

Funeral Relations Mastery

Funeral Director's Guide For Public Speaking

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Chapter 1

Gaining Confidence as a Public Speaker

“They!” You know who “they” are. They say this, they say that. Most times the “they” are accepted without questions as experts, however no one knows the actual identify of “they.” Anyway “they” say that the second greatest fear in life after death is the fear of public speaking. The following suggestions are offered to help build confidence as a public speaker.

Adopt a new set of attitudes about your fear of public speaking

Audiences I have found are rarely hostile, and you do not have to be Robert Schueller, Billy Graham or William Jennings Bryan to succeed. People in public speaking rarely look as nervous as they really and the great thing about public speaking is your audience will never know what you have not told them! I have found that frankly a little nervousness is actually a good thing. I have watched many overly confident speakers go down in flames. Podium anxiety is something that speaker’s simply need to accept.

Analyze your audience

It is simply a truth in public speaking the more you know about your audience the more confident you will feel.

Prepare, prepare, prepare, prepare, prepare, prepare, prepare, prepare - did I say prepare?

The better you know your topic, the more you will feel master of both it and your audience. I well remember a major funeral service seminar which we were holding in Las Vegas. A new speaker had been arranged and she was given two hours to make her presentation. I asked her repeatedly if she had prepared **MORE** than two hours of materials and she assured me again and again “Don’t worry, Todd.” I was standing outside in the lobby of the casino when 35 minutes, yes you read right, 35 minutes later the doors opened and the audience began filing out. It was a disaster. Always prepare more information than the time allotted and practice your presentation and time it.

Develop reassuring notes

Use a format comfortable for you. Note down your “cues” to remind yourself when to pause, when to emphasize a point, when to refer to audiovisual aids and so on. My speaking idol is Winston Churchill. People think he was a natural born orator - but that was not the case. If you examine the written text of a Churchill speech the margins are full of “cues.” Fold my hands across my chest, point to heaven, look over my glasses, etc. Try it, it works!

Imagine being a hit

When you go to bed at night think about the applause, the admiration, the audience hanging on every word that comes out of your mouth. Imagine hearing your own voice pound out your message and see the smile, tears, delight of your audience.

Audiovisuals will take some of the heat off you

I do not use audiovisuals much anymore, and my version of PowerPoint is still a set of colored jumbo magic markers and a flip chart. However I know from experience that when you’re highly nervous a couple of well timed audiovisuals will get those piercing, glaring eyes looking in another direction other than yourself. It will give you a moment to wipe the perspiration from you brow.

Practice, practice, practice, practice, practice, practice - did I mention practice?

Deliver your speech ten, fifteen, twenty times before the real deal. Present in front of people who you trust - but **DO NOT** let them change the speech, modify the speech in anyway. This is **YOUR** work not theirs. Get comfortable with the timing, pace, the pauses, etc. Do not practice on the day of the speech.

Get familiar with the room and podium, environment in advance

A Funeral Home invited me to do a clergy seminar and they held the seminar in a Denny's Restaurant! Heaven's to Betsy there was no private meeting room, no partition and I am standing up there babbling on about Theology and Death while Archie and Edith Bunker and eating the Hungry Heifer Breakfast Special! It was a disaster - however I can tell you this: The Bunker's while eating their ham and eggs learned more about Christianity and Death than they ever thought possible or ever wanted to know.

Relax, rest, and avoid stimulation

A good night's sleep makes for remarkable positive energy to give a great speech.

Write your own introduction

NEVER EVER UNDER ANY CONDITIONS LET SOMEONE ELSE MAKE UP YOUR INTRODUCTION. HIGH RISK!

People in our profession are subject to - well let me illustrate. I was speaking to a Rotary group on the assassination and funeral of Abraham Lincoln. The President of Rotary (who was also terrified of public speaking) stood up and said this: "I want to introduce our speaker today, Todd Van Beck the undertaker. Before the lunch Todd told me it was going to be real nice to at last talk to a live audience!" He laughed his fanny off, I had NOT said that, and he thought it was hilarious. I was not amused, and it affected the serious purpose of the speech.

Establish a comfortable room temperature, good lighting, and adequate ventilation

A drowsy audience will only upset you further. Nothing is more annoying and confusing to a speaker than to have the audience fall asleep during the speech. Also a comfortable environment will raise the ante greatly that YOU will not faint.

Dress appropriately

Wear something you know you look good in. It is difficult to overdress when you are the speaker - but it is mighty easy to under dress - which just might make the host question why they invited you in the first place.

Expend an image of energy about your topic

Audiences love conviction and passion about the subject. I have often felt that whatever success I have experienced in speaking to funeral directors is not anything to do with expertise, but everything to do with the simple fact that I love the funeral service profession.

Talk to the friendly faces and play to the winners

Get ready for this fact: you will never find an audience where every attendee likes you. Never, ever! Audiences have it real easy, they don't have to do a damned thing and can basically tear you apart - and trust me some of them will do exactly that.

There are just grumpy, cranky, fussy people out there who will decide that of all the seminars at the convention they could have attended, they will attend yours. Lucky you! So do yourself a real big favor and protect your ego and self worth by basking in the warm gaze of people whom you know or who are nonverbally communicating their support of you. Play to the winners.

Speak loudly, not shouting, this will help dissipate your anxiety

Project your voice - no one likes listening to Minnie Mouse except little children watching a cartoon, and YOU are not a cartoon, or should not be.

Use natural humor, as opposed to planned jokes that may fail

I have found in my 30 years in public speaker that the easiest subject to get people to laugh at spontaneously is ME. I tell stories on myself and what crazy things have happened to me in my career. If you do plan a joke better be damned certain that it is neither an ethnic nor a sexual joke; better to bore than offend. You would think that a few Presidential candidates would figure this one out?

Pretend your mistakes don't happen

We all make mistakes. I once walked right off the stage and fell into the orchestra pit - that one was difficult to pretend did not happen. Don't be rattled by them and **DO NOT STOP TALKING.**

One great comfort in public speaking is the fact that most adults have an extremely limited attention span, so many times when you make a mistake they don't even know it because they weren't even listening to you in the first place. I remember once I was giving a major seminar to the Ohio Funeral Directors Association and I was babbling on about Abraham in the Old Testament preparing to slit the throat of Isaac. Instead of saying the word slit I said the word slut. I stopped dead in my tracks. A funeral director from Lima, Ohio looked at me, then looked at the person sitting next to him and said, "Did Todd just say slut?" Keep moving, and apologies only weaken your position.

Don't take yourself too seriously

Naturally we want to do a good job, but honestly we are not Winston Churchill or Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the future of Western Civilization is probably not going to hinge in the balance in a world waiting for the content of a speech made at the Tiny Rock Funeral Directors and Cemeterians Association convention. It is safe and wise not to overestimate the importance of your speech in the larger scheme of things. Our presentations are not the earthshaking event to others that it is to you and me. Moreover if we screw up your audience won't remember what you did nearly as long as you will. I have found that learning to laugh at my blunders has been a great blessing in my evolution as a public speaker.

Chapter 2

Never Underestimate Your Audience!

Oh, those people - a piece of cake! These words are basically professional suicide for any speaker to utter or worse believe. The key to successful public speaking is a connection with your audience - without it the speaker is just a babbling piece of protoplasm.

Here are some points that I have found useful in thinking about your audience.

What do they already know about your topic?

I remember very well when I started doing clergy seminars and I was scared to death! Sure I had graduated from seminary - but I was not a very good student, and I was particularly poor in Greek and Hebrew - the basic languages of both Testaments!

When the invitation came to talk to the clergy I knew I was not going to be able to hold my own with them in Holy Scripture - so I did not even try. Instead I stayed within the bounds of my own true knowledge level and the first seminar one went ok, not great, not stellar, but ok. Over the years I have discovered that as a Funeral Director first and a seminary graduate second, if I stay within the bounds of funeral service I can teach and instruct the clergy. When I was in seminary there was not one course required for graduation in thanatology, grief psychology or bereavement counseling so I know that I probably know more than the average clergy in this area. I have discovered being genuinely humble about what the audience already knows is a wise safety valve.

How does your audience feel about your topic?

Well as a Funeral Director where should I start? I have discovered a few insights concerning a non-funeral audience and how they really feel about the topic of our profession. Overall the topic will ring people's bells and whistles, and I have also discovered that you and I need to first and foremost begin our presentations by explaining to the audience why we became Funeral Directors. I have discovered that while the audience is staring at us, what is going through their minds is this question: "How can he/she stand to do that work?" I am not trying to violate the sacredness of our great profession, but I have found we need to first and foremost explain our calling into this wonderful line of work. Once the audience has crossed the threshold of funeral service anxiety to funeral service interest the sky is the limit. You and I always need to prepare ourselves that an hour presentation can easily transform itself into a three or four hour funeral question and answer session - and when that happens, good things happen to good people.

What do they know about you?

This one is easy - simply give out some elementary background information - but certainly not a resume or curriculum vitae. Hosts tend to embellish introductions because they have a vested interest in the impression the audience has of the "expert" that they have brought to town. I have discovered however that speakers need to earn their expertise with the audience and a handout listing everything about the speaker's wonders does not accomplish that.

Also I have discovered that the main thing you want your audience to know is that you are mighty pleased and honored to be speaking with them and that you have genuine humility about yourself. Usually after I am introduced I will wink at my audience and thank the host for the kind words and enter into my talk with this phrase: "I'm just a farm boy from Iowa." I have never once had anyone in the audience accuse me of being full of myself when I identify myself as a farm boy from Iowa - which is the truth!

How does the audience feel about you?

In my speaking career I have identified four feelings which audiences will exhibit towards the speaker;

- They can like you.
- They can dislike you.
- They can feel neutral about you.
- They can feel sorry for you.

I have experienced all four and I can tell you with all sincerity of purpose the first one is the best one. In the end you want your audience to like you, trust you, believe you, and consider you a friend. A word about being a friend: "baby" undertakers crave recognition from the veteran Funeral Director. Each one of us has been the neophyte undertaker going to her or his first "big" meeting. Some of the best and most long lasting friendships that I have made in funeral service has been to those young Funeral Directors with whom I talk to during and after seminars. Also simply going around the audience before the presentation shaking hands and introducing your self is mighty effective. It is high risk speaker behavior to assume that just because you have been identified as the "expert" that absolves you or me of possessing and exhibiting the human touch.

One last thought - you cannot be all things to all people - and I would not expect nor anticipate a "love feast" when you are asked to speak to the anti-funeral league at the Memorial Society.

Are external circumstances likely to affect the audience's response to my speech?

I was in the New York City area on September 11, 2001 and I made a presentation to a group of Funeral Directors that very evening. Try as they might external circumstances affected their response greatly - as well it should have.

I remember a seminar I was asked to do in Southeastern Iowa. The seminar was to start at 7:00 p.m. but this Funeral Director from a town on the Mississippi River thought the meeting was to start at 4:00 p.m. So promptly at 4:00 p.m. he arrived and when he discovered that he was three hours early he promptly headed for the bar in the hotel. By 7:00 p.m. he was in the bag. During my presentation he started throwing notes wadded up like spit balls at me and then he declared it was too hot in the room. So to cool off he proceeded to remove his suit coat, then his tie, and then he took off his undershirt and sat there trying to act like he was listening to me with a hairy bare chest. His behavior qualifies as an example of an external circumstance which would likely affect the audience's response to your speech.

Do they want me to be here?

As most speakers in funeral service readily realize the toughest group to present to are the groups that gather at the final stages of the continuing education cycle for last minute CEU's. So the question is not sometimes do they want you or me to be there, but do THEY want to be there.

Customarily continuing education groups are not as animated or seemingly interested in the proceedings as are groups of people who show up because they truly want to be there and want to learn something. Back to the original question, do they want you to be there?

In public speaking you are at times going to run into "cranky" audiences. No doubt the most temperamental are the anti-funeral groups, and here and there some clergy groups. I have discovered that the greatest strength a speaker has is to simply tell their story.

I well remember a clergy seminar I was doing in Winchester, Virginia. I was scheduled to speak for 8 hours and arrived at the seminar well prepared. I started at 9:00 a.m. At 9:10 a.m. one of the clergy, a highly dignified and I might say intimidating individuals stood up and made this announcement: "Sure the undertaker will be speaking on behalf of the funeral he has a great big money interest in the work!" I almost threw up. Then I looked at my watch and thought I have 7 hours and fifty minutes left in this seminar. I froze, my knees locked and I thought to myself "I don't need this aggravation I got 30 mortuary science students back home well prepared to verbally beat me up - everyday!"

Then I remembered something that Rev. Dr. Edgar N. Jackson told me when I was his student, "If the Funeral Director does not stand up and speak on behalf of the benefits and values of the funeral - Who will?" So I regained what little composure I had left and pushed ahead.

During the break the host Funeral Director came up and actually apologized for the behavior of the clergyman. In fact he confided to me that the clergyman had a pre arranged plan with his funeral home and there was to be no ritual or ceremony at all upon the clergyman's death. A good question was raised that day - how can a clergyperson endorse christenings, weddings, blessings of our pets, Sunday worship service and dispel the funeral ritual?

