

# The Three Commandments of Presenting

## AND HOW TO OBEY THEM

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I believe Al Gore\* is a remarkable man—smart, disciplined, and determined. I believe he loves his wife; his children seem bright, attractive, and devoted to their father. He comes across as earnest and well mannered. I also believe he is thoughtful and reflective, if not bookish, and in private, or so I hear, even funny. He shares these traits with many of us in consulting, and a few more to boot:

- Incumbency in a glamorous, if not reputable, profession
- A degree from a first-rate university
- Mountains of facts, figures, and recommendations to impart.

You'd think a man like this, endowed as we are, with so many virtues and advantages, could persuade the skin off a snake, waltz into the highest office in the land, and rule the better part of the world.

It didn't work out that way for Al Gore, and I think I know why. Because despite all his virtues and advantages, there is one area of his life where Al Gore is a profligate sinner, and these sins might well have prevented him from passing through the pearly gates of the election to the kingdom of the White House. I am speaking of his sins as a presenter.

What were his sins? He was arrogant, boring, and confusing. By presenting himself and

his ideas in this manner, he violated the Three Commandments of Presenting, which are (mnemonically):

1. Thou shalt not be arrogant.
2. Thou shalt not be boring.
3. Thou shalt not be confusing.

It's as easy as ABC. For his sins Al Gore was punished, and I'm sure, even now as I write this, the flesh of this poor, good man (a man more accomplished, advantaged, and virtuous than you, dear reader, and me, too, scribbler that I am, and consultant in public speaking)—even now, I say, as I write this, he burns and blisters in the fires of his own regret. He has my deepest sympathy, and yours too, I'm sure, no matter where you stand on the issues. Let us be charitable.

But, let us also learn from his mistakes. Let us, who seek to sell ourselves, our recommendations, and our firms, contemplate the cautionary tale of brother Al, lest we, too, be turned away—by the prospect who decides to hire another firm; by the client, who rejects our recommendations; or by our own colleagues, who would banish us from the kingdom of partnership and ask us to remain seated whenever it's time to work magic on an audience.

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### Thou Shalt Not Be Arrogant

Al Gore is probably not arrogant. He only came across that way in his presentations. From the

■ *Presentations that cut to the chase rarely annoy your audience or put them to sleep.*

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\* In 2000, former Vice President Al Gore lost in his bid to become president of the United States.

podium, he often seemed mechanical, phony, and condescending . . . in a word, arrogant.

On the other hand, once upon a time, I had a colleague who was a brilliant performer.

He was a large man, tufted with wisps of black hair landscaped with infinite care to conceal a ghastly bald patch. His suits were expensive, his cologne pungent. He could remember and tell a thousand jokes, and his wit was known to unmask the pathetically disguised vulnerabilities of all who came before him. His passions were as large as his frame, and propelled him to hold forth on many topics. When I compared myself as a presenter to him, I thought, "How can I stand in the gale force of his presence? I'm average in size, average in voice, my opinions are mild, my suits from the rack. When I speak after him, the audience must wish I would go away so that he might return to the front of the room and thunder down on them his oratorical brilliance." Once, when I complimented him on a particular talk, he replied, "That's why they pay me the big bucks." Humility was not his strong suit. "If only I had a little humility, then I would be perfect," said Ted Turner, and my old colleague might have said the same.

I found out, many years later, that some clients found him hard to take. In fact, some clients loathed him. To be fair, many were impressed, but a surprising percentage found him difficult to swallow. He was arrogant in a different way. Where Al Gore was cold and superior, my colleague was impassioned and pompous. Both seemed arrogant because we felt that we never got to know them, and arrogance, I read somewhere, is the tendency to arrogate to ourselves qualities that we don't, in fact, possess. People would much rather be in the company of a straight shooter.

Public speaking is frightening to most of us, consultants and candidates alike. Some of us hide behind a mountain of content and the patina of learning, sticking to the facts and dismissing as mere showmanship the ability to build rapport with an audience. Others, more rare, try to dazzle with a performance, tossing off confetti-clouds of words while tearing a passion to tatters. Both approaches sidestep the essential task of persuasion, which is to build a personal connection with the audience. Both approaches create the impression of arrogance

and deny the speaker his or her greatest competitive advantage: the ability to connect.

Information is a commodity, pizzazz is a commodity, and so is IQ, especially among consultants. Two things can make us stand out and avoid the trap of arrogance. The first is the ability to project authenticity. The second is the ability to enter the subjective world of the audience. Give them the experience of knowing you, and give them the experience of being known. Nothing is more powerful.

