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Addressing fear, rewards of public speaking

So you think public speaking is just for politicians? Think again. Whether it's a big sales pitch, a keynote speech or a briefing to corporate shareholders, public speaking is something that just about every entrepreneur eventually has to do somewhere down the line.

"Everyone at some point has to address an audience," says Margaret Bennett, vice president of public relations at Huntington Toastmasters, a group that helps members build and improve their public speaking skills. "You never know when you're going to be called upon to speak."

Still, the mere thought of addressing a crowd of any size may make your stomach queasy, says Bennett, whose group meets weekly at Walt Whitman High School. And if that's the case, you're not alone.

"Public speaking, second to dying, is the greatest fear that anyone has," says Kim Dower, co-author of "Life Is a Series of Presentations" and owner of Kim-from-L.A. Literary and Media Services. "A huge reason for that is fear of the unknown."



SMALL BUSINESS

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That's why it pays to prepare and try to eliminate any unknowns before making your presentation, Dower says.

For starters: Know your audience.

"People hear and learn and take in information differently," explains Dower. A presentation to salespeople, for example, would likely sound different from one tailored to academics. "Salespeople want it quick," she explains, "while your academics like more information and details."

Knowing who your audience will be, Bennett adds, can not only help you fine-tune your presentation but also quell some of your fears. And getting familiarized with your surroundings can help ease some pre-anxiety. Visit the meeting site ahead of time to get an idea of the layout and

where you'll be presenting.

"The more you know, the less fear you are going to have," Dower notes.

To be sure, preparation is key, says Hadassa Legatt, president of Speak Up, a public speaking consulting company in Great Neck. Figure out your message beforehand, she recommends, and put it in note form so you can refer to it. You don't want to sound scripted, but notes can help you stay focused throughout your speech, says Legatt, an assistant professor of public speaking at St. John's University and Queensborough Community College.

Be sure to practice your presentation, she suggests, because the more you practice, the more comfortable you'll be.

The key is to stay focused and make sure that whatever you are presenting is of interest to your audience.

"Make sure you actually have information to share," says Lucy Rosen, president of The Business Development Group, a Garden City-based marketing and public relations agency.

You don't want your presentation to sound self-serving. Don't

GESTURES TO AVOID

- ✗ Rattling change in your pocket
- ✗ Constantly adjusting your glasses
- ✗ Fiddling with your clothing or jewelry
- ✗ Hugging yourself
- ✗ Clapping your hands together and thrusting them toward the audience as if you're begging.
- ✗ Rubbing your hands together
- ✗ Playing with little "toys" — pens, markers or pointers
- ✗ Pulling at your hair

SOURCE: MALCOLM KUSHNER, "PUBLIC SPEAKING FOR DUMMIES"

let it turn into a self-promotional advertisement for your company, says Rosen, who has done 82 public speaking engagements during the past year on various industry topics — and generated business as a result.

"They are there to get information that you are supposed

to have," says Malcolm Kushner, author of "Public Speaking for Dummies" and "Successful Presentations for Dummies" (Wiley Publishing).

And if you provide relevant information, you'll have a better shot of keeping the audience's attention.

A strong opener doesn't hurt either, says Kushner, who's based in Santa Cruz, Calif. Jokes are popular as a starter, but they can backfire if you're not good at telling them, he notes.

In that case, try a personal anecdote, he says, or a humorous quote that's relevant to your point — even poking fun at yourself can generate some laughs.

Or perhaps you can put a new twist on an industry buzzword. Something like "I'm here to talk to you about regulation 50/20, which means you'll have to pay me more next year," Kushner says. Then of course, you'd go on to explain its actual real meaning. "Humor creates rapport and builds a reserve of good will," he notes.

And if nothing else, it will help keep your audience awake.