arouse interest? Inspire or initiate action? Evaluate, interpret or clarify? Set the

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stage for further action? Gather ideas or explore? Entertain? Or, are you aiming for a combination of these?

A way to make writing your objective easier is to visualize the end of your presentation. What do you want to have happen? What do you want the members of your audience to take with them or to do?

Remember, speaking is like selling. When you are writing your objective, you are actually establishing a "need." You must convince your audience that it is in its best interest to listen to you and to act.

Next month, part two of this series will discuss guidelines for preparing your effective presentation.

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