

Better Oral Communications for Range Managers Series—No. 6



Speaking Aids . . . or Distractions?

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Because it is such a natural thing to do, nearly all public speakers have used aids or props in the course of a talk. Properly used, such speaking aids can be very effective in illustrating a concept, making a point or closing an idea—in short, making a favorable impression on the audience.

But therein lies the rub. Too seldom are speaking aids used properly. Too often do they become simply an impediment—a distraction—to the speaker's message. Examples abound. How often have you, as a member of an audience, watched a speaker hold up an object as an illustration only to find that it was too small to appreciate its significance? How many times have you watched speakers using lantern or overhead projectors fill the screen with ranks of words or columns of figures too small to be seen easily from anywhere in the room? How many slides have you seen too misexposed, too ill-focused, or too badly composed to illustrate their intended points? Remember the feelings of irritation or resignation, or more likely, disinterest resulting from such events?

These reactions were produced by your inability to readily learn the point of the speaking aid. Very likely, they resulted in your losing track of what the speaker was saying. More properly, the speaker lost you, and thereby committed the fundamental error of public speaking: creating a condition wherein attention of the listener was diverted from the intent of the talk. Where use of audio-visual aids helped to create that condition, the speaker would have been better off not using them at all.

There is a better way, a much better way. A way calculated to make use of speaking aids just that—aids, not distractions. To the extent the potential of such aids can be achieved, to that same extent will the impression of the talk, and therefore its message, be enhanced.

Most speaking aids are visible rather than audible, ranging from brief and occasional use of objects to full-scale slide talks when words become almost secondary to pictures. The rules governing effective use of both visible and audible props are few and simple, but vital. They begin with the basic imperative that nothing used in the course of a talk should

divert attention to itself—that is, create a distraction—instead of focusing attention on the point being illustrated. Judge every potential aid by that standard. Visual aids will most often meet the standard if they are (1) big, (2) simple, and (3) imaginative.

1. Make it big. The first requirement of any visual aid is that it be large enough to be readily seen and understood by all members of the audience. The requirement applies to all forms of visual aids. For example, if your talk calls for use of a balloon, find a big balloon and have it filled beforehand (perhaps with helium) so as to make the fact that it is a balloon—and what that illustrates or reinforces—inescapable. If you're writing on a chalkboard or easel, do it boldly. If you're using



lantern or overhead projectors, make sure that what is projected can be easily seen and immediately recognized.

If possible, try the visual aid out before the talk. Have someone hold up the object, write on the board, or project the slide, and then see whether each can be easily recognized from the most distant corners of the room. If it cannot be easily recognized, make it bigger or do not use it! You'll be surprised how many prospective visual aids will be changed or ruled out by this simple test. But the surviving aids will reinforce the talk and help it proceed smoothly without the distraction of listeners wondering what that object is, or what you're doing. Remember that no speaker can afford to deliberately create feelings or irritation, or what is worse, disinterest in any member of the audience, even those in far corners of the room.

2. Keep it simple. A second requirement of any visual aid is that it be simple or uncomplicated, so that its point can be readily understood by all members of the audience. Subject every potential visual aid to the mental question: Is it more complicated than it needs to be to illustrate the point? If it is, find some way to simplify it, or replace it entirely. This inspection will help you weed out objects requiring detailed explanation, too-busy displays, slides or transparencies, and complicated models.

Remember that listeners have only a brief, one-time opportunity to grasp the significance of the visual aid. If the point can't be illustrated simply, don't illustrate it at all. The talk will be far better off relying on well-delivered words alone, avoiding the possibility of a serious distraction.

3. Make it imaginative. The fundamental reason to use props in the course of a talk is to make its points more understandable, or to give them added emphasis. Therefore, speakers can profit from imagination in selecting or devising visual aids. For instance, instead of using only black-and-white transparencies on overhead projectors, why not use color? A host of semi-transparent objects can be projected on an overhead, often in vivid color. Even opaque objects often project interesting outlines, and can frequently be used to meet the requirements of adequate size as well.

If you choose to use a visual aid to illustrate a point, and are satisfied that it is both large enough and simple enough, then

make it as colorful, as dramatic—as eye-catching—as possible. Not only will such vividness help underline the point, but it will also help maintain attention of the audience generally. An imaginative use of big and simple visual aids is often the difference between an effective talk—one that makes an impression—and just a talk.

Big, simple and imaginative are the hallmarks of effective visual aids. Parallel criteria can be applied to the use of sounds as speaking aids. First, determine whether the sound you hope to use can be easily heard in the most distant corners of the room. Second, make sure the sound is clear and can be immediately recognized. If it is not loud enough or clear enough, make it so or do not use it! And third, use sounds as colorful, as dramatic—as ear-catching—as possible. An imaginative use of sound will engage the attention of



an audience more quickly than any other speaking aid. Caution: do not leave your listeners puzzling over a strange or unfamiliar sound; the distraction will be devastating to the attention you must maintain. Loud, clear and engaging are the characteristics of effective audible speaking aids.

The speaker who employs effective audio-visual aids to the spoken message will more likely make a favorable impression—the basic goal of all public speaking. All of us enjoy a thoughtful, fresh approach, especially to common or familiar things, and all of us will react favorably to a speaker making effective use of speaking aids. The speaker who engages us with props will be using aids, not distractions.

Special Notice!!

Due to reassignment and different responsibilities, *Doug Sellars* will no longer be able to continue as chairman, Membership Committee. **Joe B. Norris** has been appointed to be chairman by President Merrill and to put special emphasis on membership recruitment and retention. Doug will continue on the Committee, emphasizing efforts to obtain greater benefits for members of SRM such as discounts for car rentals and motels.

The address and telephone number of the new Chairman, Membership Committee, is:

Joe B. Norris
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