I flew back to New York and thought I had failed. Two weeks later the host Funeral Director called me up and informed me that the cranky clergyman had just left his office and had amended his pre need arrangements by adding an evening of calling hours for the community.

That clergyman might well have not wanted me or himself at the seminar but telling the story of the value and benefits of the funeral did have an affect.

Who are the major opinion leaders in the group?

Remember as a public speaker you cannot be all things to all people, however you can have an influence on the major opinion leaders in the group - for good or not good. I remember doing a major Hospice seminar in Sault St. Marie, Ontario. The place was packed. Numerous Hospice workers and many Hospice top brass individuals were present. I particularly remember one group of Hospice workers who arrived en masse. It was easy to pick out the major opinion leader in this group because the rest of the Hospice people followed her into the room like soldiers following their leader into battle. The "general" of the Hospice group had this tremendous frown on her face and was basically telling everybody else where to sit and what to do. (In all my years of seminar work I am still amazed at people who attend a seminar and really don't want to be there. Oh well, the power that Continuing Education hours possess to motivate. Go figure?)

I started the seminar and frankly it was one of those days when I was simply on the mark - it had all the ear marks of a good seminar day. However, every point I made the Hospice "general" would frown, scowl, and shake her head negatively at me, and then proceed to pass down her line of loyal minions her opinions of how inaccurate my information was. So I brought out the trick which is mighty powerful in public seminars - I started to talk directly to her!

I have found that "grumpy" people are in every seminar, and if they are not a leader - well who cares. But a "general" is a different matter all together because they just might have influence as to whether or not you are issued a return invitation.

I started in making a point and then looking directly at her and asked the question "Don't you agree with that?" At first she tried to ignore me, but I persisted. Eventually I would make a point and look directly at her and say "Of course you already know this." Finally she started to nod her head in the affirmative - yes I was right - she did know everything. Then a miracle occurred, when the Hospice "general" nodded all her loyal followers sitting in the seats she had selected for them they also started nodding their heads exactly imitating her in the affirmative to me. Truthfully, I don't think her Hospice regiment was listening to one word that came out of my mouth, but by jingo they were glued to her responses.

When the first break came the Hospice "general" approached me with her handful of disciples in tow and personally anointed me as being worthy of talking to herself and her people. It paid off for I was asked again to speak to the group. Only difference the next time was that the Hospice "general" instructed her people to sit in the front row. Sometimes in speaking one gets much more with molasses than vinegar.

Who is the formal leader? The informal leader?

There is a unique political chemistry in public speaking. Formal leaders are certainly a presence to be reckoned with but often times are truly not as powerful a presence as the informal leader in a group. Formal leaders usually are the boss, owner, partner, family member etc. The chemistry in a public seminar between these people is absolutely fascinating to watch and frankly very entertaining.

In a staff seminar if the formal leader is present (unless that leader has created an impressive level of trust with the staff) truth will be an elusive prey. Also, what is amazing is that is anybody who the staff believes - true or not - is a formal leader whatever that persons says the group will find unbelievably interesting (even when it is not) and absolutely hilarious (even when it is not). In other words if the "boss" makes a joke or attempts to make a witty comment the staff will hold their side in laughter.

I remember doing a staff seminar and the formal leader was "busy" and hence late. The informal leader was basically the point person which whom the entire group looked to for cues on reactions,

behaviors and the like. Things were moving along nicely and then the formal leader arrived. The minute this person walked into the room everything changed. The formal leader approached me, acted as if we were long lost friends and then made one of the stupidest remarks I have ever heard publicly. I just stood there dumbfounded, but good Lord his staff thought it was the funniest most hilarious comment they had ever listened to. Better than Bob Hope or Jack Benny or Steve Martin.

My experience has taught me that a good relationship must be forged with the formal leader, but the true authentic work of the seminar is basically centered on chemistry of the group with the informal leader.

Should your speech attempt to accomplish different purposes with various audience members?
This depends totally on the composition of the audience. If you are giving a seminar to a group of Embalmers talking about accounts payable of the funeral home it might not create a home run. Likewise if you are talking to the business manager of the funeral home a speech on the advantages and disadvantages of jaundice embalming fluid, it just might flop.

However if you are making a presentation to the entire funeral home staff then to be sure you need to connect with the receptionists, support staff, car washers, flower planters, snow scoopers, Funeral Directors etc.

I am constantly amazed how a type of “food chain” is created in some funeral homes with the result being an ego driven caste system which exhibits itself in this type of caste typing - I am **THE** Funeral Director, I am **THE** Embalmer, I am **ONLY** the car washer, I am **ONLY** the receptionist.

When making a presentation to a funeral home staff it is extremely effective to show legitimately how and why every last person who works in the company is important. Know who your audience is and tailor your remarks to make everyone feel truly important and proud of their contributions to the entire success of the operation.

Is there an expert on my topic in the group?

I remember I was asked to make a presentation on computers in funeral service in Las Vegas a couple of years ago. Now everybody who knows TVB on a personal and not so personal level is already dropping to the floor laughing. Todd Van Beck being flown to Vegas to give a seminar on computers! Good God! How in the hell did he manage that invitation? - Easy. One of my best friends in funeral service owns the computer company - relationship building is everything in funeral service!

Anyway I digress. I knew that every person in attendance at that seminar was light years ahead of me in computer knowledge. So why would I even attempt to make a stab at presenting myself as an “expert.” So to fulfill my responsibility to my friend’s kind invitation I stuck to the real purpose of my presence in Vegas which was this, “If Todd Van Beck can turn a computer on - hell anybody can!” and the power of this position in the presentation was that it was the gospel truth.

Every public speaker will be invited based only on relationships to make a presentation to an audience who are made up of experts far in excess of the speaker’s knowledge or talents - and that is ok..

What are the questions or objections this audience is likely to have?

It is always a safe practice in public speaking to compose in advance a list of predictable problem questions which you might be asked during the seminar. I realize this might sound like overkill, but it does have its wise merits.

I remember one seminar I was asked to present to a Memorial Society meeting in Southern Vermont. The group was basically made up of really nice people who were devoted to the environmental cause and thought that embalming dead bodies contributed to global warming!

Here is an example of what I mean. During the time that I was preparing for this seminar I remember going to bed one night and just as I was beginning to doze off to sleep I thought of this predictable question. This group, I thought, is going to ask me, “If we keep burying dead people in

the ground at this rate the entire country will eventually turn into a cemetery.” I knew in my gut that I would be confronted with that question.

A week later the seminar started and sure enough right in the middle of the session up went the hand and the presenter of the question was very direct, very self righteous, and basically smug. She thought she had me!

In preparation for the seminar I had posed this very question to a friend of mine who was great at math. I asked my mathematical wizard friend to find the answer to this problem: There are five billion people on the face of the earth, and you can give 1000 dead people a single burial space on one acre of land. If everyone across the globe died at the very same minute how much space would it take to bury them all? I had the answer sitting right on the speakers table when this very nice, but smug, lady confronted me with the question I knew would be asked.

I looked at her and very nicely thanked her for such an insightful and intelligent question. She smiled with self content and premature self congratulations. Here was my response. “If everyone across the globe (5 billion) people died today at the same time, seeing as you can bury 1000 people on one acre of land, every human being on the face of the earth could have a single grave space on 7812.50 square miles of ground. This is an area which would be a little smaller than Massachusetts and about six times larger than Rhode Island.

The lady who asked the question did not ask anymore.

What is the best way to create rapport with your audience?

Be free and easy with compliments and be extremely careful and build your case gingerly with any type of criticism. I find that when I am asked today to speak for say one hour I usually politely turn those invitations down. Truth is I am not through my first story in less than half an hour. I have discovered that humor at oneself helps to relax a group, makes the speaker infinitely more human, and sets a safe stage for later when you might need to address some sticky subjects. Coming out of the gate like a bull in a china closet does not build rapport.

But beyond compliments or criticism the absolutely best way to build rapport in public speaking is to be able to tell a story. I have never, ever in over 1250 public presentations over 30 years ever encountered one person who did not like to be told a story. Frankly ALL great public speakers are great story tellers. More stories the better. Interestingly, the only public speakers or people in leadership who look down on storytelling are the people who don't know how to tell a good story! And remember the stories do not have to be 100% factual - I learned that little tidbit from a simple Jewish carpenter from a town called Nazareth.

What do audiences value?

Audiences love to be made to feel like they are mighty special, mighty successful and that they have made great career decisions in their lives. Audiences love to be inspired, they love to laugh and they love to cry. In fact my personal definition of the best seminars is when the speaker is able to do both in the same session - make 'em laugh, and make 'em cry.

Audiences see great value in being told how smart they were to attend your seminar. Audiences respond greatly to the value of being told a few things (not many now) which turns on the light bulb. As a speaker you want to strive for the “I did not know that!” response, you want to strive for the nodding yes of the heads syndrome, and you want to strive for the welled up eyes and the laughter where they hold their sides.

Think about this for a moment: if you were going to spend time and money getting to and attending a seminar which one would you value the most? The seminar where the speaker devalued you, what you did, why you do it, and tell you everything that you are doing wrong? Or the seminar whereby you are uplifted, told what great things you have done and do, inspired you to move forward, get a few good ideas to use back home, and walk out of the seminar feeling like Thanos - the God of Death? For me the answer is a no brainer.

What demographic characteristics of the audience do I need to keep in mind?

DO YOUR DEMOGRAPHIC HOMEWORK! I only know a few things about public speaking and here is one: What works in Tiny Rock, Iowa will not cut it in the West End of London. What works in

Alabama will not cut it in California. What works in the Atlantic Provinces in Canada will fall on its face in Vancouver. YOU MUST DO YOUR DEMOGRAPHIC HOMEWORK and in funeral service that means knowing what's going on, who are the player's and how funerals are approached. This is particularly valuable in international speaking where right off the bat some audiences will be suspect of the Yank from the Excited States of America.

When I began international speaking in Canada I dove into the history of Canada. At a seminar in Winnipeg I knew that Thompson's Funeral Home had done the funeral for Louis Riel when the Royal Canadian Mounties hung him as a traitor. The Canadian's seemed pleased that somebody from the States would know that information. When I spoke in England I researched Westminster Abbey and Scottish burial customs. The British and Scottish groups seemed pleased that a "Yank" would know that information. And when I was asked to give a program on the Assassination and Funeral of Abraham Lincoln to a Rotary group in the middle of Georgia I began my remarks with this statement: "It is difficult for me to believe that this seminar is going to elicit a great amount of sadness and grief with the Rotarians today." The Rotarian's roared with laughter and off we went.

The cardinal rule in public speaking is to know your audience and be prepared - and demographic knowledge is an essential part of that process.

Chapter 3

Ways to Give your Presentation More Impact!

Have you ever heard this one: “Good God where did they get her?” “My God was he boring!” “They wonder why funeral directors hate continuing education!”

I remember I was making a presentation to the Ohio Embalmer’s Association at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. I was sitting up front trying to gather my thoughts when this Funeral Director who was a total stranger to me sat next to me. I smiled at him he smiled back and opened up his program. As he read the agenda he leaned over to me and said this: “Have you ever heard Todd Van Beck speak?” Before I could utter one syllable this gentleman concluded with this: “He is absolutely horrible. I have heard him a dozen times and he is terrible. This will be a yawner!” I said nothing to him except nonverbal nods of my head in sympathy with his dilemma.

One saving grace to this story - you should have seen the look on his face when the President of the Ohio Embalmer’s Association introduced me and I stood up and walked to the podium. This Funeral Director left at the break and I have never laid eyes on him again.

The point of the story is that the impact of your public presentations will be discussed in the profession and your goal is NOT to be reputed as being a “Yawner!” You can do better than I. Let’s begin.

Use transitions to link your ideas together

Transitions are words, phrases, or sentences that help you move from point to point in your presentation. I call it the “circle eight.” Basically the circle eight is where you plant a seed of an idea, a word, phrase, sentence over here - leave it for a time - the audience will usually forget it, and then after you have made a few more points you circle back to the original idea. It makes the audiences brain work.

Here is an example of the circle eight. Imagine that you are hearing this story in a seminar - ok? The story goes this way: A young telegraph operator answered an ad for a position with a large passenger ocean line. When the young man arrived for the interview the room was already packed with scores of cigar smoking telegraphers. All the men were much older and much more experienced than this young man. All of the sudden the young man jumped up and marched right into the President office. The others were stunned and indignant. In a minute the President opened the door and marched out arm in arm with the young telegrapher and announced that the job was filled. Then a greater uproar broke out. Finally the President of the Ocean Line said this: “Gentlemen please can you shut up for just one minute - let me explain. Our telegraphers out on the open ocean must be alert constantly because they are the ship’s only communication to the mainland. So they must be sharp, alert and ready and willing to listen.” Then there was more grumbling from the older men. Again the President said: “Gentlemen quiet please - please absolute quiet - can you hear that?” Over in the corner was a telegraph key that had been ticking the entire time the “older” telegraphers were busy babbling on about God knows what.

Here was the message, except one, received way too late: “Anybody who gets this message - come to the President’s office immediately - the job is yours.”

