

Speech Articulation

When delivering a speech, clearly articulate every sentence, phrase and word. When your speech is clear and coherent, it conveys competence. When your diction gets sloppy, on the other hand, it suggests lack of education and laziness. Consider how lawyers, doctors, supervisors, lobbyists and the like must be articulate if they are to professionally survive. Good articulation conveys competence, experience and credibility. Another practical reason to have good diction is simply because it is so much easier to follow than poorly articulated speech. People will be more likely to be won over by your message if you are easy to understand.

Vocal fillers can destroy your presentation, hurt your credibility and annoy your audience. Most people feel that they don't have a problem with fillers, but you would be amazed when you record yourself what words you use to fill in space during a speech. Vocal fillers include the common "um," "er," "ya know" and "uh." In addition to these, some people have their own idiosyncratic way of filling in gaps between ideas. Some repeat the first two or three words of a sentence until their brain catches up and they decide what they're going to say next. Others constantly say things like "OK" and "like." Fillers will never work to your advantage and they need to be eliminated from all speech. Here we see another reason why you should record yourself and assess your vocal abilities.

Besides words, pauses also add meaning and impact to your stories. The sound of well-timed silence can be more powerful than a dozen words. Because of this technique's dramatic effect, however, it can be overdone. Don't use pausing too much. If you do, it will lose its effectiveness. Besides highlighting important points, pausing also increases comprehension. When you pause in your story, your prospects have a moment of introspection, which helps them mentally and emotionally participate in the moment. Whether it is a moment to reflect or to enjoy a good laugh, a lull allows your audience members to process your story on a deeper level.

Silence amplifies all sensory and emotional details of your story. Use pauses to create attention, emphasis and mood. It is a common mistake to not hold the pause long enough. Be sure you allow enough of a pause that the full effect will be felt. When you do this, the audience anticipates and listens closely to what you will say next. As they come to understand your pausing patterns, your audience can tell something important is about to happen. This strategy is made even more effective when you combine it with pitch strategies. Be sure that as you come to the pause, your pitch is high, thereby building suspense and giving momentum to what will follow. Inflecting your pitch downward will defeat the purpose, providing a feeling of resolution instead of suspension.

Because of the many nuances that are conveyed through the different uses of the voice, it's always a good idea to record your voice and listen to it. What does it project? Do you sound compelling? Besides the overt message, observe the subtleties such as pitch, pace, volume, tone and articulation. Effective use of vocal variety catches and holds others' attention. If you don't like how you sound, don't despair; it is a common phenomenon. Pinpoint the precise aspects of your voice you'd like to strengthen then take things one step at a time. A handy tape or digital recorder may prove to be your best coach.

The thing that speaks the most directly, other than the voice, is your body. When you speak, words comprise less than 15 percent of what your listeners "hear." Your audience also receives information from your face, your posture, your hands, your eye movements, your gestures and your overall demeanor. Used well, these elements can give your story flow and add emphasis to it. If not used well, your body language can be very distracting and even cause you to lose credibility with your prospects. If you seem awkward or unsure of yourself, your audience will not receive your message as well.

During a presentation, use gestures very carefully. Certainly there is room for spontaneity, but as a general rule, plan your gestures out ahead of time. They have to fit the story you are telling and not seem awkward or thrown together. Don't overdo it, but do use them to keep your audience's attention, to add drama to your story and to underscore your key points. Think of your body as a prop that serves as a visual

extension of the story you are telling with your voice. Above all else, your gestures must come across very naturally. Don't be robotic in your presentations. As with your voice, it's always a good idea to video record your presentation in advance or to practice it in front of a mirror.

The nice thing about telling a story to a live audience is that you can always gauge their reactions and thereby determine how your message is going over. With a story, you can tell right away if your prospects are with you or if you're losing them. This gauging enables you to instantaneously adjust and adapt your presentation as necessary. If your audience is involved in your story, you're encouraged to keep doing what you're doing. If you're losing them, however, you can make a change and re-harness their attention. How do you know when you're losing your prospects' attention? Watch their faces. Are their eyes on you? Are they taking notes? What is the expression on their faces? Usually, it's easy to tell. If you're losing them, your story might be too long-winded. In that case, cut out extraneous details. Also try changing your voice by adjusting its volume, pace or quality.

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