

Writing a speech that matters

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at
The Columbia Club
Indianapolis, Indiana
Feb. 16, 2010

On this date – Feb. 16, 1923 – archeologist Howard Carter entered the burial chamber of King Tutankhamen. There he found a solid gold coffin, Tut's intact mummy and priceless treasures.

On Feb. 16, 1959, Fidel Castro took over the Cuban government 45 days after overthrowing Fulvencia Battista.

And America's first 9-1-1 emergency phone system went live in Haleyville, Alabama on this date in 1968.

Today, I won't be revealing priceless treasures. I promise not to overthrow anyone, or generate any 9-1-1 calls. But I do hope to reveal a few speechwriting secrets, provide a little revolutionary thinking and a sense of urgency about the speeches you ought to be giving.

That's one way to open a talk – tie your subject to events that took place on the date you're speaking.

Another is to tie your talk to the place where you're speaking, like this...

The Columbia Club started out as The Harrison Marching Society. A group of Indianapolis Republicans got together to help elect Benjamin Harrison president of the United States. They succeeded and Harrison became the 23rd president and only Hoosier to occupy the Oval Office.

It was called the Harrison Marching Society because members would gather dignitaries and delegates visiting Indianapolis and literally march them over to Harrison's house on North Delaware Street, where the candidate would speak to them from his front porch.

Fortunately, club member Harry New thought changing the group's name to "Columbia," a popular and patriotic synonym for America, would attract more members. He was right. That was back in 1889.

Ninety years later – in 1979 – someone else had a good idea – to admit women to the Columbia Club, permitting me to talk to you today about my favorite subject – speechwriting. How it's done and, more to the point, what it can do for you.

My name is Cynthia Starks...and I've been writing speeches for men and women like you for about 25 years.

I've been a speechwriter at IBM, United Technologies Corp. and Southern New England Telecommunications – the telephone company of Connecticut – where I was born and raised.

I've written for business, government and education leaders, and once for the late Walter Cronkite.

In truth, speechwriting has a long and storied history.

A Google search on "history of speechwriting" reveals that it dates to at least 1415 when, it seems, England's King Henry V employed a speechwriter to craft his call to arms on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt. The essence of that speech was captured by Shakespeare, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers..."

More than 350 years later, here in the states, it's believed that both Alexander Hamilton and James Madison had a hand in writing Washington's farewell address.

And Abraham Lincoln, that most accomplished of writers, "got suggestions from many people on what he should say as he took office with the Union breaking apart," according to the Google History of Speechwriting timeline.

However, the official White House Speechwriting Office is only 89 years old, dating to 1921. The first presidential speechwriter? Judson Welliver, whose title was “literary clerk” to President Warren G. Harding.

Reading or listening to the speeches of Lincoln, FDR, Churchill, the Kennedy brothers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Barbara Jordan, Jesse Jackson and Mario Cuomo, reminds us of the power – the visceral power – of elegant, inspiring and memorable phrases and ideas delivered with passion.

My message to you today is simple – speeches matter.

In the political world, they can win votes, start wars or inspire a generation.

In the business world, they can attract customers, boost sales, motivate employees, influence investors, position individuals as thought-leaders and companies as pace-setters.

If you want to communicate passion, clarity of purpose, and a call to action, nothing beats a speech. Nothing else gives your message a human face.

Let’s look at “employee engagement,” for example; a hot topic in business management these days.

“Employee engagement” is when your employees act in the best interests of your company, working to accomplish your goals. A Gallup study puts the national average for employee engagement at 25 percent. But research shows companies need at least 50 percent of their work force truly engaged in order to grow and succeed.

If you think engagement at your business is closer to 25% than 50 %, then you should be telling your employees exactly what your priorities are so they can act on them. You can tell them in a speech.

The same is true if you see a need to improve the commitment of your vendors, your shareholders, your industry peers, or the community at large – whichever audiences are important to your success.