Now when I tell this story people respond every favorably and I move on to other points. But here is the art of transition and creating the WOW factor in a presentation. I will wait to the very end of the seminar - I mean maybe five or nine hours later and just as I am finishing it off I will look at the audience and act in a “I forgot” something manner and say this: “Oh, heaven’s to Betsey I am a really terrible speaker. Remember that young telegrapher who got the message and was really tuned in? His name was Thomas Alva Edison.” The audience always oohs and aahs at the transition.

When you are preparing your presentation the simplest way to make the transition is to number your points as you state them. This way you can remember them and easily return to the ones which you will use to make the transition.

Another transitional procedure that I have found useful is a question and you pose and answer. You can repeat a phrase from a previous sentence and elaborate on it. Certain words also effect transition such as besides, furthermore, in the same way, on the other hand, consequently, in fact, meanwhile, to this end - the one phrase I have found worked best for me is this "Here's one for ya!" Every head in the audience looks up.

Vary your choice of transitions. If all you do is transitions throughout your presentation you will numb your audience more than their dentist can. Remember your goal is to be asked back.

Use repetition to rivet your audience.

For many years I have given a seminar which is entitled "This is a Funeral Home." Throughout the entire seminar this phrase is used again and again to open up a new area of exploration as to what exactly a funeral home is. Repetition can appear at the beginning of successive sentences as in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Repetitions can also be used at the end of a presentation such as: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child; I understood as a child, I thought as a child." (1 Corinthians)

Use antithesis to create memorable effects

This technique places contrasting ideas within parallel arrangements of words. For instance John F. Kennedy used this technique when he said: "And so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country."

Create attention through alliteration

When two or more successive or nearby words begin with the same letter you have alliteration. The late President Gerald R. Ford accomplished this when he said: "My record is one of progress, not platitudes; performance, not promises." The one I love is when Winston Churchill described the men who worked for Adolf Hitler as "Those meager mousy men who work their master's wicked will." It is very hard to beat Winston Churchill in giving a speech. Good stuff!

Emphasize a point by asking a rhetorical question

In "The Merchant of Venice" Shylock asks six rhetorical questions to win the audience over: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And, if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

The power of the rhetorical question is that you are not asking for an answer, you are making your points by driving home the point that your audience already knows the answers and basically the questions do not require answers and more importantly are not up for discussion.

Paint word pictures for the audience with analogies, similes, and metaphors

Connect your idea to something they already know. This is particularly effective in funeral service and is the reason that experienced funeral people often times connect in a more effective and meaningful way with Funeral Directors than non funeral people do. Using case studies from the funeral home is an excellent way to create the word picture - simply tell your stories from your career.

I well remember attending a banquet that was being held in York, England by the National Association of Funeral Directors of Great Britain. I was sitting beside two Funeral Directors who I have known for many, many years. Across the table were two American casket representatives who were really trying hard to woo the British Funeral Directors (not an easy task). During the dinner the casket guys would make a funeral point here and there - the Brits sat there and listened. Then I told the story of the ambulance call we went on where the man had tried to kill himself by eating several rolls of toilet paper. The British Funeral Directors had tears coming down their faces with laughter. Later in the evening the casket guys came over and asked me how I got to be such good friends with the Funeral Directors. Easy: information about the gauge of a casket in painting a word picture simply cannot compete with the word pictures that are created in a person's mind

when they imagine someone desperate to end their own life and decides to devour rolls of toilet paper as the means of self destruction.

Appeal to the audience through the rule of three

Oddly a series of three ideas for some reason is almost always more powerful than two, four, or more. Consider: "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; "Duty, honor, country"; or "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory."

Also, most audience's attention span cannot tolerate - well try this: next presentation you give stand up and announce that you have thirty seven points which you are going to cover and see the reaction. Remember your goal is to be asked back.

When I lived in Houston, Texas I attended St. Luke's United Methodist Church and the senior pastor was one of the finest preachers I have ever listened to in my life, Dr. James W. Moore. He was a master at alliteration and the rule of three. One of the best sermons I listened to was titled "Mission, Mercy and Motivation." Dr. Moore developed his themes and took off examining the three points. I never experienced Dr. Moore developing more than three points - ever!

Chapter 4

“What to do with the disruptive seminar attendee?”

Fortunately I have not had many really disruptive people in my seminars. However I have contended with the “talker” who just cannot shut up. I have contended with the “flirt” who thinks he is Fabio and winks and waves at women while I am talking. I have contended with the “grumpy” person who was forced to attend. I have contended with the “sleepy” person who cannot keep their eyes opened. Today cell phones are the bane of most public speakers. I have to admit that when a cell phone goes off in a seminar not only is it disruptive, but at times downright inconsiderate.

I was giving a seminar to a group of Funeral Directors in Virginia one afternoon and this Funeral Director’s cell phone went off and he took the call and started talking while I was talking - he did not even have the courtesy to leave the room. I looked at the rest of the people and said, “It’s probably a family who want to borrow some folding chairs.” The group broke out in laughter and everyone in the group turned their phones off.

The worst was a Funeral Director from Canada who was flown into Cincinnati to attend a four day manager’s workshop. The first day he waltzed into the seminar and sat in his chair doing or saying nothing. However, just as I began to speak he in a grand flowing manner of opening up the morning issues of the Cincinnati Inquirer and began reading the newspaper. I did not say a word. All day long he read the newspaper. I was amazed that Cincinnati could produce so much news as to keep one person occupied all day long. I thought to myself to be careful, don’t upset him, maybe he was just having a bad day. However on the second day he did the same thing. Again, I did not say a word, but during the morning break I went upstairs to the travel agency and got him a return ticket to Canada that very afternoon. It was really a win/win situation for he did not want to be there and I did not want him there. When the gossip went through the group that this gentleman had been “sent home” the others in the group began taking a keen interest in the seminar material. Group dynamics are interesting to say the least.

Here are some suggestions of dealing with a disruptive person in the audience that I have found to be effective:

Mention the names of talkers in an example that fits into your speech

Say the names loudly and distinctly. You will certainly grab their attention and at the same time send them a direct message to shut up.

I remember I had a flirt in the group and goodness gracious he could not stop talking to the woman sitting next to him. This young man was making a complete fool out of himself and humiliating the woman, but as most of us know hormones are strange critters. After about half an hour of this mating game (on his part only) I had had enough. I was making a significant point and he was whispering the entire time and I knew I had my chance to confront this babbling. So at the top of my lungs I said “Fred, what do you think about what I just said?” Fred looked up at me with the look of a deer in the headlights. Poor chap he did not have a clue as to what I had just said. So I repeated the question in another way: “Fred, you have had a great deal of experience with this subject, tell the group what you would have done?” Fred sputtered, mumbled, turned red, and was dumfounded. Interesting, in 15 seconds Fred evolved from Fabio the Flirt to Fred the Flop. Fred got the message loud and clear and finally shut up. Oh, by the way the lady sitting next to him thanked me during the next break and moved her seat.

Move toward your disruptor(s)

One of the main reasons that I do not like to use a podium is that it keeps me from getting into the body of the audience. When the disruptors feel safe they will take full advantage of the perceived position. However, if you can get into the audience and enter the personal space of the disruptors they will usually get the message without you having to say anything.

Ask the entire audience for quiet

The disruptor(s) are just as annoying to the rest of the audience usually as they are to you the speaker. I have actually had incidences when someone in the audience yells to the disruptor "Shut Up!!!!!" However I have found that kindness and gentleness are required of the speaker. It is odd but true that some people who attend a seminar are seminar retarded - in other words they haven't got a clue as to how to behave. We do not necessarily want to single people out and a safe way to do this is to ask the entire group to settle down. Most people in the audience will know who you are talking about.

Simply stop talking.

If you want to command your audience's attention just do two simple things: first begin to talk very softly and two simply stop talking. Every head in the group will look up when you do this. With the whisper or silence, while at the same time looking in the direction of the disruptors people in the audience will soon be hushing them because they do not want to miss what you are whispering or being silent about.

Do nothing

There have been a few times in my seminars when the audience will just not calm down that I have simply sat or stood up front doing nothing until the audience on their own brings order to the session.

Startle the audience

I have found that when an audience is getting disruptive, stopping the flow of information and telling them a case study which either will bring for a flood of tears from sorrow or a flood of tears from laughter is extremely effective.

I was presenting a seminar to a group of Victims Assistance Volunteers in Calgary, Alberta some time ago. They were mighty fine people, but for some reason they were wiggling and talking and it was not stopping. So I shifted gears and moved from the lecture material to a startling case study that I knew would stop the wiggling and talking dead in the tracks.

This happened when I was doing work with FEMA (in another lifetime). A volunteer firefighter in Maryland joined the force and was an EMT. He got accustomed to the routine ambulance call and this routine went on and on for many years. However, one day a man on drugs in the town kicked his wife out of their home and was holding their infant hostage. The State Police showed up and called the fire department to dispatch the ambulance. This volunteer firefighter was on the call and was standing out on the street while the waiting continued for hours. Finally, the door opened up and out walked the man with the infant in his arms. The State Police instructed this volunteer EMT to get the baby and check it out in the back of the ambulance. When the man turned the baby over to the EMT the baby's head rolled out of the blanket. The father had decapitated his own child.

I can assure you this story will shut your audience up in a New York minute.

As a last resort - ask the disruptors to leave the seminar

As a public speaker you have the right to defend your own dignity. To that end just asking a person to leave your seminar is at times appropriate and deserving. However draw your battle line very carefully. Remember you want to be asked back.

Chapter 5

Public Speaking Techniques for Conducting a Successful Question-and-Answer Session.

Questions and Answers. WOW. There seems to be absolutely nothing that the general public likes more than to pick the brain of the undertaker. Professional funeral service groups composed of licensed Funeral Directors and Embalmers will ask questions but naturally they are on a much higher level of sophistication and insight than the lay person such as “Archie and Edith Bunker.”

However part of my greatest joys in public speaking has risen precisely from the questions that “Archie and Edith Bunker” ask. The sky is the limit with lay people’s questions. Anything goes. And if the lay people cross the threshold from funeral service anxiety to funeral service interest - WATCH OUT! The questions will come at you fast and furious.

What still amazes me is the variety and scope of the questions. The questions which the public presents at a funeral service seminar are unbelievable. They range from the most sophisticated to the most stupid. Everyone has heard the old saying that “There is no such thing as a stupid question.” Certainly the individual who developed this quote had NOT done much public speaking. Believe me my friends there are stupid questions and here is an example.

A few years ago I took a group of mortuary science student’s on a field trip to England and Scotland. We visited funeral homes, cemeteries, Westminster Abbey and had the extraordinary opportunity to visit with the gentleman who had in years past possessed the warrant from Buckingham Palace as the Royal Undertaker. This gentleman, Michael Kenyon has been a close friend of mine for many years. As Mr. Kenyon was talking to the class and he covered many Royal funerals, but at the end of his presentation he told the group that he had saved the best for last. In 1965 Mr. Kenyon had conducted the funeral service for Sir Winston Churchill at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. I personally was in rapture listening to his descriptions of the myriad of details which he had to personally oversee. It was a real funeral service treat.

When Mr. Kenyon ended his talk he asked if there were any questions. One of my ace crack students raised her hand and asked this question. “Who is Winston Churchill?” I damned near threw up (operating that school for me was like doing time!). Trust me there are stupid questions.

However as a speaker you never ever identify the stupid question publicly as being stupid. Of course you privately think it, but never ever embarrass the person who raised the question.

That is not to say that you should not stand up for the dignity of our profession and challenge a question. Here is an example: I was lecturing to a group of up and coming clergy at the Theology School of the University of Vancouver in British Columbia. The time for questions and answers arrived and off we went. Half way through the session a young lady who looked like the poster girl for L.L. Bean & Co. raised her hand and poised this question: “What about putting all this money on funerals in the ground?” Frankly the questions offended me and made me mad as hell and I got my Dutch up. I look right at her and replied: “We do not put any money in the ground we put the money in the bank!” I could have cared less the effect that my reply had on her by that time. I was obligated to protect the funeral profession and bugger on her.

Here then are some thoughts about conducting question and answer sessions following your public presentation.

Look directly at the person asking the question; and then direct your answer to the entire audience

It is not wise to engage in private dialogues exclusively with one single person in a group made up of many. When the question is asked look directly at the person and then repeat the question to the entire group.

Sometimes there will be the “ambusher” type sitting in the group just like a spider waiting to jump on something you have said. The ambusher will pose questions which basically they already know the answer to. This is terribly unfair in a manner of speaking, but I can tell you it is a tremendous motivator for you the speaker to know your subject as well as you can.

A short time ago I was giving a lecture on the Assassination and Funeral of President Abraham Lincoln in a small community in Indiana. In a prior article I wrote on the speaker knowing the demographics of the area in which he or she is speaking. I have given the Lincoln presentation for 35 years and I can tell you states where Lincoln lived namely - Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois and the District of Columbia have many more Lincoln “experts” that say places like Alabama, Georgia, California, Arizona. This presentation was in Indiana and only 30 miles from Ft. Wayne where the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company houses the Lincoln Museum and Research Center. So I knew going in that there would be Lincoln experts in the group. Sure enough I was right.

The ambusher’s in any seminar will usually set right up front. They customarily have their arms folded in a defensive stance. They never take their eyes off of you, and make very interesting facial expressions conveying a myriad of non verbal communication signals.

