

Public Relations Quarterly

Volume 33 Number 2

Speaker Training: Twenty-Five Experts on Substance and Style

By Joyce Newman

Which is more important, “substance” or “style”? Is there a speaking “style” that will appeal to everyone? Or, is “substance” more important than the person delivering the message? Is it even possible to get agreement on the question?

In my more than 14 years of experience as a speaker and media trainer, I’ve worked on hundreds of presentations with top CEO’s, best selling authors, doctors, lawyers, executives, sports figures and other celebrities. Time and again clients, or their public relations representatives, ask me this same question.

Even Hollywood addressed the question in last season’s box office blockbuster, “Broadcast News.” And, judging from the network news rating wars, there is no one “style” with universal appeal. But, is the same true for public speakers and guests on television?

While I have an answer for each of my clients, I went looking in our literature for some universal agreement on this question. I couldn’t find it so I decided to survey, via phone and personal contact, 25 of the nation’s leading speaker and media trainers and several executives who have benefited from training.

Everyone surveyed agreed that most executives can be convincing and articulate in one-on-one conversations, yet few are able to effectively demonstrate their leadership abilities when they have to speak before a group. Once they get in front of an audience, or a video camera, their self confidence and ability to express themselves disappears. As a result, the presentation becomes an ordeal for *both* the speaker and the listener. The speaker loses credibility. The audience never receives the intended message.

“My clients come with the substance of what they want to say but often with little sense of organization or form. Most of my work is biased toward organization and delivery,” says James Marrin (Senior Vice President, Communispond).

He told me about one CEO he worked with who used all the right words but was boring nonetheless. After telling this CEO the truth, the CEO replied, “You’re right but my position creates instantly attentive listeners inside my company.” That’s when Marrin had to remind his client that to get the job done the message had to go outside the company as well.

“Good speakers are made not born,” according to Linda Fields (Principal, Fields and McKamy International Speaker Services). Fields says, “New and specific training techniques can help any executive deliver his or her message with the style that makes people want to listen. Style and substance must be combined because substance without style is like a Mercedes without a motor. It sure looks nice, but it won’t go anywhere.”

There is a one-word answer to the question according to Walter J. Pfister Jr. (President, Executive Television Workshop). “The word is both. It’s one thing to send a message but it is another to have that message received and retained. To achieve that, both substance and style are needed.”

Several specialists including Pfister compared speech preparation to the culinary arts. “A speech must be tasty, nutritious and sparkled with flavorful language which translates to style. Successful speakers keep the audience interested with colorful words and phrases as well as excellent execution yet they know that none of that will mean anything unless the speaker gives the audience something to chew on—or substance.”

Most of the experts I spoke with believe they get better results when they combine substance and style in their training sessions. But, I was looking for those willing to dare to answer “how much of which?”

“Typical spokespeople lack substance,” according to O. John Haering (Senior Vice President, Doremus Porter Novelli) because “substance suggests control, and control is what successful interviews are all about!

"Untrained spokespeople make three primary errors. First, they assume reporters have done their homework so they sit back and wait for the right questions to be asked. Second, they feel compelled to answer any question regardless of how irrelevant, antagonistic or just plain dumb it might be. Third, they lack a message," according to Haering. "These three errors add up to lack of substance, lack of control that style can't and won't make up for."

I agree in principle with Haering but perhaps have a semantic difference of opinion. I look at control as a function of style. I can teach style. I do not teach clients substance. They already have it.

I work with clients on organizing and streamlining their substance, or "must say" messages for media appearances. I also teach them specific techniques to handle different types of interviewers. Once clients learn to recognize the different styles of reporters, they can respond in their own style to take control and make their points in the allotted time.

Sonya Hamlin (author of *How To Talk So People Listen*, Harper & Row) shares my point of view when she says, "Substance is the message that style delivers, so they're interdependent. However, in order to determine the most effective style you have to begin with the meat, the essence of what you're going to say.

"Decoration alone—delivering a message with warmth, power or confidence—doesn't work, if the message is disorganized or poorly reasoned," she adds. "True—you *can* make a personal impression stylistically but you'll lose your listeners unless the message you're delivering with that style is fully developed.

"Well said—yes, that's vital. But first—what are you saying?" adds Hamlin.

