

SPECIAL INTEREST

Open to Close

By Deborah Shames and David Booth

Thank you for letting us contribute to PNG's newsletter. We appreciate the opportunity to introduce our company.

And in the next few paragraphs, we will cover —

If you were speaking in public, your audience would have already tuned you out. We've heard these obligatory openings so often that they have no currency in today's market and have lost their cachet.

Openings are critical to any presentation. They set the tone, connect you with your audience, introduce your topic, present a theme, and alleviate anxiety.

Speakers have a few brief moments while the audience allows you the luxury of their full attention. During this honeymoon period, you can capture their attention or leave them cold.

A study published in Mark R. Leary's *"Self Presentation" Impression Management and Interpersonal Behavior** assessed a speaker's "likeability quotient." Surprisingly, the results did not include making eye contact, telling a joke, or using dynamic gestures.

The two most important factors for a high likeability quotient were that the speakers revealed something about themselves in the opening, and the presentation was designed for the current audience.

When preparing your opening remarks, look for a personal anecdote or experience relevant to the topic. Or simply relate your own take on the subject. Make it brief and then craft a pertinent transition.

Consider the following opening triggers:

Find a strong metaphor or simile that gives your audience a vivid image of your business...

Recall a setback or disappointment that had a positive outcome on your career...

Pick a current event from the headlines and relate it to your business...

Another benefit of telling a personal story is that when we use our own voice, speaker anxiety is greatly reduced. At the root of most anxiety is the fear we aren't the absolute expert on our topic or we believe the audience is harshly judging us.

By telling a personal anecdote, there is no fear of being "found out." We have no trouble remembering the details of our openings. And by exhibiting personal charm or self-effacing humor instead of a joke, we are not setting up expectations with the audience to laugh or find us funny.

WORKING AT MY LAST COMPANY WAS LIKE PLAYING MUSICAL CHAIRS. ONE DAY THE MUSIC STOPPED AND I WAS LAID OFF. MY CHAIR WAS YANKED OUT FROM UNDER ME.



If you have acknowledgements and introductions, place them AFTER your opening remarks. Your comments will then have a richer meaning. For example:

Recently, we assisted an attorney who was asked to thank sponsors and volunteers at a charity event. She kept forgetting her prepared remarks because they were meaningless. We encouraged her to speak from her own experience and make her "thank you's" relevant. To paraphrase, here's what she came up with.

"I love to shop. When I was eighteen, my sister and I could cover as many as five malls a day. I'm fortunate that my sister is still alive. A few years ago, she contracted cancer, and if it weren't for the efforts of people like you, I would have lost her... (obligatory thank you's) But there's a silent auction going on next door, and I hate to miss ANY shopping opportunity, so please join me!"

Openings can also be effective in setting the tone for a conference. An executive came to us after being hired by a large company. He was hosting a two day conference between service providers and the California State University system. Because he knew

so little about the companies or the individuals, he was filled with anxiety, and had no idea how to craft his introductory remarks. We uncovered the following.

"My mother raised me as a single parent in upstate New York. Our town was so small that our phone number was 17. I've met more people at this company over the last three days than I met in the first nine years of my life."

He effectively warmed up the audience and let them know he was looking forward to meeting each and every one of them over the next few weeks.

An opening might suggest a theme, which can be re-visited in various ways throughout a presentation..

"Working at my last company was like playing musical chairs. One day the music stopped and I was laid off. My chair was yanked out from under me. At the next company, my chair was a bit wobbly, but I made it work." This engineer revisited his theme of "musical chairs" throughout his presentation, which kept the audience engaged.

Openings may also be an effective way to close. The old axiom says that if you begin and end powerfully, the audience will forgive a weak middle. When a speaker "bookends" a talk with a reference to the opening, the audience has a sense of coming full circle.

Instead of merely racing to finish, letting your voice trail off, or asking for questions, stay focused on engaging your audience. A strong finish can be a call to action, request for enrollment, or an inspirational quote. Recap, synthesize your ideas, and speak from the heart. Allow your voice and body, as well as your content, to underline "The End."

* Mark R. Leary's *"Self Presentation"* was published by Westview Press, Colorado in 1996.

Deborah Shames [WLK2] and David Booth [SO1] are partners in Eloquent (formerly David Booth Associates), a presentation and communications training company based in Topanga. Their clients include Amgen, Greenberg Glusker, Wilshire Associates, Intuit, Teradyne and Riverstone Networks. They may be reached at 818/346-1844, dshames@eloqui.biz, or dbooth@eloqui.biz.