The evening for the big event arrived and the host Funeral Director had worked diligently to see that everything was in order. As I began speaking there were too ambushers in the front row. Two middle aged men. Two hours later I was finished and frankly was brain dead. I opened it up for questions and answers and a woman in the front row asked this question: “Was it true that many of Mrs. Lincoln’s family fought for the Confederacy and this got President Lincoln into deep trouble?” The answer was yes and I elaborated on the psychological trauma that Lincoln experienced dealing with this experience. Then the woman asked a follow up question: “Did Mrs. Lincoln herself experience any personal losses from her relatives fighting for the other side?” I stood there and said no. That was it. The ambushers had me dead to rights.

For two hours they had sat there waiting for me to screw up and I did. They were like a man shot out of a cannon to correct me in front of the entire group. They were right, and I was wrong. It was a tough lesson to be reminded that after speaking for 35 years one can still mess up.

Listen carefully to all questions

The audiences expect you to hear, listen and understand their question the first time - so careful attention to what they are saying is extremely important. Remember as the speaker you are in a very tenuous and vulnerable situation. You are basically expected to do everything, be right in the mark, and keep the audience captured throughout your presentation. The audience on the other hand is expected to do nothing except maybe clap at the end of the presentation.

It is interesting the dynamics of an audience when they ask questions. Some shout at you, some mumble, some are sweating, some giggle, some forget the question they wanted to ask, some want to argue, some want to take over the seminar, some want to talk and talk endlessly, some mutilate the English language, some have no clue how to use a microphone, some grab the microphone and dream they are Frank Sinatra, some are the mouth for the person sitting next to them who is too timid to ask the question. The point is the audience can basically do what they want. You are the speaker however cannot and the audience as individual human beings expects and demands that you “get it” concerning questions almost immediately. There are certain times this is NOT enjoyable.

Be sure you understand the question

Remember the lay audience is NOT a funeral service audience. It will be the very rare lay person who will know what a church truck is without a great deal of explanation. Funeral service terminologies are not terms used in everyday talk.

It is better for a member of the audience to think you are an idiot for not getting the question correct the first time, than to plunder ahead and answer the question wrong. So suck it in and ask for clarifications and very politely ask for the question to be repeated.

Repeat the questions for any audience

It is important that every person in the audience has an opportunity to hear the question. It is your responsibility to make sure this happens. Also give yourself time to think about your response. Pause and consideration send a non verbal message to the question asker that you are taking this issue very seriously.

Do not allow one person to monopolize the question and answer time.

One way to control the seminar monopolizer is to basically and politely ignore the person. Just turn away from them and walk to the other side of the room and start to call on others. However if the monopolizer is someone you must appease I have found you will just have to grin and bear it.

I conducted a seminar in Atlanta many years ago. The room was full and the host who had invited me had a psychological fixation on the microphone. Literally anytime he could take the microphone away from anybody he did it. Then with the microphone in tow he would strut around the room seemingly addicted to the sound of his own voice. Eventually question and answer time arrived which my microphoniac friend was scheduled to facilitate. He was in hog heaven. I was standing with some other Funeral Directors in the back of the room when the questions and answers began.

There was only one microphone in the room and he had it and was not going to give it up. I stood back and watched this comedy unfold. In time a woman who was sitting in the center of the audience (there were probably 250 people present) stood up and asked a question. No one could hear her, even my friend who had a death grip on the microphone. Finally I had had enough. I knew this man well enough to risk getting away with what I did. I yelled at him from the back of the room, "Use the microphone for God's sake." My friend looked at me with a startled quizzical expression and yelled back to me, "I am using the microphone!" I responded in a loud voice "Not you! You idiot give the mic to the woman asking the question!" The entire audience burst out in laughter. It was one of the memorable seminars in my career.

If you don't have an answer to a specific question, do not fake it

Remember the life mission of the ambusher is to trip you up anyway possible and the quickest way is for them to ask you a question which they already know the answer and you make the response up. Got ya!

You as a public speaker cannot be all things to all people. Some people in an audience no matter how confident you are in your answer will not believe your response. I remember doing a seminar where this little old lady asked me this question: "Can a dead person sit up in the casket?" I damned near burst out in laughter. However I composed myself and said no. Well beware of little old ladies in seminars because she was an ambusher in disguise. When I said no to her question she immediately jumped all over me with this response: "You are WRONG. When I was five years old I was sitting with my mother next to my dead grandmother who they had laid out in our house. And sure enough out of the blue my grandmother sat up in her casket. I was there and saw it with my own eyes, and I have had nightmares about that for 70 years."

Good Jesus you could have heard a pin drop in the audience. Everybody was staring at the old lady and she was basking in all the attention. The audience was ruminating and moaning about this "Ripley's Believe It or Not" episode - right here in the basement of the Methodist Church.

Then, as all audiences will do, they all looked back at me to respond to this odd little old lady. I responded again NO, and this set the old lady off again. Finally, I thought enough is enough and said to the entire group, "If this woman's grandmother sat up in her casket two things happened." The audience was hushed with anticipation as to what would be the next episode in the horror/fiction conversation. "The two things are one: if the grandmothers sat up she was not dead, and two: there would have been one surprised undertaker in town that day."

Everyone in the group laughed except the little old lady.

Basically if you don't have the answer promise to follow up on the question and get the answer quickly.

Keep the focus on the purpose of your speech

Don't allow questions to divert you from your main thrust.

We were conducting an embalming seminar for the Ohio Embalmer's Association at Case Western Reserve Medical School in Cleveland, Ohio. We had engaged a professor of Anatomy from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio to basically dissect a cadaver and make comments concerning a review of the Linear and Anatomical guides which are used in the location of vessels.

The good Professor was smack in the middle of the dissection when this elderly Funeral Director from Northern Ohio raised his hand to ask a question. The Professor nodded and here was the question: "Why the hell do you pathologists cut the carotid arteries off so high up in the neck - I can't raise anything when you do that!"

I was sitting in the front row and I looked at the Anatomy Professor and smiled. The Professor replied very politely "Sir, I am not a pathologist, I am an anatomist." This did absolutely nothing to deter this Funeral Director on his question quest. Again he sounded off, "You damned pathologists, you have no consideration for us Embalmers!"

Eventually the awkward situation died down, but it rattled the Anatomy Professor very much and needlessly too.

Do not hesitate to say when the questions are so far afield, "That's very interesting, but really your question is beyond the scope of my presentation. However I would be happy to talk privately with you about your question during the break."

Retain control of your presentation

Here and there, every now and then, once in a while there will be someone in the audience who will grab at the question and answer session as a private soap box to rant and rave. Do not let others use your Q & A as a personal forum. Remember you are there to answer questions, not respond to opinions. Responding to an opinion either way is high risk behavior for any speaker and certainly there will be attendees who will take issue with any side taking.

Ask the debater in the audience to rephrase assertions as questions - this is right and fair to everyone concerned.

I was asked to make a presentation to a district Funeral Directors meeting. The state legislature had just passed a statute which allowed cemeterians to sell caskets directly to the public. I was asked to speak on the subject of the history of the ambulance service in the funeral home - which was a mighty interesting subject.

When I arrived at the meeting you could cut the tension in that room with a knife - these Funeral Directors were mighty upset and frankly they were not in the least interested in my presentation of the history of the ambulance service. However, I had prepared my information and after the meal (where several heated conversations had taken place) I started to speak. The session lasted about half an hour and I asked if anyone had any questions. At regular district Funeral Director meetings the attendees can't seem to make their exit fast enough, but this night five hands went up in the air. Let me remind the reader the topic of the question and answer session was the ambulance service - not who gets to sell caskets.

One Funeral Director stood up said: "This legislation sucks!" Everyone nodded in agreement. Then another one stood up and said, "Where was the association lobby when this law was passed?" Then another one stood up and asked me "Todd, what do you think about letting those lousy cemeterians sell caskets?"

I knew that I was not going to answer any questions about the ambulance service. Frankly by this time the only thought in my mind was this, "The objective here Todd is for you to get out of here as quickly as possible." That is precisely what I did.

I thanked them profusely for the invitation, said absolutely nothing about cemeterians and casket sales shook a few hands and made a quiet exit with a friend of mine and headed for the nearest bar.

Respond to challenges and objections with data, not emotion

Fortunately in my speaking experience this has not happened often. However when it does just remain calm and collected. You will prevail and the hothead will lose in the audience's eyes.

Know your "Achilles' Heel."

Speaker's are usually seen or expected to be experts. This is a normal and predictable attitude that most audiences possess. However even the "experts" have their Achilles' Heel, and at times the ambushers in the audience are laying in wait for the opportunity to spring into action and pull you down.

I have found that I needed to plan my responses for the questions I hoped no one would ask.

I will give you a premier example of what I am talking about. In 1979 the funeral home I owned and operated in Iowa went bankrupt. It is true. I lost my funeral home due to many issues, some in my control some not in my control. I felt terrible about it for many years. I was ashamed of myself, and thought that I was an absolute flop in my chosen and beloved career. I was working for John B. Turner & Son in Cedar Rapids and John Turner kept trying to boost my self opinion, but it did not work. Todd Van Beck was a flop and failure in funeral service - pure and simple.

Life takes strange detours. The detour which changed my life was when St. James United Methodist Church in Cedar Rapids asked if a Funeral Director from Turner's could come to their adult Sunday school session and talk about funerals. No one at the funeral home wanted to do it, so because I was at the bottom of the funeral home food chain I was sent out to make the public presentation. Guess what? I did a pretty good job and they asked me back. Little did I know that that speaking gig would change my life.

Over a period of years I began speaking to more and more groups and then one day many years ago Jake Dodge called me up and asked if I would come to Honolulu and make a presentation at the Dodge Sunshine Seminars. I damned near fainted. I could not believe that the Dodge Company was interested in having me on their program.

Following my initial shock at the invitation I then felt a feeling of terror. I am the bankrupt Funeral Director who is going to stand up there in Hawaii and give a presentation to extremely successful Funeral Directors. I thought "Does Mr. Dodge know I went bankrupt?" I was a psychological wreck.

I called my teacher and mentor the Rev. Dr. Edgar N. Jackson who was retired and told him of my situation. He gave me a sage piece of counsel. "Tell the group what happened to you straight away." That is precisely what I did, and frankly still do today. In fact I have found it a liberator for me to share my Achilles' heel because I was shocked when I discovered that I was not the only Funeral Director on the face of the globe who had had failures in their career.

Plan your responses ahead of time for the questions you hope no one will ask. It is a good insurance to have as a public speaker.

Conclude by drawing attention back to your presentation's purpose

Remind the audience of your major points, and what ideas and concepts you want them to take home with them.

Chapter 6

Sensible Communication

For many years I have attended seminar after seminar where the human technique of listening and communicating are made to be so complicated that I am usually lost by the end of the session.

As with any aspect of life communication is a vitally important skill to have keenly developed. Most mistakes, most frustrations, most disappointments in life are basically a consequence of poor communication skills - but they do not have to be difficult or complicated.

The following are offered communications suggestions which I have found have been valuable in my speaking career and in my career as I was waiting on families.

From the start let me make this point very clear - no one can have a perfect score in human communications. Sometimes our brains simply trip us up. Have you ever had something in your brain to say, and what came out of your mouth was entirely different?

I made five funeral arrangements in one day. The first three went fine, the fourth I got through. When the fifth bereaved person came in she was the widow and we were going to make arrangements for her husband's funeral. It was winter time in Iowa and this woman was wearing a heavy overcoat. What I wanted and intended to communicate to her was this message "May I help you take off your overcoat." What came out of my mouth while I was looking at her eye ball to eye ball was this: "May I help you take off your blouse."

So it is with human communication - no one is perfect.

Communications skills can acquire more than they are inborn

Human beings are basically helpless at birth. We are not like other creatures like the baby horse who can stand up in a matter of minutes and naturally find the food supply without being directed to it. Not so with the baby human being. It takes us a long time to stand up, to walk, to learn how to feed ourselves (let alone make our own food), and it takes us a long time to learn how to talk. Interestingly talking is the one asset that the human possesses that other animal's lack. The human being is a highly developed communication delivery service. In fact we are the most highly developed communication critter on the face of the earth. No other creation on earth can develop and spell the word "strenocleidomastoid" and teach its meaning and the lesson will be understood.

We were born crying, not speaking. We learned how to speak by imitating others and truthfully that learning need never end.

One of the best communication lessons that I personally have learned in my life was the wealth of knowledge that was to be gained by watching other great communicators communicate. Their ability to take a simple idea and weave the threads of development and add the correct timing and phrasing are truly learned skills. For instance Billy Graham or Ronald Reagan or FDR were NOT born orators and communicators. They also had to go up the learning scale and mostly it was by imitating other great communicators.

Winston Churchill once commented that he "thought" he was a gifted communicator of ideas and vision until he listened to a man named Bourke Cochran in New York City. Churchill decided there and then that he needed to imitate Cochran with the Churchill style and it revolutionized Churchill's ability to communicate.

Tapes, CD's, DVD, and VHS's which have captured the great communicator's skill abound. I have found it well worth the time and money to make this investment.

