

20 Tips for Better Conference Speaking - Cameron Moll

Below are 20 things I've learned. Though this list is geared towards one-hour sessions rather than panels and workshops, some of the same principles apply.

Preparation

1. The art of speaking is roughly 51% entertainment, 49% meaty content. Your primary responsibility is to entertain a room full of people. This doesn't necessarily equate to jokes and magic tricks*, but it does mean that the content of your presentation, and the delivery of that content, should be compelling and engaging. Bear in mind that sitting in a chair for a full day of presentations isn't the most enjoyable activity as an conference attendee. Keeping the audience eyes' on you rather than their laptops benefits both you and the audience.
2. Ask yourself: When attendees return to work and speak about you and your presentation, what do you hope they will say? What will be the key takeaways? How will they describe your presence on stage? Think ahead to what the discussion may be like among attendees as they return to work, and allow that to help inform your preparation.
3. To borrow a line from the An Event Apart Speaker's Guide, always err on the side of being more advanced. With Jeffrey Zeldman's permission, I've borrowed that line as well as this one:

One of our little backstage maxims is: "Attendees will apologize for not understanding a talk, but will want an apology for a talk that's too basic."

Edward Tufte argues the same, as paraphrased by Phillip Kerman :

"Match your presentation to the level of The New York Times or Wall Street Journal. Audiences don't suddenly become dumber when they sit down to hear you speak — no reason to "dumb down" anything!"

4. My personal rule of thumb when using slides: Roughly 1-2 slides per minute of speaking. This suits my style. It may not suit yours. You might show only 10 slides, you might show 100, or you might not have slides altogether. But when I'm estimating how much content I need for a one-hour presentation — 45 minutes of speaking, 15 minutes of questions — I usually end up with about 50-80 slides. Ultimately I run through my entire presentation a couple times the same as I'll give it on stage, but knowing roughly how much content I'll need before practicing is helpful.
5. Test legibility by sitting six feet back from your laptop display. It's not scientific, but it feels about the same as an audience member seated towards the back of a large room with an 18-foot screen at the front. If you can read it from six feet back, whatever is on screen is probably big enough.
6. Select a typeface appropriate for on-screen presentation. I hesitate offering too much advice here, as I've seen a variety of typography work in presentations — big, small, serif, sans, etc. Be creative in your typeface selection, weight, and sizing, but also look at what others are using. Popular typefaces at the moment include Gotham, Helvetica Neue, and Archer. Just last week I saw Museo (free!) used in a presentation and it looked sharp on screen. Currently my typeface setup includes Warnock Pro, Gotham, and Helvetica Neue. A few samples are shown below.
7. If this is your first time speaking, expect to not do well. I'm finding that speaking is a skill that takes a very long time to master. Don't be overly concerned about your first engagement. Prepare really well, stay relaxed when delivering, and walk away knowing you'll do better next time. Chances are, things will go better than you expect them to.

Equipment

8. There is absolutely no reason in the world you should use anything other than Keynote. Period. I don't care if you're on a PC — if you're serious about speaking, buy a MacBook just for presenting. There is an

astounding difference (not an exaggeration) between the tools, canvas placement, typographic control, and overall aesthetics in Keynote compared to PowerPoint. Once you become familiar with Keynote, which isn't an arduous process, the productivity and just plain enjoyment you'll experience using it over PowerPoint is completely worth any switching costs.

9. Consider using iShowU for screencasts. If I plan to show interaction within a web app or use a video snippet for which there isn't a downloadable file, I do video screen capture using iShowU for Mac OS X. It's an inexpensive app with a good range of features.

10. Need a wireless remote? Go with the Logitech Cordless Presenter. This is all but the industry standard for presenting. It's a little more bulky than I'd prefer, but in terms of reliability and range, it's tough to beat this remote. (Don't use the Apple remote that came with your machine. It's unreliable and its range is short.)

11. Don't forget to travel well. This is a bit off-topic, but still relevant. If you're flying in, you'll probably be finishing up slides on the ride over, and often you'll have a lengthy flight. I try to be as comfortable as possible during flight, which is nearly impossible given the status of the airline industry these days. Among other advice I might give, one thing I've done is to try and combat the unpredictability of cabin temperature — seems every flight is either too hot or too cold — by dressing in clothing suitable for both temperature ranges, usually something like Columbia Omni-Dry pants and a Nike Dri-Fit shirt. Bring a lightweight jacket on board and you're set for just about any temperature, freeing you to focus on polishing your presentation. (Side benefit: If you spill a beverage in flight, synthetic clothing always dries faster.)

On Stage: The Presentation

12. Don't stray far from who you really are. Your presentation style should suit your personal style, whether that's relaxed, formal, snarky, etc. Dan Cederholm's style is laid back and casual. Jeff Veen's style is energetic and fast-paced. Hans Rosling's style is humorous and matter-of-factly. Elizabeth Gilbert's style is living-room-conversationally. All of these styles work well on stage because they reflect who the individuals really are. ** Allow your unique personality to shine through on stage, and it's likely the audience will be engaged.

13. In the first 30 seconds you'll do more to establish your presence on stage than just about any other part of the presentation. Start strong and confidently. Be cautious not to lose the audience with personal or industry histories, unless completely relevant to your presentation. Dive right in and don't stop until it's over.

14. Always remain cognizant of audience interest. A good speaker can sense when the audience is engaged and when they're not, and carefully adjusts his or her tone, speed, and deliberate pauses throughout the presentation, and may even skip content when necessary.

On Stage: Q&A

15. Always repeat the question. There are two reasons for this: 1) so other audience members can hear the question, and 2) so those listening to the audio or video archived version can hear the question.

16. If the person asking the question has a puzzled look on their face when you're done answering their question, ask this: "Now, what part of your question did I not answer?" This is a technique I learned only a few months ago after watching perhaps the most skilled person I've ever seen do a Question & Answer session. I wish I would have known of such a question when I first started speaking.

17. Answer the question as best as you can, but don't linger on it. Realize you've only got a short amount of time to field questions. Even if you feel you've not adequately answered an audience member's question after a second attempt, mention that you'd be happy to talk after the session. Then move on to allow others to ask their questions. (You'll find there's an awkward feeling in the room when you and an audience member engage in a long conversation trying to adequately answer a question, and everyone else in the room becomes observers.)

Other Resources

18. Edward Tufte's Presentation Tips.

19. BusinessWeek: Deliver a Presentation like Steve Jobs.

20. Presentation Zen. Lots of resources here. Specifically, see Gates, Jobs, & the Zen aesthetic.