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Great Beginnings

By Tad Simons

The somber sages of business lore long ago decreed that the first two minutes of any presentation are the most critical, thereby condemning every presentation from now until the end of time to begin with a certain measure of dread. Because in that first 120 seconds, you, dear presenter, must somehow shake the audience out of its stupor, snare your listeners' reluctant attention, prove that you are a worthwhile distraction from the shuffle and swirl of their day, displace the clutter in their business-addled brains with your own crystalline genius, dissuade the skeptics and naysayers from speaking their poisoned minds, establish a deep, intimate connection with each and every member of your audience, dangle the carrot of life-changing knowledge and/or profit just beyond their reach, smile, breathe naturally, move with grace and purpose, elicit some good-natured laughter, and lay the critical groundwork for the next 58 minutes of your presentation, each of which are only slightly less critical than first two.

That's a large load to haul in an awfully tiny bucket. Public-speaking experts know this, of course, so they hawk plenty of advice on how to accomplish such a Herculean task: Open with an anecdote, they say – tell a personal story, ask a question, state a startling fact, share a famous or pertinent quote, break the ice with a joke, blah, blah, blah. And by the way, good luck.

All of which is fine, so far as it goes. The trouble is, all such advice really tells you is that there are certain safe, acceptable ways of beginning a presentation, and if you execute one of them adequately you will skirt the sea of shame that awaits those who don't. Rarely does any light get shed on the mystery and mechanics of a truly great beginning – one that transcends the mediocrity of the moment and announces to all who are assembled that something truly special is about to be said.

Such moments don't happen every day, of course. But perhaps if we study a few of them up close – poke at them, that is, until they reveal the secrets of their greatness – we'll stand a better chance of experiencing and creating a few great moments of our own.

Great Beginning No. 1

Speaking to your fellow savages

Atop almost everyone's list of "great people to quote from" is legendary writer and humorist Mark Twain. Aside from his books, Twain was, among other things, one of our first stand-up comedians. In the late 1880s, to supplement his writing income, Twain traveled around the country delivering humorous lectures on

various subjects, the most famous of which was a piece called "Our Fellow Savages," a travelogue loosely based on his five-month stint in Hawaii as a correspondent for the Sacramento Union newspaper.

The first line of this speech set the tone: "Ladies and gentlemen, the next lecture in this course will be delivered by Samuel L. Clemens, a gentleman whose high character and unimpeachable integrity are only equaled by his comeliness of person and grace of manner."

Twain worked hard to cultivate a reputation as a scoundrel whose reliability was usually in doubt, of course, so the grandiloquent tone was obviously a put-on, hinting to all that the account to come would be as unreliable as it was entertaining. Twain went on to explain that he would "endeavor to tell the truth as nearly as a newspaper man can" (not very), and if he happened to "embellish it with a little nonsense" along the way, not to worry, because it wouldn't "mar the truth." Which, of course, it did.

What makes this preamble such a great beginning is how deftly Twain blended the pretense of credibility with an unmistakable wink to the crowd, letting his audience know that the coming account of his adventures would not be entirely factual. He was lying while simultaneously letting his audience in on the joke, which is a neat comedic trick if you can pull it off. Twain then proceeded to mix fact and fiction freely for the better part of two hours, leaving his audiences exhausted with laughter.

What you can learn from Mark Twain

A carefully crafted beginning should set the stage for what's to come, laying a foundation for the many magical moments ahead. If you're trying to be funny, it also helps to have some good material. If you can get Mark Twain to write it for you, so much the better.

Great Beginning No. 2

State the fear

A more contemporary example of a splendid speech beginning by a well-known writer came on Sept. 15, 2003, when Michael Crichton – author of Jurassic Park, Lost World, State of Fear and many other cautionary sci-fi thrillers – delivered an address to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco.

Crichton's approach was the opposite of Twain's. Crichton, who makes his living inventing improbable doomsday scenarios, was on this particular occasion asked to address the most serious subject he could possibly imagine. His opening sentence didn't mince words: "I have been asked to talk about what I consider to be the most important challenge facing mankind, and I have a fundamental answer."

Crichton set the hook immediately. It's hard not to hear this sentence and wonder what exactly is the most important challenge facing mankind? Global warming? Nuclear holocaust? Terrorism? Capitalism run amok?

No, too obvious – which is why the next two sentences out of Crichton's mouth had such a powerful impact: "The greatest challenge facing mankind is the challenge of distinguishing reality from fantasy, truth from propaganda. Perceiving the truth has always been a challenge to mankind, but in the information age (or, as I think of it, the disinformation age) it takes on a special urgency and importance."

If Twain was the reporter telling a lie, Crichton was the fiction writer offering to tell the truth. But the truth Crichton wanted to talk about was not the first truth that leaps to mind, it was a truth several layers deeper and a few magnitudes more disturbing, which made it as compelling as any opening he might concoct for one of his novels. He didn't just beg the question, either; in the speech, he also provided the answer.

What you can learn from Michael Crichton

Crichton's beginning combined two popular bits of advice for starting a presentation: Opening with a startling fact or statistic, and asking a rhetorical question, which the speaker then goes on to explain or answer. He also ratcheted up the stakes of his speech by declaring that he was going to discuss "the greatest challenge facing mankind." Granted, not everyone has such grandiose themes to draw upon, but it often serves a speaker well to emphasize the "urgency and importance" of the comments to come – providing of course that they are legitimately urgent and important.