Assume the next message you send will be misunderstood

I have discovered that ALL really great communicator's are also humble communicators. They have the great psychological advantage to assume that their message will be misunderstood. Now

some reader will be thinking what is the advantage of that? Here is the communication insight: you will communicate more thoughtfully, you will look for feedback particularly non verbal feedback, and you will examine yourself **FIRST** whenever you do not get your desired results. Remember a botched up public speaking opportunity is never the fault of the audience.

I was once asked of all things to give my seminar on the Assassination and Funeral of Abraham Lincoln to a group of Funeral Directors in Northern Alberta Canada. Because I have learned some valuable lessons from other communicators and my own errors concerning the issue of being misunderstood, I was on high alert as I made the trip north. It was good preparation because my audience who were wonderful people basically knew nothing about our 16th President of the United States and why should they? They are Canadians.

Everything about this seminar was different in Canada as compared to how it would have been delivered if I had made the presentation in the States. Every word, phrase, time, place, name, character - everything that came out of my mouth I had to deliberately think to myself “slow down, clarify everything, pause, ask if they have any questions.” As it turned out they seemed to enjoy the seminar, but if I had not learned the wise lesson of assuming that I will be misunderstood that seminar could very easily have turned into a speaking disaster.

Don't worry about being clear, worry instead about being misunderstood

Sometimes in human communications the message is clear as a bell and people still do not get it. Have you ever experienced that? Ask yourself “How can I send this message in such a way that I will not be misunderstood?” The same words mean different things to different people, for instance in the United States the word “boot” means a shoe. In Great Britain the word “boot” means the trunk on an automobile.

It is always a wise exercise of time and effort to examine your communication under this type of scrutiny. Here are some guidelines:

- Picture your goal in communicating. How do you intend to change the listener?
- Know your listeners - do your homework. Who are they? What do they already know? How much detail do they need? What have they experienced prior to your message? How do they feel? What do they want to hear? Are they paying attention? Do they even care about you and what you have to say?
- Know yourself as a communicator. You are unique. You have your own style, do you know what it is? How do your values, thought patterns, vocabulary, and tone of voice, speech habits, moods, body language, and overall presence affect the meaning listeners receive?
- Put your listeners in the picture. Use vivid language, tell complete stories, and paint full mental pictures that the listener can see with their ears. Use examples, metaphors, and analogies and for funeral service audiences case studies.
- Convince your listeners. Audiences love conviction, confidence and enthusiasm through tone of voice and body language. Stay away from exaggerations and overstatements. Remember audiences are usually selfish and are continually thinking about the answer to this primary audience question “What’s in this for me?”
- Stroke your audience. Leave your listeners feeling good about them and about you. This is just as easy as it is to scold them and make them dislike you. Be supportive and caring genuinely. Don’t accuse, belittle, violate expectations or over generalize. The only time I violate this rule is when I am talking about Jessica Mitford (I couldn’t stand her when she was alive and her death did not change my opinion one bit!). It is wise to be a good listener to the people who are listening to you. In the end you really need to make the audience glad that they attended your seminar.
- Control time and place. It is helpful to learn to “read” an audience. In time most speakers will develop this skill. For instance, I can at this phase of my career tell almost before the audience sends the signal that they are getting tired or bored. The minute I feel this coming on I will take control of the situation then and there and tell a hilarious funeral service story which almost universally has me as the butt of the story.
- Finally assess and respond to results. What are your listeners telling you? Did they laugh, did they cry or did they fall asleep? What will they do with your message? Have you been understood? Why or why not? What will you do differently next time? A further word on

assessment and response. When I give a seminar to a group of Funeral Directors I know very well whether or not the message is being received, however when I give a seminar to a group of 10th graders I do not. So I have to be extremely careful with the 10th graders because they might miss the central point of the seminar and if your audience misses the central point of the seminar, the seminar is doomed.

The meaning of a word cannot be found in a dictionary

I bet you are thinking “Where else would you find the meaning of a word?” Definitions are in dictionaries; meanings are in people. We do not transmit meaning; we transmit messages (words and behaviors) that represent and elicit meaning in the listeners’ minds.

Our brain plays tricks on us - does it not? Here is an exercise that I have used in my seminars for years. Reading this you will immediately know the answers, but verbally....well let’s see. I will stand up and say “If I tell you a funny story with a punch line, I have told you a....?” The audience will with extreme, I mean extreme confidence say “Joke.” Then I say, “If I go over to this man and tap him on his shoulder with my finger I have given him a....?” The audience will with extreme confidence say “Poke.” Then I ask, “And the white of an egg is the...?” Most everyone, with extreme confidence, and now almost annoyance at this series of foolish questions will set back with arms folded and say “Yoke!” A pause to let the information sink into their brains and in their thoughtful silence some of the audience will begin to laugh. We all know that the yellow of the egg is the yoke and the white of the egg is technically called the albumin.

Here is another brain twister which creates a different meaning for different people. I will ask a person in the audience “How do you spell spot?” They usually look at me with an expression of annoyance and in rapid fire say “S-P-O-T.” Then I ask them “What do you do when you pull up to a green light?” Ninety percent of people will say in the same rapid fire manner “You stop.” Sometimes they even will spell the word out saying “You S-T-O-P.” Then I say nothing and let the meaning sink into their brains. Some get it, and some do not.

In the funeral profession the meaning of our vocabulary does NOT possess the same meaning for Archie and Edith Bunker as it does for us. For instance, I once was giving a seminar to a group of lay people and I made reference to the term “church truck.” At the end of the seminar one man raised his hand and asked the very normal question “Why would a funeral home be furnishing a truck to move a church?” For you and I who know exactly the meaning of the word church truck the question might seem strange and ridiculous, however for Archie Bunker when he heard the term church truck his meaning of the words said that a truck from the funeral home moving a church.

We need to always be sensitive to the connection that our audiences have with the meaning of the words we are using.

The meaning people get from you comes less from what you say than from how you say it

The fact of speaking in public is that the tone of your voice and your body language, your nonverbal communication, account for over 90% of the meaning the audience receives.

For instance if you want to grab your audience’s attention immediately simply modulate from speaking in a normal audible voice to a whisper. The whisper is extremely powerful in public speaking - I use it all the time. I remember as a child every piece of sensitive information that my parents passed on to me was communicated to me in a whisper. The most intimate moments in life usually are communicated in a whisper. I will give you an example of a test I did concerning this truth.

I was giving a seminar to a large Funeral Directors association meeting and I was babbling on about God knows what and I began to notice that I was losing the crowd. In my papers I had a copy of all things instructions on how to assemble a clock. You read right - a clock. I pulled out the clock instructions and paused and began to whisper the assembly instructions. Every person’s head in that audience looked up, and they strained their necks and ears trying to grab a hold of every syllable that was coming out of my mouth. Think about this: the subject devoted to funeral service did not command their attention, but listening to clock assembly instructions being given in a whisper that audience could not get enough of it. In time a few in the front row caught on and we all had a great laugh.

Whenever two people are in each other's presence, they communicate

Human beings are fascinating. We all play games with each other - all day long. Even when you don't think you are sending messages make no mistake you are. A glance can carry a message worth a thousand words. They might not be the messages you want to send, but the other person is indeed receiving them. **YOU CANNOT NOT COMMUNICATE.**

When I started out in funeral service I worked for one of the Great American Funeral Directors in Omaha, Nebraska - Mr. Heafey. He was licensed in 1919 and his uncle had Embalmer's license number 1 in the state. When we would go on a funeral Mr. Heafey rarely told anyone the instructions of the funeral procedures. What he would do is communicate with you through hand signals, eye and mouth expression and body language. If the funeral was going smoothly the communication was calm and reassuring, however if say somebody like, let's see who can we pick, ok like me, was not receiving the communications Mr. Heafey looked like one of the ground crew at the airport waving in a 747. There was no mistaking his communication when he was upset, and I knew very well that I would be receiving verbal communications from him when we got back to the mortuary.

Verbal and non-verbal communications are both important, but in the end non-verbal communication comes out as the most influential communication tool the human being possesses. Here are some non-verbal examples:

Eyes

They are the most communicative organs in the human body. The eyes tell if someone is happy, sad, interested, intense, surprised, lying, sick, or in a dozen other conditions. And the sender, interestingly, has very little control over what their eyes say. In other words that old saying that "Eyes are the window to the soul" has a great amount of truth to it.

I was smitten with a woman last year. I could not get her out of my mind and followed her around like a whipped dog. I would invite her to go out for drinks, I would invite her to meet me, I would invite her to see my apartment and she never once said no in any of my invitations she said yes 100%, however she never once followed up and fulfilled her acceptance and I knew she had no intentions of doing so simply because when she said "yes" her eyes said no. Her eyes told the truth, not her mouth.

Face

The mouth can scowl, grimace, pout, smile, or communicate arrogance and pomposity. Flushed cheeks might well reveal discomfort, embarrassment, or a lack of physical stamina. I had a fourth grade teacher who had to only raise one eyebrow and look at me and I would immediately shut up or knock off anything I was doing. We called it "The Look!"

Hair

What about hair today? Good God! I had a student in the mortuary college who had red hair on one side of his head and orange hair on the other side. He looked like a moving interstate traffic sign. He would constantly come into my office and want to talk about serving families and how he knew he was going to be excellent as a front line Funeral Director. Things have certainly changed since I was in Mortuary College because if I had uttered one word to him concerning how out of step he was with the conservative nature of the funeral profession he could have sued me and the college.

Some people make judgments of others based upon the color of their hair, whether the color or the hair appears to be natural. Certainly people in the Old Testament made a great deal about the amount of hair that Samson had. The amount of hair a person has remaining on their head may speak to some, as well as whether a moustache or beard is worn - and how well. Hair style is often an indicator of a person's value, religious beliefs and/or socioeconomic status.

Body

The American society draws profound (and not always consistent or considerate) inferences about people according to whether they are tall, short, fat, or thin.

I have been a large person all my life. I remember one day driving my two twin nephews back to their home, they were 4 years old at the time. One was sitting in the front passenger seat strapped

in and the other was strapped in the back seat. The one sitting next to me looked up at me and said "Uncle Todd, you have a great big head." Then the one in the back chimed in with "Uncle Todd I would not want you to fall over on me." Size creates reactions.

Posture

Leaning, kneeling, slouching, slumping, and standing erect all create distinct images in others' minds.

Gestures

Good Heaven's gestures! Hand and some finger movements either reinforce or contradict what is said and can even serve as effective substitutes for words.

I remember I was in line at a toll station on the Mass Pike when I lived in Boston. The car right in front of me had a bumper sticker which read "Honk if you love Jesus." This car went through and paid the toll and then I went through. As I came out of the toll booth I passed this guy and honked my horn and waved at him and he gave me the finger.

The nonverbal communication thing is really endless. Clothing, cosmetics, accessories, voice, touch, behavior, surroundings, and personal space all contribute to communications.

87% of the information stored in people's brains enters through their eyes

You have heard the old saying that "actions speak louder than words" well it is true. When your words conflict with your actions your listener will believe the actions.

I cannot tell you how many times when people discover that I am a Funeral Director and Embalmer what comes out of their mouths totally betrays their actions. I remember very well sitting at a dinner party and someone asked me what I did. I said that I was a Funeral Director. This person's verbal response was "Oh that is interesting." While she was expressing how interesting she thought my career was she in the process had dropped her fork, tipped over her water glass, and looked to me as if she was ready to spit up. But it was the look in her eye's which betrayed her spoken response. The look was one of fear and anxiety.

However by the end of the evening this lady and I had polished off several bottle of wine and she h confessed every loss and grief experience she had ever had to me. She was absolutely right funeral service is extremely interesting.

Communication is a complex, ongoing, dynamic and changing process

None of us are mind readers. No matter how intuitive or insightful or all knowing we perceive or think ourselves to be - no one can possibly know what it is another person's mind - no one.

Communication is not the simple exchange of words that many of us assume it is. Throughout this article I have given example after example of how clumsy and error ridden the average communication is between human beings. Add language differences, cultural differences and it is not too difficult to appreciate how almost impossible it must be to be involved with the United Nations.

In my experience with communication I have discovered that more can go wrong than can go right and communications has a nasty habit of continuing to fall apart if you do not keep fixing it.

There is probably no human frustration greater that to pour your heart out to another person and be misunderstood. This causes untold problems in marriages, business relationships, family interactions, friendships and a myriad of other human to human events.

When my mother and father celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary we had a party and dance. The book "Tender Moments with Tony Van Beck" (my father) will never be written. My father is a good honest man, but being understood by others is not a skill he developed and truthfully it was never a priority in his life. Dad could care less about being understood. My mother describes their marriage as "being happily incompatible for 55 years."

When their party was over the both of them were standing together putting their gifts into a box to take home. My father leaned over, touched Mother's hand and said, "Norma I admire you." Mother, who is hard of hearing glared back at Father and said, "Well I'm tired of you too."

Chapter 7

The Great Advantages of Listening

A Funeral Director who won't listen! Now there is an oxymoron for you! If ever there was a profession which required concentrated listening it is the funeral service profession. For years and years the admonition in funeral service was and is this: you cannot repeat a funeral if you screw it up, so you have to do it right the first time. Doing it right the first time depends greatly on listening to what the family is telling you.