"The obvious response to style versus substance is to go with substance. Yet no amount of substance will overcome the handicap of poor delivery," says Jeannette Paladino (President-elect, PRSA, New York). She agrees with those experts who feel that "we have

become so attuned to the slick delivery of television commentators and political candidates, we have come to expect style from speakers of every kind. We are also quick to knock bumbler no matter how important their message.

"Therefore," Paladino concludes, "you would have to go with substance and style for maximum impact."

Several years ago, associates of a partner in a well known brokerage house asked me to help one of their colleagues prepare a talk to be delivered at an annual banker's conference in New York.

When we first met, the partner was all substance and no style. The facts were there but he came across as flat and disinterested in his own topic. After several hours, I realized the best way I could help him, given our time constraints, was to create a script for him using large typeface with stylistic comments written in the margins. I made notations for eye contact, smiles, pauses, gestures and highlighted key words to remind him to emphasize them throughout his talk.

When I returned for our next session, he made it clear he placed little value on this "style thing," as he called it. He had asked his secretary to type his notes in his usual format and insisted on delivering his talk twice—once his way and then using the script I had prepared. Both efforts were videotaped.

He was confident he would see better results using his method. Once he looked at himself objectively, he quickly agreed that he was boring. He conceded that style makes a difference. He then took my advice, went on to make a successful presentation and has been a valued client over the years.

Barbara Browning (a communications consultant in New York) advises clients, "If you have to emphasize one over the other, ask yourself, 'Who am I talking to? What is the setting? Am I there to inform, persuade or entertain?'" She feels that both style and substance are important but separates them according to subject matter and audience.

For example, she says, "If you're a doctor talking to doctors, substance is paramount. However, if you're a guest on a TV talk show, you'd better get the viewer's attention and that takes style!"

I ask, "Why should doctors neglect style?" Doctors are becoming more knowledgeable about public speaking. As a consultant to major pharmaceutical companies, I have spoken on the subject of "Power Speaking" to over 5,000 doctors throughout the country. The physicians I met have been grateful for the tips and techniques I have taught them. Like executives, they want to add style to their talks to make their meetings less boring.

The drug companies all compete for the physicians' attendance at these meetings. The companies want the doctors' loyalty. To this end, the large pharmaceutical



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companies are spending a lot of time and money to upgrade the quality of their meetings. They are even offering the physicians speaker training and have been upgrading the visual support they produce in-house.

Having worked with doctors in almost every specialty, I am convinced that although a talk has to be technical in nature, it does not have to be boring. Judging from the doctors I've met and worked with, I have unanimous agreement on the subject.

I do, however, agree with Barbara Browning's premise that most audiences are blase and exhibit what she calls a "universal indifference to almost any message." To overcome this indifference, Browning advises speakers to "make your listeners care and the caring comes with a combination of style and substance."

But what percentage of each? The next expert I spoke with was the only one to mention a number.

"Let's not discount content. Clearly, if you have nothing to say, all the polish in the world at saying it is useless," claims Arnold Zenker (Arnold Zenker Associates Inc., Boston, Mass.) "But, we live in a communication era dominated by the impact of television and subconsciously we judge all speakers by the standards of that medium. And, television has conditioned us to respond to style more than substance, entertainment more than depth. In my judgment," Zenker says, "eighty percent of a successful communication effort can be attributed to delivery. Maybe that's sad. It's also a fact of life."

In looking through the literature I found most experts seem to agree that 87% of the knowledge we possess comes from a visual source. Hearing sources provide 7%, smell provides 3.5%, touch gives us 1.5% and taste provides 1%. How does this relate to speech preparation?

Although most audiences listen with both their eyes and their ears, most of what they remember comes from what they see. Much of what they see is directly related to style and has little, if any, relation to substance.

"Substance and style should not be mutually exclusive in either speaker training or media interview training. Like love and marriage, they work best when they work together," says Bob Kimmel (President, Audio TV Features). "Time and again it's been shown in research studies that how a person looks and speaks often leaves a greater and longer lasting impression than what he or she actually says.

"However, style should be used as a catalyst to help imprint the substance of the communication in the listener or viewer's mind. If the substance is

mundane or poorly organized, the message loses its impact even if well presented," adds Kimmel.

Most audiences are blase and exhibit "a universal indifference to almost any message."

"Who remembers today exactly what Ollie North said in those nationally televised hearings? How he looked and how he spoke caused a stir and illuminated the message," according to Kimmel. That's why he believes training has to combine the two elements of substance and style in a formula based on participants' needs.

