

Practical Success

Cordell M. Parvin

Practical Tips on Giving Presentations to Business Audiences

I was recently asked: “What was the greatest return on your investment of time?”

Making presentations at construction industry meetings was by far the best use of my time. Early in my career I realized that I would be presenting to a skeptical audience. I would need to take command of the stage and capture their attention right away. If you make presentations to businessmen and women, you also will have to capture their attention.

What does it mean to take command of the stage? It is easier to explain in the context of a rock concert. The best example I know of was when James Brown took the stage at a concert right before the Rolling Stones. (You can read about it in this New Yorker article: *The Possessed: James Brown in Eighteen Minutes*. It is the story of a Teenage Awards Music International concert that took place 50 years ago.)

As you will see, James was not happy that the Rolling Stones were the closing act.

“Nobody follows James Brown!” he kept telling the show’s director, Steve Binder. Mick Jagger him-



self was hesitant. He and Keith Richards were boys from Kent with an unusual obsession with American blues. They knew what Brown could do. In Santa Monica, they watched him from the wings, just 20 feet away, and as they did, they grew sick with anxiety. James Brown was electric, and he captured the audience with his first song. You need to capture your audience the same way.

So, how do you start a presentation? You have 90 seconds to connect with an audience. During those 90 seconds the audience is asking: What’s in this for me (WITFM)? So, how can you do it? Let me share ideas and how I used each one.

1. Ask an attention-grabbing question.
2. Give an attention-grabbling statistic or statement.
3. Give a roadmap of the presentation. “The three things you need to know about _____ are...”
4. Tell a story.
5. Self-deprecating humor (Be very careful).

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Years ago, after the Enron and Worldcom scandals the federal government began investigating contractors. I wrote articles, including *At The Risk of Sounding False about What Every Contractor Needed To Know in The Post-Enron Era*. The articles led to me speaking all over the country.

I gave more thought to the opening of the presentation than any other part. My challenge in the WITFM question was that the contractors attending my presentations all believed they were honest and all believed they would never get in trouble. I ultimately decided on the attention-grabbing series of questions.

Attention-Grabbing Questions

Because the contractors all believed they would never get in trouble, I wanted to start with something I knew they believed was important and then compare it to what I would share with them in the presentation. I did it this way:

First, I asked:

1. How many of you do not have a safety program in your company? (No hands)
2. How many of you do not do safety training? (No hands)
3. How many of you do not have a person in your company responsible for safety? (No hands)

Then I paused for a moment and asked:

1. How many of you do not have an ethics program in your company? (Every hand)
2. How many of you do not do ethics training? (Every hand)
3. How many of you do not have someone responsible for your company's ethics? (Every hand)

A few years later I wrote about how I opened the presentation: Hear Me Now.

Startling Statistic or Statement

I could have started the presentation with a startling statistic or statement: "The federal government is currently investigating 43 different contractors in 17 different states. Over the last 6 years 40 contractors have been convicted. You may know some of those contractors, and I am confident many believed they had done nothing wrong."

Over the next 50 minutes, I want to share ideas with you that will help you avoid being investigated for doing anything wrong.

Roadmap of the Presentation

I could have started the presentation by outlining what I would cover.

"Today I will be sharing with you three main points:

- 1 What the going on with the government investigations of contractors.
- 2 What you need to know.
- 3 What you need to do."

Story

I could have told a story.

"In 1987 a contractor was wrongly accused of a crime. The contractor sat through an eight month trial, put on no evidence and was acquitted by the jury in 10 hours. Every contractor in the audience would have been familiar with the story."

If you are familiar with the story, here is the New York Times story after the verdict: *Donovan Cleared Of Fraud Charges By Jury In Bronx*.

Self-Deprecating Humor

I never did consider using self-deprecating humor to open this presentation. I did use it to open other presentations by telling a true story. I have told the story many times. While we were flying to resolve a contract dispute, one of my first contractor client's told me that he hated all lawyers. I did not know how to respond. After a minute, he said, "But of all the lawyers I hate, I hate you the least." I frequently told that story and said, "I know con-

tractors do not like lawyers, so if at the end of this presentation, if you hate me the least of all the lawyers you know, then I will know I provided you with something valuable."

Conclusion

None of us can electrify an audience like James Brown. However, we can open a presentation like a rock concert with high energy and answer to our audience's "what's in this for me" question.

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