The advantages of listening are numerous, too many to mention here, but I have thought of several which might be of assistance in our mutual quest of constantly improving funeral services to our families. Here goes.

Listening keeps you out of trouble

A good listener heeds instructions, suggestions and warnings. A poor listener ignores all these essential points and hence causes trouble for themselves and others. People rarely have cause to get upset with someone who pays attention to them.

When I started working years ago for the Heafey & Heafey Mortuary in Omaha we had a ship-in from the west coast. The man who died had committed suicide, the body had not been found for several days and hence between the trauma and the advanced decomposition the body could not be viewed - closed, sealed, casket.

The deceased had not lived in Omaha for years and on the evening scheduled for his visitation Mr. Heafey came down and told me that I was to answer the door during the visitation. He and Mrs. Heafey were going home.

This was the first time I had been put in charge of a visitation by myself and my brain was spinning. As they departed Mr. Heafey gave me one critically important instruction; "No one," he said, "absolutely no one was to be told of the method of death for this man. No one." If anyone asked I was instructed to play dumb (which was not an arduous task for me) I did not listen to one word that came out of his mouth. My agenda was to get them out of the mortuary so I could "play" Funeral Director. Immaturity is a dangerous thing.

As the evening progressed and I was walking around the funeral home acting like the "Archduke of Death." I found that I was really in charge of very little because absolutely no one was showing up for the visitation. I was totally by myself.

However about 8:30 p.m. the door bell rang and I thought, "Here is my chance to play Funeral Director," and up I jumped and to the front door I went. When I opened up the door there stood the cutest little couple you ever laid eyes on. They were both dressed in black with wire rim glasses. They had to be in their late 80's and they were holding hands. I very courtly asked them to "enter" and sign the register book.

As they walked into the Chapel the husband expressed surprise that the casket was closed. Because I had not listened to one word that Mr. Heafey had said to me, I proceeded to tell these two old folks exactly what had happened. They both seemed stunned. I remember feeling so important.

About one hour later the funeral home phone rang and it was the daughter of the deceased man on the phone. I picked up the call and I knew that Mr. Heafey was on the other line from his home. Here was the conversation: "This is Mrs. XYZ calling and I am mighty upset."

I replied "What is the trouble?"

"My great aunt and great uncle just returned from your place and someone over there told them how my father died - Good heaven's these were the very people we wanted spared this terrible news." I could have thrown up!

Then it went from bad to worse. I found out that the old gentleman was a retired District Court Judge in Omaha and here is the kicker: Heafey's had buried five generations of this man's family. About a year later when the old Judge died his body was taken to a funeral home about three blocks down the street from Heafey's.

Due to the respectful tone and dignified approach that this magazine takes concerning anything it publishes I will refrain from adding information concerning what Mr. Heafey communicated to me when I saw him the next morning. Needless to say it was not pleasant.

What a totally avoidable circumstance. If I had just listened to him everything would have been fine. Mr. Heafey has been dead for many years and I still marvel that he did not fire me.

Is not life a total learning experience? Things are happening around us all the time. The more you hear and understand those things, the more you learn personally and professionally from your experience.

The more information you have about the funeral service profession, the more successfully you will perform it. Listening is the way to get more knowledge that most others have. It took me a long, long, long, long, time to learn this, but I am happy to say that I have learned the lesson and I can attest to you that it works.

Throughout my career in presenting seminars I have been asked time and time again, "Where do you get all these ideas?" Easy - I shut up and listen to other Funeral Directors on a world-wide basis. The wealth of knowledge that is sitting out there in the brains of Funeral Directors world-wide is utterly staggering. Great ideas on service enhancements, great ideas on improved embalming, great ideas on cremation issues, the list does not stop - however what stopped was me saying "Oh wait till you hear what I do." That stopped years ago and now I sit back and listen and just might have a cocktail or two or three while my ears are tuned in. I think one of the reasons I have learned to listen to other Funeral Directors is that I have found it mighty difficult to be drinking booze and talking at the same time.

Knowledge is Power

Dr. Deming always said that "knowledge is power." He was right. The power of knowledge gained through listening is that you have more data and information at your disposal than others. Your actions hence are well informed and appropriate.

When Dr. Deming told me that knowledge is power I took that thought quite seriously. Today I have often time suspected that any success and return invitations I have received in my career has absolutely nothing to do with my stage presence - I mean for God's sake I am not Fabio or Robert Redford - but I do have something that Fabio or Robert Redford will never have - I have a ton of information concerning all aspects of funeral service. The truth is knowledge being power is powerful, for I can attest to you that I receive invitations to speak from people who I know do not care for me one little bit, but they realize that in my office reposes knowledge and information that they want and need so the dislike of me fly's out the window until I am finished with the seminar and then in fly's back in again.

Understanding Others

Is there anything more important than understanding the needs, motivations, and values of those around us? Goodness in funeral service we pin our professional identity basically on the word "understanding." One night I was out on a date. The woman was a looker, and I have always been a sucker for a beautiful woman. As we sat down to eat we started to chat. Quickly however the conversation turned to her and exclusively her. Throughout a three hour dinner she did not ask me one question about my life and career. Fortunately for me, the bar tender was a good friend of mine and when he discovered my dilemma he became much more generous with the booze. He was a true professional!

Here is the kicker. When the evening (thank God) finally came to a close this totally self absorbed woman leaned over to me and took my hand and told me how smart she thought I was and that she hoped I would ask her out again. I was stunned. I had not said a word, but I had listened to her

and tried to understand her, and I did come to some sort of understanding about her - I clearly understood that I would never ever ask her out again.

Here is a good question: What better way is there to learn what makes other people tick than to simply listen to them?

Listening wins respect

How many times have you heard another person say, "...well at least he listened me out." I can usually feel the respect people have for the person who will listen to them.

In my work in bereavement care I have often times thought that facilitating the bereavement support group is really an extremely easy job. All I have to do is listen. Now this is not to say that listening is many times draining, but doesn't take a ton of effort.

Getting what you want

The two keys to getting what you want from others is knowing what they are willing to give and what it will take to get them to give more. The only way I have found to accomplish this is listen, listen, listen.

Many years ago I was of the opinion that everything I wanted or needed to say needed to be said right then and there! It took me many failures as a communicator to learn to listen, not only to the other person, but to my own sense of intuition. Today when my intuition says, "Todd you had better shut up and be quiet," I have learned to shut up and stay quiet, even at the risk of coming across to the other people that I might not have a brain in my head - which is not too difficult for me to pull off.

Remember Lincoln's wonderful quote: "Better to be silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt." That's a good one!

Listening and defusing anger in others

The best initial response to emotion is made with our ears and not our mouths. When we listen to an angry person we come to understand the cause of the anger and we hence demonstrate our empathy and we allow the venting that will ultimately make the person more rational. It is silly folly to attempt to reason with anger before we can understand it, empathize with it, and defuse it.

However to have this vital communication skill well developed is one of the cardinal signs of personal maturity and growth.

Unresolved, unrestrained, unreasonable anger is a terrible detriment in both personal and professional life. The angry person is often times the frightened person and they use their anger as an unproductive way to lash out at their perceptions of their bad luck, misfortunes, disappointments etc. The worse communication system is when all parties involved are angry - nothing, absolutely nothing as far as quality human communications can happen in this environment.

Building self esteem in others

When you stop what you are doing to listen to someone else what you are really saying is this, "I value you and what you have to say." This is one of the surest and most powerful ways to build self-esteem in subordinates, associates, children your spouse and just about anyone else in your life. I have found that everybody likes to be listened to.

I worked off and on over the years with a person who held an important executive position in funeral service. Because of my travels, I would run into this person on a regular basis at national meetings and the like. Whenever I would see this person they would act as if I was their long lost friend. Hugs and kisses would start the interaction, but then as this person would be talking to me they would be looking over my shoulder at the rest of the people in the room, and if someone of greater importance than little ole Todd would walk in the room the conversation was abruptly

halted and my “friend” left standing by myself. In fact this routine happened so many times and so many meetings that it in time became a joke.

Also I would never, ever under any circumstances have sought this person out to talk to if I had a serious personal problem.

Listening brings love into life

Let me at once disclaim any expertise in the area of love. However in my own personal life I have found that the most convincing expression of liking and love and caring is when certain people really listen to me. It works visa versa. After all who stops to listen to people that they do not like? Not many. Furthermore one of the quickest ways to get people to think highly of you, if not love you, is to simply listen to them. Everybody has a story to tell. Notice how children will almost universally judge parental love by whether or not father and mother show an interest in them through listening.

What a wonderful opportunity that we as human beings possess. We can listen to others. Every human being desires respect, support and the quality of being listened to. It seems that being listened to is a deep-seated need in most human psychology. We want others to think well of our thoughts, ideas and behavior - the quickest way to accomplish this is through listening to one another. I have discovered that nothing in life is as interesting and growth filled than just sitting down and listening to the other person’s story.

Chapter 8

Exciting Your Audience

We have all been there. In church, a continuing education seminar, a lecture, a class or even a business meeting where the speaker is so boring, so mundane, so unexciting that - well people just nod off, they actually fall asleep.

No speaker can have a 100% success rate at creating excitement in an audience. First of all, the speaker cannot really know what the individuals in the audience were doing the night before the seminar. I have done many seminars where I highly suspected some in the audience were hung over, and I have done many seminars where I knew bloody well that certain attendees were hung over, because I had been out with them the night before celebrating life! No one is perfect.

Putting all of the personality variables aside for a moment there are several things that a public speaker can do to excite the audience and maintain the excitement. Before we get into some of these techniques, let me share one speaking experience with you which happened many years ago and illustrates the power which excitement possesses.

I was asked to speak to an anti-funeral group in British Columbia. British Columbia is noted for their high immediate disposal rate, constant changes in both life and funerals. They are very liberal minded and very socially mobile. The anti-funeral league in British Columbia was and I believe still is successful in preaching the “Jessica Mitford” gospel concerning funeral service. Because of the ever changing funeral environment in British Columbia, I have always had a high respect level for the Funeral Directors of that province; they do mighty good work in a seemingly ever changing environment.

I knew the seminar would be a hot potato when I walked in. Fortunately for me, I was the last speaker of the day and unfortunately my speaking associate he was scheduled to speak first. His information was excellent but his delivery - well it was not very exciting. And the result was that the group took full advantage of his vulnerability and proceeded to beat him up. It was truly sad, and having been in that situation myself I felt mighty sorry for the chap, and thought to myself, “You are going to have to do something which excites this group, surprises this group, and entertains this group.”

During the lunch time my friend was very sad and disappointed and discouraged. The expression on his face looked like somebody had shot his dog. I tried to cheer him up, but he was really down, and my attempts at assurance did not work and in time he just quietly left for home, but not before vowing that he would never make another public presentation in his life, and I believe he has kept that vow. Sadly, the anti-funeral people seemed mighty pleased with themselves in their ability to “beat” my friend up. Audiences can quickly fall into what I call “group thinking” and if they are with you that is wonderful, but if they turn on you they can together be quite unforgiving and cruel - it goes with the speaker’s territory. It struck me that what they were saying on the surface was this: “See we got the best of the undertaker today!” What I think they really meant without associating the two was this: “See we got the better of death today, we took a shot at death and it worked!”

Finally, show time arrived for TVB and I was introduced. When I arrived at the podium I stared at the audience in silence for maybe a minute, they all started looking at one another and in my mind I was thinking, “They know nothing about the realities of funeral service, and I am not going to let them do to me what they just did to my friend.” My speaking goal was to defend, protect, and stand up for funeral service. I opened with this question. “How many of you have read Jessica Mitford’s book *The American Way of Death* from cover to cover, really now, how many?” Not one hand went up. I am still shocked at how many anti-funeral people spout off about Jessica Mitford

and have in reality never read the book - but I have read the book and I knew I had my opening and I took it. I continued with this remark "This is very interesting, I think I will tell you what she had to say about funeral service?" The group was on the edge of their seats with excited anticipation, they had not bargained for this twist. They were thinking, "The undertaker is going to teach us about Jessica Mitford, the undertaker has read that book?" They were right. That was what I was going to do precisely and during my time with them I was not going to leave one stone unturned as to Mitford's flagrant exaggerations, lies, and misinformation which permeate that book from cover to cover. I excited the audience by using their own funeral expert Miss Mitford, whose book none of them had read, and by teaching them the truths and realities of funeral service through exposing the errors of the number one anti-funeral person in history. At the end of the seminar one young man came up to me and asked if he could speak to me privately he said, "You know I always thought it would be interesting being a Funeral Director, how do you go about that?" He was excited, in fact the entire afternoon session ended up not being anti-funeral at all, and it was not because I ever possessed any unique talent or skill - what worked was simply the freedom of attitude to excite the audience, get them interested, and then just tell the story of the wonderful world of funeral service and let the chips fall where they may.