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## Thou Shalt Not Be Boring

However, even if you're real, you run the risk of being boring. I remember sitting with pen and pad in hand in front of my TV during the year 2000 Democratic convention, announcing to no one in particular that it was my duty as a speech professional and a citizen to pay close attention to Al Gore's big speech. But neither my ambition nor my patriotism sufficed to keep me alert.

Your goal as a presenter should be to have inscribed on your tombstone "He Bored Them Less." To accomplish this lifetime achievement, adhere to the following.

### Cut the Stack

In the old days (three years ago), we would arrive at a meeting with a stack of overheads detailing interview lists, line-item build-ups, and multi-step and methodology diagrams. Now we arrive with a library of PowerPoint slides and want to take our listeners on a death march through a jungle of minutiae. Don't do it. Instead, tell the client what the problem is, how to solve it, and why they need to do it. For effect, drop on the table your mountain of paper, but don't make them sit through a reading of it.

### Stuff the Bag

If it's a five-pound meeting, prepare five pounds of content and end on time. Good

*One of the great pleasures for an audience is the experience of quickly grasping what you're getting at.*

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teachers create class lessons with a beginning, middle, and end, and you should do likewise. You lose impact if you don't. Rule of thumb is two minutes per slide. In an hour, you'll be lucky to cover 20.

### ***Begin, Be Brief, Be Seated***

Why do people clap at the end of a speech? Because it's over. One of the great pleasures for an audience is the experience of quickly grasping what you're getting at. They resent it when you deprive them of this pleasure. The correlation between length of talk and value of content is tenuous. As Mrs. Humphrey said to her husband, "Hubert, for a speech to be immortal, it need not be interminable."

### ***All U Can Eat 1 Mile***

Slides, like billboards, should be legible from a distance. Big print means only a few lines can fit. If members of your audience can't read it, or have to work hard to do so, they tire and ignore you, losing clarity and momentum. Not good for you or them. Keep it big and clear.

### ***Get the Picture***

Minimize the use of bullet-point slides. Use pictures, graphs, and charts whenever possible. Eschew clip art. Peruse magazines and old books for images. Find good ones and have them scanned into your digital library.

### ***This Just In***

I'm getting sick of PowerPoint slides. They are another tool that's controlling us. They are excruciatingly predictable. We tend to use the slides as speaker prompts, not as aids to the audience. A plethora of slides actually communicates the speaker's insecurity. People reluctant to undertake the personal development necessary for effective speaking devote all their allotted preparation time to overdesigning the slides and therefore have yet another excuse not to rehearse. Speakers turn away from the audience to read them (and the audience can read faster than the speaker can talk). Slides give the audience another place to look, instead of *at the speaker*. Slides turn the speaker's thoughts into bullet points and make his or her speech mechanical and predictable.

And finally, slides tend to divert the speaker from *meaning* to *information*.

### ***Tell Stories***

I had a professor who used to shout at the top of his lungs, "No data without stories, no stories without data." Data arouse skepticism about methodologies and objectivity. Stories, on the other hand, engender the willing suspension of disbelief. Make your point, show the data to back it up, but then include an example, a story, a brief, telling anecdote. It'll get people to understand and remember what you said.

### ***Get Ready for Prime Time!***

Be well rehearsed. No one pays to watch rehearsal. It's boring. People pay to watch a show. Know your lines: your headline, story line, and bottom line. Know your blocking (where to stand and when to stand there). Don't block the audience's view of the slides (don't, for example, allow "Growth in Market Share" to be projected on your belly). Eliminate from your vocabulary "er" and "um" and other such verbal indiscretions. To do this, learn to focus your eyes on one person at a time. Ninety percent of "ers" and "ums" go away when you learn to focus your eyes.

### ***Think "Human A/V"***

Unless you're telepathic, the only way into their brains is through their eyes and their ears. Lift your voice from Death Valley to lend it variety, color, and emphasis. If you're happy, inform your face. One reason Reagan was Teflon was because he could twinkle on cue. A *great* Irishman, William Butler Yeats, opined on the issue of content and style in this way: "I always think a great speaker convinces us not by force of reasoning but because he is visibly enjoying the beliefs he wants us to accept." In other words, inform your face.

### ***Get Some Guts About You***

Bring your personality to the table. You may be one smart cookie, but the first question on a listener's mind is, "Am I enjoying myself in this person's company?" No jokes please, unless they're fast, relevant, and inoffensive, which is a combination hard to find. But energy, convic-

tion, warmth, and your peculiar stamp are most welcome.

