

SPEAKING WELL:

Economists Can, Too!

by Jay A. Leitch

Articles in *CHOICES* have provided readers advice on consulting and using economic counsel. Yet, economists serve as speakers at conferences and meetings even more often than they serve as consultants. I have listened to countless presentations and have spoken to well over 100 lay audiences at home and abroad over the past 12 years. Along the way I learned a few things about audiences and public speaking and would like to share some of them with *CHOICES* readers.

Most articles of this kind urge you to do three things: prepare, prepare, and prepare. But fully preparing a relevant and engaging presentation includes more than good research and well-timed jokes. It requires planning the presentation from beginning to end.

Start Off Right

Before you accept a speaking invitation, think about the following:

- Prepare fresh material for each speech, don't just pull an old speech from your files. Be prepared—rehearse and know your material—that way you won't feel the need to make apologies. Talk to the audience, do your homework to find out who's there. Relate to the conference theme. As tempting as it might be to report your latest esoteric findings—don't, unless it relates to the subject at hand. Relate to the previous speakers and subsequent speakers' talk titles, but do not repeat what they said. Do your homework about the region, the organization, and the audience.

- Insist on a proper introduction (when appropriate) to legitimize your time at the podium. Then assume everyone accepts your credentials so you don't waste time trying to impress them with who you are, but can impress them with what you have to say.

- Don't stray beyond your expertise, unless you alert the audience. You conceivably were invited to speak based on your professional expertise, not your opinions. Don't cloak your personal opinions in scientific garb and be sure to differentiate theory, opinion, and fact for the audience.

The Nitty Gritty

- If visuals are necessary to highlight your speech, make sure everyone in the audience can read them. Turn off the overhead between transparencies to refocus attention on you. If you have a choice, use an overhead rather than slides. Slides can be easily transformed into overheads and you will not have to turn the lights down. Don't fumble around trying to fix a projector, you can't afford the time, just get on with it. Get used to microphones and cameras. Arrive early to familiarize yourself with the room and the audio-visual technology.

- Speak in a way that the audience learns with the least amount of pain and effort—and still remembers what you said. Speak clearly in a conversational tone. You can only impress and influence people if they can understand you and your reasoning. Avoid bureaucratese and economese and please avoid

Jay A. Leitch is Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, North Dakota State University.

“the sales pitch” mentality. Speak with confidence, but not in a condescending manner.

- Introduce no more than one main point for every 10 minutes of speaking time, for a maximum of 3 or 4 main points in any one public address. Make these points explicit so the audience can follow your presentation and remember what you said.

- Do not read your talk unless you are really good at it—use notes to keep yourself on track. On the other hand, do not memorize your talk either—forget one line and you have lost the rest of the talk.

- Leave ample time for questions. Repeat questions when not everyone might have heard the question. Respond to questions directly and concisely. Don't use jargon to win an argument and explain the questioner's jargon to the audience. Make yourself available immediately after the talk for questions. Have business cards available. Respond promptly to requests for reprints.

Polishing Points

- Dress well, at least one step above the audience. Your appearance helps establish your legitimacy. You don't want to have to overcome a sloppy appearance. Button your jacket, remove your name tag unless it was provided by the group you are addressing.

- Aim to make at least one person upset and one enthralled with your talk. This way you are less likely to lose your enthusiasm if there is a small audience. Two are enough. The upset person will, hopefully, challenge you; the other will invite you back.

- Be provocative, but not arrogant or pompous. Remember at least 5 percent of any audience is inherently more intelligent than you are. Seek audience input to help them relate and retain the main points. Tell the audience something they do not already know; if you can't do that, tell them something they know but in a way that helps them understand better. If you don't have anything to add, don't agree to be a speaker.

- Don't deviate from your assignment and avoid irrelevant tangents. Stay within your allotted time, even cut it if the program is running behind. Going over your allotted time is rude and unprofessional.

- Don't try to be funny. Remember, you're an economist! Use humor, when appropriate, to show you are human. Don't make jokes about individuals in the audience without their prior permission. Given the language gridlock of contemporary society, you can safely assume that almost anything you say in an attempt to be funny will offend someone in the audience. Once offended, they never forget you, they only forget the substance of your talk.

- If your speaking fee is high, don't arrive too early or stay around too long after your talk, otherwise your time will seem less valuable to others!

Final Tips

- Be flexible. Be prepared to condense your talk without affecting the content. Be prepared for any circumstances in the meeting room. Be prepared to do without your slides, overheads, and even your notes.

- Never assume the audience knows as much as you do, nor that you know as much as they do in the aggregate.

- Don't plagiarize. It is easy to overlook giving appropriate credit when under a time constraint.

- Include at least one economic principle in each talk. This often works best if you do so implicitly.

- Don't forget that everyone has a bad day once in a while. If it happens to you, learn from it and keep going.