After 35 years of public speaking I am convinced that many times the ability to excite the audience makes a boring subject interesting, and makes an interesting subject absolutely fascinating. Here are some suggestions you may want to implement in order to excite your audience

Choose a topic that excites you

At the outset of this article let me clarify that sometimes, in fact many times, you as the speaker will not be able to choose your own topic. Sometimes the topic is chosen for you, it is an assignment which might be necessary for required continuing education units. When that happens to me I just cross my fingers say a prayer and hope to heaven above that it is not another OSHA seminar. Try as I might I usually fail at making OSHA exciting - however if I am asked to give the seminar on the Assassination and Funeral of Abraham Lincoln, or on the Funerals of the President's of the United States, or on the management theories of Dr. W. Edward Deming I know that all will be well in my private speaking world.

OSHA is terribly important I mean who in their right mind would argue against a safe workplace. I have discovered that there is no way I can make Material Safety Data Sheets as interesting as I can make the United States Army chasing John Wilkes Booth through the woods of Virginia after he shot Abraham Lincoln. As a public speaker, if you are interested in covering many speaking bases which translates into more speaking invitations, then it is recommended that you become interested in a wide variety of topics pertaining to the subjects of funerals, grief, cemeteries, mourning practices, rituals, business management and the like. Widening the scope of subjects helps insure that most of your seminars will have the element of excitement in them.

Even OSHA can be exciting, but I have found that one must maintain a sense of humor concerning these "boring" subjects. When I enter into the Kingdom of Boredom in any seminar I usually prepare my audience well in advance by saying, "This is going to be a dry stretch," and then tell them some hilarious story which always has me as the butt of the story. It seems that a good belly laugh prior to the dry stretch's helps the group wade through the muck of boring.

Sleep well the night before

This is an extremely simple thought. If the speaker is physically exhausted how can he or she expect the audience to get excited? In fact just the opposite happens. I once sat through a seminar where for some reason the speaker yawned throughout the entire presentation, which lasted 3 hours. Honestly, it was torture for the audience. You know the effect that a yawning person has on others. When the speaker started to yawn in a short time the front row was yawning and rubbing their eyes. Then in a few minutes rows one through five were yawning. In about twenty-minutes the entire audience from the front to the back of the room were yawning. One lady sitting next to me looked at me in distress and said, "I'm sorry I have to go to the ladies room and splash my face with cold water - I don't know why I am so tired today?" I felt like standing up and taking

the microphone from the speaker and singing “Braham’s Lullaby” to the group and let nature take its course. A good night’s sleep is essential for good public speaking.

Don’t eat a heavy meal just before you speak

I learned many years ago the physiological truth about when you eat a big meal the blood supply moves from your brain to your stomach. This is not good a thing to have happen to a public speaker - you really want as much blood as you can get going to your brain. Your full stomach will do nothing to help you make an excellent presentation. It is better to deal with hunger, than it is to have it deal with a bloodless brain.

You can always eat after the presentation. The truth of this connection between the stomach and speaking is easily proven by watching your audience’s behavior upon their return from lunch for your afternoon session. The audience is blurry eyed, they nod off, and they will make comments like “Wow did I ever eat too much.” As a speaker you can stand at the front of the room and visibly watch the blood drain from the audience’s brain and go right to their stomach.

When this happens it is imperative that the speaker grab hold of their attention quickly and jump start their brains with a story which will either have them in the aisles laughing or have their head in their handkerchief crying. Both extremes, sadness and humor, will add excitement to any presentation.

Become familiar with the room, podium and audience

Recently I was giving a daylong seminar in Louisiana. I arrived at the place of the presentation, walked in and froze. The auditorium had been set up for 500 people, and they were expecting 130. Also I had asked for a flip chart and magic markers (my version of power point) and they had indeed complied with this request. However, the flip chart looked like it had been borrowed from KinderCare and was basically the size used when little 3 year old kids color. The magic markers were the extra thin point type, so really you could not see anything which was written on the flip chart. I must say right now THIS SITUATION WAS NOT MY HOSTS FAULT - IT WAS MINE, more on that later.

Then there was the Audio-Visual person. A word or two about audio-visual people - I have found them generally to be odd and moody. I have often times suspected that while in reality they are working for the Best Western Hotel in Tiny Rock, Iowa in their fantasy world they really see themselves as being Steven Spielbergs technical assistant in the making of another episode of Star Wars. If you ask them something they sigh, roll their eye balls, shake their heads, and then many of them make the remark that strikes fear and terror in any speaker’s heart: “Gee, Mr. Speaker I just don’t know if I can get that done before the seminar starts.” I have encountered some real professions amid the AV world, but generally I have found audio-visual people are a challenge. I was doing a mid-winter meeting for the Ohio Funeral Directors Association in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. The topic was the Funerals of the United States Presidents and I needed three slide projects working all at the same time. When I arrived in Mexico I was introduced to the audio-visual personnel at the El Rancho Resort. Naturally there was a language barrier, but good Lord when the AV people discovered that I needed three slide projects, three screens, and then on top of all that to have the capacity to hit one clicker and have all three projectors move together in unison - well folks I might as well have asked them to build me a rocket ship on the beach and fly me round trip to the moon. Eventually it was worked out, but it had all the earmarks of an international diplomatic crisis.

The room set up, the microphones, the lighting, the temperature, where the podium is positioned, and where the audience sits is in reality all the responsibility of the speaker, because if you do not have everything just the way you know it will work for you, then you are taking too much of a risk that something will go wrong that will distract you from the very task that you have been invited to accomplish - that is give a damned good talk. When everything and I mean everything is the way YOU want it then you can totally immerse yourself in your presentation.

One last thought about audiences. It is in the very biological makeup of any audience that they gravitate to the back of the room. It is very annoying, and the longer I spend speaking frankly my patience for this irritating practice is getting shorter and shorter. These days I, as usual, try to joke it off, but I am firm with the host or the usher to get these people up front, and if I fail at that task I say “to hell with it” and I walk the flip chart right down the center aisle and give my presentation from the middle of the room. It has long amazed me that Funeral Directors when they are conducting a funeral, or ministers when they are preaching always complain about this very issue of people sitting in the back of the room, but then these very Funeral Directors and/or clergy come to a seminar and almost universally seem to forget their own frustrations with the “back benchers”, and turn around and do precisely the same thing. Interesting?

Take time to talk to someone before your speech about the excitement you feel for the topic

This takes time, but it is time well spent. I did not do this when I started speaking in public, mainly because I had not thought about it, and no one planted the seed. One day, however, Dr. Edgar N. Jackson was giving a seminar and I was standing next to him and I noticed that he was engaging people by talking about how much he enjoyed his subject and that every time he spoke about it he learned so much from the audience. After this conversation Dr. Jackson looked at me and said “This works really well.” That was it and I witnessed firsthand how taking just a few minutes to excite certain attendee’s prior to the seminar actually had a domino effect when the seminar was in full swing. The excited one’s pass their positive attitude to others in the room. Excitement is contagious.

Don’t stray below 120 words per minute

This is something for a speaker to really think about. Your audience’s brains have the capacity to absorb information at a fast rate, and if your information does not arrive in a good steady clip they will certainly mentally wander off and start to day dream. The best public speakers clip along at right about 200 words per minute. Going below 120 words per minute will cause the wandering mind syndrome. Time yourself before your presentation. The best way to insure that you can keep up with the audience’s brain activity is to know your subject so well that you do not require any dependency on notes, notes always will slow a speaker down. This takes time and practice, but if you can get to a position in skill development where the words just come into your head then you can forge right along, and use pauses and silences to emphasize and reinforce the points you have just clipped through.

Use your voice impact

This skill takes trial and error and a lot of practice, but it is worth the time. Change the volume of your voice. Remember when a speaker lowers the voice and starts to almost whisper the audience will always think, “Wow this must be important, better listen close, I don’t want to miss this.” It works every time. Change the speed of your delivery, but only for temporary effect. Change the pitch of your voice and try to develop imitations of different voices sounds, such as the voice of a really old person, or the voice of a small child, or the voice of someone really tense and under the gun, or the voice of someone who is trying to be sincere. Audiences respond to this simply because that is how they themselves communicate with the real world with different sounding voices. Change the emphasis to continue to hold their interest, and finally when you are ready to end the seminar you have two choices: first you can go out like a lamb, second you can go out like a lion. However when you are ready to make your exit make sure that’s it - no false departures. Nothing frustrates an audience more than when all the signals are present that the speaker is ready to wind down and conclude and then all of a sudden they take right off again in another direction. The audience will be thinking, “Hell I thought he was done!”

Know your opening so well that you can look directly at the audience when you deliver it

Something like this: “HOW CAN IT BE THAT SOME PEOPLE JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND FUNERALS?” I can assure you this opener will capture the attention of any group of Funeral Directors. Make your opening with conviction and high energy and grab them with your eyes. Winston Churchill was a master at openers. He would put his hands on his hips, or stretches his arms out as far as he could and then make a statement that had his audience on the edge of their seats. In fact, I have often suggested that if up and coming speakers really want to get a free lesson on really great speech making they ought to go rent reruns of Winston Churchill in action - there was no one better!

Use a microphone only if necessary

In a prior article on public speaking I told a funny incident about a friend of mine who was a microphoniatic and he simply loved microphones, and in the end this love affair made him look utterly ridiculous at a seminar. No need to rehash that story. Suffice to say that for many people microphones are, well they are “sexy.” They imply power, authority, skill, knowledge, entertainment, Hollywood. In reality there are many people who get to use the microphone and really don’t need to. For audiences of fewer than fifty and in rooms with decent acoustics you will generally do better with your natural voice. Also if you have a Minnie Mouse voice the incentive which comes from audiences shouting at you that, “We can’t hear you!” is a great motivator to crank the volume up! Also it is almost always better to wear or carry a microphone than to stand behind one affixed to a lectern.

Many microphones are very much like cell phones, in reality they don’t always work very well. It is better to develop your natural voice which you can then depend upon 100%.

More about microphones - use them properly

Many microphones are touchy. If the room is set up wrong you will encounter hideous feedback with annoy everybody. That is why it is so important to get to the facility early and check everything out, and if you are not 100% satisfied do not let any audio-visual person push you around. Remember you will be on stage with 500 pairs of eyes staring at you, not the AV man.

Desert the podium; move into the audience

With some groups you will have to use a podium. This is particularly true when you are the keynote speaker for a major meeting which is being taped and the recorder is connected to the podium microphone. Keynote addresses are far and few between and do not resemble a seminar in anyway. I will address keynote addresses in a future article.

Podiums are simply people barriers there is no way around this fact. Podiums are ok for church, in formal settings like funerals, but in seminars they remove the speaker from where the real action is taking place, on the floor.

It is effective to move into your audience. Smile at them shake their hands ask their opinions ask them to tell a story. This approach makes the speaker human, accessible, warm kind and above all shows sincerity in your desire to connect with the very people who choose to attend YOUR seminar. All speakers owe a tremendous degree of genuine gratitude to every audience, for they and they alone possess the power to make or unmake your speaking career. One of the best speakers whom I have ever worked with gave me a sage piece of advice, “Remember, Todd, you want to be invited back.” I have counseled with many speaker “wannabe’s” in my career who can’t understand why they are never asked back to speak. I have never confessed to them my private suspicions of the cause, which might be their own self-absorbed view of themselves, they have the “know-it-all” syndrome, or they just aren’t very good. Hard points to confront, but most speakers have had to come to terms with such situations at one time or another.

Show your excitement through body movement, gestures and posture

I have had a blessed career, even though I have basically failed at most all of my attempts at success. The one area which I have been truly blessed is found in the simple fact that I love to talk and write about funeral service. I have made and continue to make all kinds of mistakes, but I do love to share thoughts, ideas, hopes and dreams about funeral service, and I have found thousands of Funeral Directors world-wide that share this same excitement.

FUNERAL SERVICE IS SIMPLY A GREAT CAREER!!!! For many years I have been singularly honored to serve as the Dean of the Funeral Home Management College at the ICFA University which is located on the campus of the University of Memphis. During this week long marathon session I have to admit, somewhat to my own personal embarrassment, that I make a complete fool out of myself by getting so excited about funeral service possibilities that I literally start dancing and shouting around the room. The first time I do this the attendee’s look at me like I have lost my mind - and in a way I have. However, in losing my mind over funeral service I find that that free excitement is

contagious. I will look at my student's and shout, "Isn't this a great line of work?" They all look at me and smile from ear to ear - it is liberating. When was the last time you heard anybody shout at the top of their lungs that being a Funeral Director is "GREAT"? Most Funeral Directors spend a lifetime dealing with the most distressful situations in a community and then get beat up in the media for doing an essential function and doing it extremely well

When I dance around the room doing the "I LOVE FUNERAL SERVICE" routine it opens the door for genuine excitement to take place - the ultra conservative funeral world can come out in the open, they can express their love too, they can swell up with pride they can feel the feelings of a job well done.

Many times after I have made a professional fool out of myself I go back to my room and think, "Todd, Good Lord you've done it again, made a complete fool of yourself, and you've gotten into trouble doing this in the past." I feel down, and feel that I shouldn't have behaved in such a way, but then I somehow end up on Beal Street in downtown Memphis and I usually run into my student's and they now are dancing and shouting about their love of the funeral and cemetery work in the middle of a street. It is a rare moment of professional catharsis and then I do it all over again next year. I am blessed.