But whether you’re talking to your sales force...giving the commencement address at a university...or “roasting” a retiring colleague...the structure of a speech is basically the same.

- First, the speaker describes a problem or an opportunity
- Second, the speaker offers a solution to the problem... or how to take advantage of the opportunity, and
- Finally, the speaker issues a “call to action”

Writing a speech is not the product of a muse that sits on your shoulder and inspires you.

It’s the product of a speechwriting process...a method...a recipe, if you will. The recipe has 10 steps. If you follow them, you’ll end up with a speech soufflé that doesn’t fall flat.

Here are those steps:

One, identify the best speaking opportunities.

Locally, these might include the Economic Club of Indiana, the Indiana Chamber of Commerce or the Columbia Club.

Nationally, club member Tim Wilcox might address the Espionage Research Institute. David Ring might speak to the National Funeral Directors Association.

Jennifer Ruby and Holly Banta might give remarks at the National Association of Women Lawyers. Dwayne McCoy could speak to the American Institute of Architects.

And Joe Ward presents to members of the U.S. Navy and Air Force, with whom he does business.

Two, analyze the opportunity. What kind of event is it, who else is on the agenda, what will they be saying, how can your speeches complement each other? Answering these questions will help you know if speaking at this particular event to this particular audience will advance your business or communications goals.

Three, analyze the audience – Find out what the audience wants to know. How do you do that? Ask them. I contacted eight Columbia Club members and asked what they wanted to know about writing and giving a speech. Their input helped me fashion this talk.

Four, focus the purpose of the speech – What is the purpose of your talk? To inform? Persuade? Motivate? Entertain? Rally? Get people to buy your product, use your service, vote for you, admire you? Understand your purpose from the start.

Speakers sometimes want to say many things in a speech. But realistically, a speaker can only hope to put across one-to-three unique ideas – that is, if she expects the audience to remember them.

To help me do this, I always put together an “Event Overview Sheet” (hold up) that details the date, time and place of the talk. But, most important, it details the purpose of the talk. In fact, I never start writing a speech without this being done.

Five, research the content. – Every speech should tell people something they don’t already know. Give them facts. Cite your sources. Show them you deserve their attention. Demonstrate knowledge first; then people will listen to your opinions.

I love history and so I love researching the opening of a talk. Can I tie my topic to what happened on this date in history? Can I tie it to a significant person or event associated with this place in history?

I once wrote an IBM speech for an event taking place in Las Vegas and began it this way: “Las Vegas had Billy the Kid, Doc Holliday and Bugsy Siegel. The computer industry had Herman Hollerith, Tom Watson and Bill Gates. Las Vegas had the Rat Pack and the voices of Sammy, Frank and Dino. The computer industry had the Homebrew Computer Club and the voices of Wozniak, Jobs and Gordon French.”

I wrote another IBM talk given in Istanbul to a group of women entrepreneurs beginning to do business online. The IBM executive compared her experience bargaining for a rug with a vendor on the streets of Istanbul with the simplicity and convenience of buying a rug over the Internet.

Six, write to the speaker's voice.

This means spending time with the speaker to learn what expressions she uses. Does he make jokes or tell stories. Are there specific phrases he likes?

If it's not possible to spend time with the speaker, I'll ask to see video of the client giving a speech or presentation. And I'll ask for hard copy of past speeches.

If even these are unavailable, I'll have a phone conversation with the speaker and ask a series of questions that helps reveal his personality. What books and films does he like? What pictures are on his desk? Where was he born and raised? What did he major in at college? Does he play sports? Does she like to travel? What's her dream job? Whom does he admire in the arts and letters? What does he do in his time off? How does he typically spend his day? What makes him laugh?

Seven, write the talk

Eight, edit the talk

Nine, review the speech with the speaker and make revisions as required.

Ten, the speaker gives the speech and basks in the applause and admiration of the audience.

But your job as a speechwriter isn't done once the talk is given. Even before you write the speech, you need to plan for two things that happen after the speech.