Great Beginning No. 3

A time for timing

Former president Ronald Reagan gave thousands of speeches during his political career, but the speech that established him as a force in national politics was his "A Time for Choosing" speech, broadcast on television in 1964 on behalf of then-presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, a Republican. Reagan used this moment to explain his philosophical split from the Democratic Party, and, even though Goldwater did not win the election, the words Reagan spoke that day resonated so deeply with so many people that the address itself is often referred to simply as "The Speech."

Reagan began The Speech this way: "Thank you and good evening. The sponsor has been identified, but unlike most television programs, the performer hasn't been provided with a script. As a matter of fact, I have been permitted to choose my own ideas regarding the choice that we face in the next few weeks."

In choosing and acknowledging his need to speak his own mind rather than following a script prepared by someone else, Reagan accomplished three things: 1) he communicated that he wasn't just an actor trying to play the part of a politician, 2) he established that he did actually have ideas of his own, and 3) he alerted anyone who might be interested in those ideas to perk up and listen.

Reagan's next words were: "I have spent most of my life as a Democrat. I recently have seen fit to follow another course [by

joining the Republican Party]. I believe that the issues confronting us cross party lines. Now, one side in this campaign has been telling us that the issues of this election are the maintenance of peace and prosperity. The line has been used, 'We've never had it so good.' But I have an uncomfortable feeling that this prosperity isn't something on which we can base our hopes for the future."

By alluding to his recent conversion to the Republican party, Reagan was able to make his political decision feel deeply personal. He then went on to say that the "peace and prosperity" promised by Democrats made him so uncomfortable that he himself had become afraid for the future. Upon hearing such a declaration, "Why?" was the immediate question he begged, and Reagan went on to explain exactly that.

What you can learn from Ronald Reagan

One of Reagan's strengths was a gift for making politics feel personal. He, like Bill Clinton after him, often did this by talking about his own thoughts and feelings. He wasn't afraid to share his ideas and emotions, and this openness, combined with a great deal of conviction and a gentle sense of humor, gave Reagan his reputation as a great communicator. Openness, honesty, conviction, humor – and having the courage to speak one's own mind – are a tough combination to beat.

Great Beginning No. 4

Breakfast with FDR

Another president who combined a gift for both candor and humor was Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1938, many of FDR's audiences were hostile toward him and critical of his New Deal policies. World War II was escalating, many thought Social Security, begun in 1935, would bankrupt the nation, and for many Americans the hardships of the Great Depression were not yet over. Consequently, FDR became a master at acknowledging his audience's anxiety and diffusing it with healthy doses of self-deprecating humor.

One morning in 1938, he began a breakfast address in Chapel Hill, N.C., this way: "You may have heard, for six years, that I was about to plunge the nation into war; that you and your little brothers would be sent to the bloody fields of battle in Europe; that I was driving the nation into bankruptcy; and that I breakfasted every morning on a dish of grilled millionaire!"

After the laughter subsided, Roosevelt continued: "Actually, I am an exceedingly mild-mannered person, a practitioner of peace, both domestic and foreign, a believer in the capitalistic system, and for my breakfast, a devotee of scrambled eggs."

What you can learn from Franklin D. Roosevelt

Facing a hostile audience is never easy, but if you know beforehand why the group is upset, the most effective strategy is often the most direct one. Don't beat around the bush – address the main issue or issues on people's minds right from the start. If, like FDR, you can lighten the mood with a bit of humor, so much the better. Just be aware that attempts at levity when audiences are on

edge can backfire if they feel you are trivializing the situation at hand.

Keep it short, direct, personal

The preceding case studies are all based on the speech-opening strategies of some extremely eloquent communicators, and part of each one's success is that they knew how to make creative use of their own strengths. For example, Mark Twain used his writing ability to craft humorous observations on the human condition; Ronald Reagan shared his own feelings and ideas, and was able to project a trustworthy mix of sincerity and warmth; Michael Crichton invoked the novelist's gift for suspense; and FDR used his natural sense of humor to help get him through difficult speeches.

One interesting quality to note is that none of these speakers devoted their opening lines to the device most commonly recommended by public-speaking experts and coaches: the personal story or anecdote. If used at all, anecdotes were deployed in the body of these speeches, in various places, to emphasize certain points. Once Twain got going, for example, his entire talk was a string of personal anecdotes.

To begin with, however, these speakers all used their precious first few lines to strike a certain tone, make a specific point or set up the body of their speech. Each one kept their opening short, direct and specific, because each of them were keenly aware of how important those first few sentences are.

It is, however, possible (and often effective) to use an anecdotal opening, as long as the anecdote follows the same short, direct, specific rule of thumb. Actor Charlton Heston once began a speech this way: "My daughter called me with some words of advice for today's talk. She said, 'Don't tell them any funny stories about me when I was a child, or how tough you had it during the Great Depression.' And so, in conclusion ..."

Or, an executive under fire over a controversial matter might begin with an anecdote such as this one, from anecdorage.com, one of many Web sites devoted to stories and quotations for speakers: "Shortly before his execution by firing squad, the notorious murderer James Rodgers was asked whether he had any final requests. 'Why yes,' he replied. 'I'd like a bulletproof vest.' Under the circumstances, I'd like to make a similar request. ..."

In any case, if one chooses to use the classic anecdotal opening, the story should deftly illustrate the theme of the talk and set up a handy metaphor for the discussion ahead. It's preferable to use a story culled from your own experience, but if you can't come up with a story of your own, there are numerous sites on the Internet – such as www.idea-bank.com, www.executive-speaker.com and www.anecdorage.com – that contain anecdotes for all occasions.

Tad Simons is editor-in-chief of Presentations magazine.


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