Smile with your mouth and with your voice

Most people like smiles. Frowns, scowls, cross looks only create tension and worry. Smiles work. It takes no more effort to smile than it does to frown. Enough said.

Deliver an uplifting message

Even a mundane or worrisome topic can be delivered with enthusiasm and optimism. I once attended a seminar which was being presented on the topic of OSHA compliance. Valuable information important information, critical information however the presenter took the fear approach and basically succeeded in scaring the life out of most of the attendees. Can you imagine what the breaks looked like? No smiles, no joking, no happiness, only doom gloom and despair. One Funeral Director looked at me and asked, "Todd is it really that bad? I think I'd better put the funeral home up for sale." I was in a pickle because you never ever contradict another speaker, ever! I gave him a sympathetic smile and felt bad for him. Here he was, a small town Funeral Director, who was coming to get a couple of continuing education credits and instead what he got was the voice of God booming at him that the sky was falling and it was falling right on his little Wisconsin village.

Too much, not necessary, speakers do not have to deliver such a terrifying message - ever. We are not talking about the threat of a nuclear war in funeral service we are talking about serving families to the best of our abilities. Predictably the host who had engaged this speaker was mortified, and the speaker was not asked to speak again.

Even serious subjects, sobering topics, and issues of great controversy can be addressed with positive excitement where solutions are explored instead of punishments predicted and/or handed out. You decide, if you are going to spend time and money to attend a seminar which one would you get the most out of, the one where you are frightened so badly that you are prepared to sell the funeral home, or the one where serious subjects are dealt with in a positive exciting possibility fashion and you leave feeling confident and secure that the future might well have its challenges, but with the seminar information you will be able to deal with them. Which one would you really want to attend?

Chapter 9

Words to Use Carefully

It is fascinating in public speaking that there are words which almost universally have to be used with great caution and care. These words can create situations which really can be avoided by the speaker simply being sensitive to the negative potentials which surely lie in wait if these words are ignored. No speaker is perfect and certainly the categories which I am addressing in this article will pop up innocently now and then - this is unavoidable in speaking. However, with that said a healthy awareness of these words can help the speaker in a big way to steer clear of dangerous waters. I have selected ten words which every speaker needs to use with great care and sensitivity.

Jargon

The language of the funeral and cemetery profession is not everyday talk. It is at times confusing to those people who don't use it every day. Terms like "index", "gauge", "advanced planning", "inurnment", "entombment", "non-declinables", "GPL", "first call", "church truck" are rarely used by the Archie and Edith Bunkers who live in Tiny Rock, Iowa. Using jargon has with it the risk of alienating your listeners and worse yet they may judge you as being inconsiderate for not knowing that it troubles them.

Many years ago I was asked to fill in for a minister friend of mine who had to leave town unexpectedly. Of all things to talk about in church I choose the topic of "The Hermeneutical Principle" which is a term used to describe a method of interpreting the Bible; it is used in seminaries all the time. The unfortunate people in church that Sunday just stared at me - "The Hermeneutical what?" they were asking in their minds. The jargon of the seminary is not the jargon of main street USA and I fell right on my face with that presentation.

Euphemisms

Confusion can result from glossing over negative concepts by using euphemisms. For instance, when politicians refer to taxation as "revenue enhancements" most people just roll their eyes.

I worked for a man many years ago who would refer to our Embalmers as "preservative surgeons." He was mighty impressed with the high sounding tone of the euphemism but it was clear by the common person's reactions that they did not have a clue as to what he was talking about.

Perhaps the greatest damage done by using too many euphemisms is that it weakens the image which you are trying to provide the listener. Nowhere in the English language are their more euphemisms used than when we refer to death. Here are some:

Passed on, Croaked, Kicked the bucket, gone to heaven, gone home, expired, breathed the last, succumbed, left us, went to his/her eternal reward, lost, met hi/her maker, wasted, checked out, eternal rest, paid to rest, pushing up daisies, called home, was a goner, came to an end, bit the dust, annihilated, liquidated, terminated, gave up the ghost, left this world, rubbed out, snuffed, six feet under, consumed, found everlasting peace, went to a new life, in the great beyond, no longer with us, made the change, on the other side, God took him/her, asleep in Jesus, departed, transcended, bought the farm, with the angels, feeling no pain, lost the race, his/her time up, cased in, crossed over Jordan, perished, lost it, was done in, translated into glory, returned to dust, withered away, in the arms of the Father, gave it up, it was curtains, a long sleep, on the heavenly shores, out of his/her misery, ended it all, angels carried him/her away, resting in peace, rode into the sunset, that was all she wrote. America truly lives in a death denying culture!

Idioms

The language peculiar to a people or community can be colorful, but also confusing to outsiders. When I moved to Boston to attend mortuary school I discovered quickly that idioms which were

perfectly understood in Beantown were not perfectly understood by a young man from the farm in Southwestern Iowa.

In Boston a malt is called a “frap.” In Boston a rubber band is called “elastics.” And in East Boston sauce for Italian food is called “gravy.”

Idioms might not be as critical in communication as some other issues, but I remember being embarrassed at times because I did not know what a “frap” was. When idioms are used it carries with it the risk of making the other person uncomfortable.

Slang

Here is a guideline that a wonderful speaker shared with me. If a word is not in the dictionary be careful in using it, especially when it is important that you make a positive impression.

I was presenting a session at the University of Memphis several years ago and told the story about the funeral home I worked at losing a call. My boss almost lost his mind in fret and anxiety. He was so upset that he held a meeting with the entire staff to dissect what had happened, what had been said, and to try and figure out why this family chose to call another funeral home - heaven's we had buried everybody in the family for four generations.

The meeting lasted about 3 hours. My boss did not take rejection very well. At the end of the meeting we all left feeling real good, because we had together solved the mystery. The answer was in the fact (or so we thought) that both the deceased woman's son and daughter were “kooks.” The entire class laughed for five minutes, however a student from Chile was not laughing. During the break the student from Chile approached me and asked what was so funny? I looked at him with an astonished look which must have betrayed my surprise that he did not know what a “kook” was. I was right the slang word “kook” while utterly familiar in the United States does not exist as a word in Chile.

I apologized to him and reminded myself once again to watch the slang.

Profanity

Todd Van Beck talking about using profanity - WOW is that the kettle calling the pot black! Throughout my career in public speaking this one is the Achilles heel for TVB. I know it, I have tried my best to get it under control, I have even tried to blame my upbringing as the cause of my “colorful” language at times, but nothing seems to work. So to everybody who has been at one of my seminars I apologize to you all ahead of time for this blatant hypocrisy on my part - however being caught in the weakness of using profanity too much I believe I am in a good position to testify to its hazards - and there are hazards.

This is true: of all the letters I receive from seminar attendees the main complaint which is lodged against me is my language. I feel humiliated in sharing this fact, but true it is.

You can do better than I. Here is the bottom line - just don't use profanity, trust me it does not work. The impact you may gain with an off-color remark can be more than offset by the offense which is taken, but which is not always acknowledged by the listeners.

Remember you can do better than I.

Funeral home or cemetery phrases

We need to keep funeral home and cemetery specific phrases in house, where they serve a useful purpose. Referring to a particular personnel document as “HRD-9” in front of outsiders is clear evidence of insensitivity. I cringe when I hear a funeral home person tell somebody calling the funeral home that the person they are looking for is “embalming right now”, or “is on a call,” or is “in the back room.” Can you imagine the images that pop into the callers mind when they are told that right this instance Bob is in the back room embalming a dead human body right now!

I have noticed that in the Hospice world when referring to how many dying human beings are being tended to the insider term is “census.” “How is your census?” really means how many dying folks are here?

Red flags

Words that elicit a strong emotional reaction need to be left alone. Referring to a woman as a “girl” offends people. Terminology like “you people” or “they” or “you know what they’re like” offends people.

The worst incidence of this that I remember in my career happened many years ago and even back then the Funeral Director should have known better. We had a small community of immigrants from Europe who lived in a secluded part of the city. They had their own church, own celebrations, own traditions, and own way of going about funerals. Their funerals were wonderful community experiences, but their funerals were long, every long, sometimes 3-4 hours in length.

To accommodate the other families that we were serving the funeral home correctly made a quiet policy that when we were called to handle a funeral in this particular community we would simply schedule the service as the last one of the day. That way the family could take all the time they needed and the funeral home would not have to get in a bind concerning equipment, and the other funerals of the day would not be affected. It was truly a win-win situation for everybody, and the small community was more than happy to have their funerals be the last one scheduled for the day, because they wanted more time.

I was finishing up funeral arrangements with a family from this community. Everything was going fine and the funeral was scheduled as usual for 3:00 p.m. Out of the blue the owner of the funeral home marched in the arrangement office (he did this all the time) and asked me, “When did you schedule this funeral?”

I responded, “3:00 p.m.” Next my boss turned to the family and in an extremely condescending tone said, “You see folks we always have to schedule your funerals at the end of the day, because we never know what you people are going to do.” I damned near fainted, then I wanted to crawl under the desk, but not before I put a bullet in my boss’s brain. The poor family was so humiliated, so stunned, so hurt, so baffled, so terribly treated, that they just sat there. With that my boss just left the room and me alone with this really nice family. They just looked at me. I tried to make amends, but I was also so offended that I didn’t really know what to say - how do you get out of that one? Finally the family stood up got their coats and I walked them to the front door.

One hour later the family called and instructed us to deliver the dead mother to a funeral home one block down the street. We lost the call, and sadly this small community who liked long, really long funerals started using other funeral homes in our city.

Vague or abstract language

What does it mean when you tell someone, “Please do it as soon as you can”? In the funeral and cemetery profession vague or abstract language can be disastrous. “The limo will be there to pick you up about 10 ish.”

I remember once attempting to explain the concept of “gauge” to a little old lady whose husband had died. I went on and on about the number of layers of the metal that it would take to make an inch. She asked me a very normal question, “Are these casket one inch thick?”

“No, they are not an inch thick, the gauge is just a term used to indicate if we were going to make an inch thickness of metal how many layers it would take of this metal to make an inch.” She responded “How many layers would it take?”

“Well this casket would take 20, this one would take 18, and this one would take 16. The less the number of the gauge the thicker the casket, see?”

She listened to me and then asked, “Where is your number 12’s?”

I replied, “Well we don’t have any 12’s” She looked at me and said, “Oh, that’s really too bad I would have bought one of those.”

No doubt I was explaining gauge in the wrong way and every Funeral Director in American could do better, but the fact remains that my explanation was vague and abstract, and when we had gone full circle we here right back where we started. I always felt sorry for that little old lady that she ended up with me as her Funeral Director.

People like to be provided with clarity, specificity, and concreteness. It is best to leave no doubt in the meaning of your words.

Overly complex words

I learned this from an old farmer in Iowa, “Don’t make the mistake of believing that \$50.00 words are better than \$5.00 words.” His words are true.

I remember attending a seminar on how to give seminars. The hosts had engaged a really famous public speaker to present the information. In the middle of the seminar he made this comment. “When presenting you never ever GESTICULATE, never ever.” In a flash people started looking at each other, some were mouthing this question, “what does gesticulate mean?” Finally one woman raised her hand and asked the very normal question, “What does gesticulate mean?” The speaker who was teaching us to be speakers stopped in his tracks, lowered his glasses on the end of his nose and said to the poor woman, “You mean you don’t know what gesticulation means?” The woman clearly humiliated replied, “If I knew what it meant I wouldn’t have asked you.” Now she was moving from humiliation to provocation, and several others in the group took her side. “Tell us what does gesticulate mean?” was the crowd’s plea. The speaking teacher just stood up there lording over the group their evident ignorance, and frankly he seemed to enjoy the unexpected power trip he had.

Finally an old minister in the group stood up and simply said, “Gesticulation is when you make strong gestures while you are speaking, that’s all.” The speaking teacher had a smug expression on his face, the look of triumph over his minions.

However, during the morning break half the attendee left. It was a disaster and all because a \$50.00 word was used when a \$5.00 word would have been more than sufficient.

Cliches

Where do we begin? Clichés! These are phrases that people consider to be trite or hackneyed. Here are a few: place your cards on the table, win hands down, clear as mud, it’s raining cats and dogs, it’s always the quiet ones, he is not the sharpest knife in the draw, don’t get mad get even, high and dry, spring forward and fall back, burning question, on the go, most people aren’t happy unless they are complaining, you have to get up pretty early in the morning to pull the wool over his eyes, you can’t tell a book by its cover and you can’t lead a horse to water. Had enough?

In professional public speaking it is best to steer clear of clichés. Remember clichés are considered by many listeners to be trite or hackneyed, and this unfortunately in turn causes you to appear trite or hackneyed. Honestly didn’t you get just a little tired of reading the clichés I included in this section? Your listeners feel the same way.

Now just to drive this point concerning clichés home just a little more I have decided to include these as an extra bonus. Here goes: it’s a dogs life, hear no evil, the whys and wherefores, cover a bet, just cruising along, thrown to the wolves, seize the bull by the horns, dog day afternoon, see red, easier said than done, the truth will out, scratch the surface, on the fritz, afraid of his own shadow, by the seat of his pants, let her hair down. OK I’m finished. TVB