The first is to evaluate the speech. This helps you and your speaker understand what worked and what didn't and how to improve going forward.

The most common way to do this is to ask the audience to fill out evaluation sheets. In fact, I'm going to do that with you when I've finished my talk.

The second is to package and market the speech for additional audiences – print, video or Web. For example, the speeches of Angela Braly, WellPoint's CEO, are up on the Wellpoint Web site.

The speech can also be repurposed as an op-ed piece, a feature story, a blog or a podcast. It might also be submitted to *Vital Speeches of the Day* (hold up), an influential print and Web publication that's read by business and government leaders and speechwriters interested in the best speeches being given about the most significant topics of the day.

These two steps are so important because they increase the return-on-the-investment you make in a speechwriter and in speech-giving.

There's a lot more to say about speechwriting, including the tone and spirit of your talk, the turn of phrase, the use of poetry or quotes, and the belief that all exceptional speeches try to inspire their audiences to commit to a cause larger than themselves.

An example of inspiring audiences in this way is Bobby Kennedy's speech in Indianapolis on April 4, 1968, the night Martin Luther King, Jr. had been killed. It was left to Kennedy to give this news to a crowd that had been waiting hours to hear him speak.

Even though his comments were largely extemporaneous, Kennedy instinctively followed the traditional structure of a speech.

With sensitivity and compassion, he told them of King's death (the devastating "problem"). He praised King's dedication to "love and to justice between fellow human beings," adding that "he died in the cause of that effort."

Then, he offered a solution – to put aside violence and to embrace love and understanding toward each other.

Finally, he issued a call to action – he asked those in the crowd to go home and to pray for themselves and for their country, and to work to put an end to the chain of violence in our land.

In between, he quoted Aeschylus, whom he called his favorite poet, "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

Many American cities burned after King's death, but there was no fire in Indianapolis, which heard the words of Robert Kennedy.

Another writer who inspires audiences to embrace a cause larger than themselves is James Fallows, former chief speechwriter to Jimmy Carter. He wrote a wonderful piece in the current issue of the *Atlantic*, called “How America Can Rise Again.”

In it, Fallows describes a problem – Americans are too practical, too productive, too innovative, and basically too good for the government we have!

He offers his readers three possible solutions to the problem – including an “enlightened military coup,” a “new constitutional convention,” or “to make decisions as if we would wake up the next day and it would be 75 years in the future.”

His call to action? Number three. Fallows encourages his readers to embrace the idea for themselves and to demand their political leaders take the long view in the programs they propose and the policies they push in order to make government as good as the people it serves.

Fallows writes, “Politicians will inevitably not look 75 years into the future but one election cycle ahead... Corporations live by the quarter; cable-news outlets by the minute. But we can at least introduce this concept” into the public square.

He closes by citing those in America’s past who have made decisions with the long-term in mind. Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed Central Park for generations to come; Theodore Roosevelt who set aside millions of acres for the National Park System; and Dwight Eisenhower who created the Pentagon Advanced Research Projects Agency, which eventually gave us the Internet.

So, following my own recipe for a speech, I’ve presented the opportunity – business, education and government leaders can use speeches to further their business and communications goals, and enhance their position as thought-leaders in their fields.

How can you take advantage of that opportunity? Start giving speeches.

My call to action? I’m giving you a homework assignment. Sometime before bed tonight, take three minutes – just 180 seconds – to think about the answers to these three questions:

1. What audiences need to hear from me?
2. What goals can I accomplish by speaking to them? and
3. Who can write the speech? The answer might be yourself, someone already in your organization, or a professional speechwriter you already know or one with whom you're willing to develop a working relationship.

Don't put it off. "Carpe diem" – seize the day, seize the moment, seize the opportunity.

And if you think you don't have time to give speeches, during 2009, John Lechleiter, chairman, president and CEO of Eli Lilly gave more than 100 internal and external speeches.

How many speeches will you give in 2010?