With yet another vote for both, Camille Lavington (an international communications consultant) believes, "There must be a balance between substance and style because time is too valuable to waste on a poor speaker with little style." She defines style as a "speaker's personal approach to customizing information." Furthermore she believes "that style is the heart of the speaker's ability to capture an audience which is why it is important to build rapport immediately."

To effectively accomplish this, Lavington suggests "that speakers personalize for different audiences using a topical comment at the beginning to give the impression that you are human and that the information you are about to share with your audience will be more conversational than just a boring lecture."

Lavington feels that "appearance impacts strongly on personal style making or breaking the speaker's power base. It's important that speakers be well groomed, look professional and wear clothing that is appropriate to the audience and the setting." In order to have a positive style that will be remembered, she advises clients to "include statements in the speech that will evoke an emotional response to keep people attentive." Lavington says, "Delivering the message in short, punchy statements with enthusiasm for the topic will enable the audience to come away with memorable information. For a speaker to be effective, the substance must be there, but the secret to getting it across is style."

Jack Hilton (President, Jack Hilton Inc.) thinks “the two are inseparable and should not be regarded as mutually exclusive. Speech making, like journalism, is story telling. A story with substance can be riveting and compelling mostly if it’s told or expressed with style and creativity.”

To achieve this, Hilton asks clients to “put style and personality into their talks by including personal observations and experiences, case histories,

anecdotes or narratives, a profound quotation from anyone else, analogies or metaphors.”

One of the tips I give to clients, particularly those who have to go on the road with a “dog and pony show” or for a media tour, is to keep the substance the same but change your style for different audiences. I ask them to read local newspapers, watch local news, eat local foods and then mention something that will have appeal to local audiences

How to Critique Your Personal Style

Use a video camera to rehearse your next presentation. Review the tape as if you were sitting in the audience.

Did you have

- **A Strong Opening** — Did your opening statement grab the audience’s attention? A rhetorical question, an anecdote, a build-up of the facts or a quotation related to your theme is an effective way to begin.
- **Direct Eye Contact** — Did you give the impression that you were looking at everyone? To make direct eye contact, talk to one person until you complete your point or for about thirty seconds. Then move on to look at another person. Be sure to “work the room,” so that everyone in the audience feels included.
- **Vocal Energy and Variety** — Did you speak in short conversational sentences? Use the punctuation marks as a natural breathing point. Highlight key words in your notes as a reminder to emphasize them.
- **Gestures & Facial Expression** — Did your hands and body movements add to your message rather than distract the audience? Remember to rest your hands at your sides or on the lectern lightly between gestures. Use your hands and arms to communicate ideas such as size, direction, emphasis and number. Keep your hands out of your pockets to resist the impulse to jangle your loose change. Your facial expression should reflect the tone of your message. Avoid smiling throughout your talk. You will look insincere.
- **Fluency** — Did your words flow smoothly? Have you avoided non-words like “um,” “uh,” or “you know”? Substitute pauses for the non-words.
- **Visuals** — Did you paint word pictures to help the audience visualize and retain your message? Were your visual aids large enough for everyone to see and simple enough to be understood?
- **Appropriate Language** — Have you avoided jargon, “inside” jokes and off-color language?
- **Knowledge of Audience** — Have you realistically analyzed the audience as to why they should be interested in what you have to say? Have you addressed the needs of the audience rather than telling them only what you want them to hear? Did you stay within the time limit and within the audience’s attention span?
- **Strong Closing** — Have you provided a summary of the important points? Have you challenged the audience to take an action? Did you indicate your intention to take an action? Did you end on a positive note?

—J.N.

at the start of their talk or interview. This successfully varies their opening comments and helps them get their energy up for new audiences while the substance remains the same.

The issue is "less one of substance versus style than it is of the relative balance between preparation and practice devoted to each," says Barbara Morrison Reno (Vice President of Marketing Communications, Merrill Lynch Capital Markets). She believes that "not only is too much time spent on writing and rewriting the text, the text is written from the wrong perspective. Too often, speakers concentrate on what they want to tell, rather than considering what the audience may want to hear."

Every trainer has his or her own philosophy about how the training process should take place. Pam Zarit (a speech consultant in New York) says, "In speaker training, the separation of substance and style is necessary to focus the text and clarify the style. But, it is the balancing and melding of these two components that is vital to create the complete presentation.

"When a speaker has a concise, specific message and few skills to hold our attention, communication is diminished. Conversely, when a speaker has an energetic, dynamic style with nothing to say, the result is unsatisfying," Zarit adds.