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## Thou Shalt Not Be Confusing

Few pundits or business speakers could do as well as Al Gore did in his acceptance speech at the convention. The problem with it, however, was that it was an acceptance speech, which means it had to mention and reaffirm every government program and interest group dear to the Democratic Party. To the TV viewer, the long list of affirmations soon becomes bewildering, as the first few mentioned are nudged from memory by the endless parade of new ones demanding attention. Speech is not the best way to communicate complex information for this very reason—it comes and goes. If it were written down, our eyes could go back and linger on what we missed. But the speaker plows on, and we lose a good deal of what he or she says. In this way, speaking to an audience is often like feeding applesauce to a one-year-old. Some of the food gets into the child, but most of it feeds the carpet.

How can we get the applesauce in?

### Make Book

Books begin with a table of contents. When a chapter ends, there's usually a blank space and a clear announcement of the new chapter. At the end, there could be an index or bibliography, offering you the chance to delve into the subject in more detail. Presentations need a spoken table of contents, which we could call *Tell 'Em*<sup>3</sup> (tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them). Likewise, when you change from one point to another in the course of your talk, how about telling us that one section of the talk is over and another is about to begin? How about letting a little silence hang in the air so we can catch our breath? Maybe you could change your tone slightly, even change your location in the room to draw a clear separation between one subject and the next. Anything to keep people focused and to create clear compartments in their minds. Then, at the end, grant them a sense of completion and purpose, not with a bibliogra-

phy, but with a summary of what you've said and a call to action. As Confucius said, "To talk much and arrive nowhere is the same as climbing a tree to catch a fish."

### So What's the Problem?

There is a pattern deep in the human mind that can help us be clear. It is simply this: statement of problem, development of its implications, and finally, resolution of the problem. If you present your problem as a fascinating puzzle, even better. If you elaborate and dramatize its implications, better yet. And if you have a sense of timing, the ability to tease your audience to the edge of doom before you offer your brilliant solution, then you may claim not only expertise in your field but talent as a performing artist as well.

### 'Tis a Gift

Wiser men than I have said that most of the troubles in the world come from two perverse tendencies in human nature: (1) treating as simple, things that are complicated, and (2) making too complicated, things that are actually simple. We crave only an optimum amount of complexity. We satisfy this craving for complexity by *adding* it to some things and *eliminating* it from others. When presenting something simple, embellish to give interest, color, and significance. A good storyteller can make a trip to the deli a roller-coaster narrative. However, when presenting something complex, which is far more common for consultants, refer to "Make Book" and "So What's the Problem?" above. The key to finding the right level of complexity lies in knowing your audience.

### Micro Tell 'Em<sup>3</sup>

If *Tell 'Em*<sup>3</sup> works for the presentation as a whole, it also works for each slide. Announce each slide before you show it. By rehearsing, you can develop transition statements that put the content of the upcoming slide into context.

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of disbelief.*

And at the end of the slide, you can remind them why they're looking at it. (Remember, meaning, not information.) By doing this well, you make your talk suspenseful and clear—suspenseful because you announce the slides before you show them; clear because you are repeating your point several times. And the discipline will force you to get rid of half your slides, which is the larger blessing.

### ***Go to Nashville***

Popular songs need a refrain to make them memorable. Presentations benefit from refrains too. Martin Luther King was no slouch at this. We needn't share our deepest dreams in the boardroom, but we can organize our talks around refrains. I recently worked with a woman who was teaching small exhibition venues about the complex logistics of a traveling art exhibit. She personified the exhibit by calling it a "diva" and described in lurid detail how temperamental she was—she did not like to be dropped on her side; she did not like to stand in the rain; and without a doubt, in a New York minute, she would sue you if she were left unchaperoned. It was funny and far more memorable (and therefore clear) than a list of do's and don'ts.

### ***Write Your Own Headline***

We know from studies that the most frequently read items in a newspaper are headlines. Boil

the sap of your talk into syrup. Give them the big idea, right up front, and occasionally thereafter. In a writing class many years ago, the instructor stressed the importance of a good opening, saying that four surefire subjects for getting attention were royalty, religion, sex, and mystery. "Get one of these in your first sentence, and you'll keep most people reading," he said. "Give it a try." The class hunched over their papers, until one sly student raised his hand. "How about this?" he said. "'My God,' said the Queen, 'let go of my leg.'" Probably a little spicy for consulting, but you get the idea. Begin well.

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## **Conclusion**

The sins of being arrogant, boring, and confusing have us poor speakers under siege. We lose business with prospects because of them. We lose influence with clients, and we lose opportunities for advancement within our own firms.

Al Gore gave up the fight for the White House, but we should not give up the fight against our enemies. Arrogance, boredom, and confusion are rampant out there in business, and fighting them will bring out the best in us. ■

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