Evelyn Kanter (a New York media trainer and PR consultant) feels that "it's less a question of style than confidence. If you're afraid, it shows. Speaker-media training prepares you to be confident to handle the 'what if' scenarios."

"Substance is important, but style and preparation are the true ingredients for success," claims Michael Wolff (Principal, Richard A. Eisner, a New York accounting firm). "A presentation may be organized in the most effective manner which is a fit between message and audience with the speaker recognized as the authority. However, audiences critique the presentation as boring, flat, disorganized and a time waster. This speaker lacks the style to capture an audience's attention in spite of the fact that he was perceived by the audience as the subject authority."

"Speaker training is enormously important in helping the professional understand his or her strengths as a communicator and how to best take advantage of these strengths," says Jeffrey A. Schmidt (Vice President, Cresap, McCormick and Paget, a management consulting firm). "An experienced trainer can also improve on the organization and supporting analysis of otherwise substantive material.

"A well delivered presentation is frequently the key to a satisfied client or customer in a profes-

sional service business. The focus of speaker training should be on the clarity and force with which the speaker's message is delivered to an audience," Schmidt points out.

The speaker lacked the style to capture the audience's attention even though the audience perceived him as the subject authority.

Joe Belew (President, Consumer Bankers Association) believes that knowing who is in your audience helps a speaker position successfully. "When you try to differentiate in substance and style in preparing for any public appearance, you obviously must gauge the audience and its degree of familiarity with your subject matter. If the audience is already familiar with both sides of an issue, then style would have a great deal to do with your persuasive ability. In that instance, you would need to be able to demonstrate enough substance and yet convey through style your open-mindedness. If that same audience is predominately of an opinion different from yours, substance would then play a much greater role in as much as the occasion would be more persuasive in nature."

Belew believes that time is an important factor to be considered in answering the question of substance versus style. He points out that "for television and broadcast appearances, a speaker has to convey a great deal in a short amount of time. That is clearly done with stylistics more than content." Belew feels that speaker training helps him "to know when to combine the two aspects of substance and style to be able to compress factual matter into a stylistically acceptable appearance."

Allyn W. Keiser (General Manager, Senior Vice President, Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, U.S.) feels that presenting is analogous to selling. "Every salesman knows that he has a limited amount of time to get and keep a buyer's attention. A speaker is usually selling himself or an agenda."

Keiser says, "A speaker has to be in command of the facts and well prepared, but the speaker must be able to get and retain the audience's attention. A speaker's delivery must be interesting and uncom-

plicated. Style is important. You need to achieve credibility quickly without getting in the way of the message. In order to do this," Keiser aptly states, "you must learn a set of skills in addition to those skills which got you to the podium in the first place."

Fabianne W. Gershon, (Director of Marketing and Communications for Bear, Stearns & Co. Inc.) believes "that speaker training has added to the success of many of our conferences and meetings; however, I would not consider having a speaker trained whom I did not already consider an expert on his subject. Training helps executives become more confident and to position effectively for a specific audience. Training also provides valuable rehearsal time that executives otherwise do not schedule for themselves."

Which then is more important? Should you rely on substance alone, style by itself or a combination of both? I believe to be successful, a speaker *must* be the subject authority. That's a given. If the speaker does not have a firm grasp on the subject, training will be of little value.

The speaker who is the expert, not only on the subject but on his or her personal style, has the right ingredients to be a successful speaker.

Over the years, I have come to realize preparing a speech is a lot like building a house. For both, you must start with a solid foundation. The house rests on the foundation; the speech on the content. But, a strong foundation is not, in itself, enough to entice anyone to live in a house. Substance alone is not sufficient to gain and hold the listener's attention.

Few people want to live in an empty log cabin. Few people will listen to an empty talk. Both must have personality. For the house, it's the decoration and for the speech, it's the style of the speaker that makes the difference.

When I hear speakers relying too much on content, giving little attention to their personal style, I find they are losing themselves in the message. Although they are speaking from the podium, they may as well be talking to themselves. Their message is not received.

You should view style with respect because, simply put, it is the speaker who makes the speech memorable—not the substance. My answer to the question of whether you should go with substance or style in speaker training is style. If your spokesperson is not the subject authority, I suggest you find a new spokesperson. Training specialists can help your spokespersons enhance their personal style; they cannot and should not have to teach them their subject material. □