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Put Your Audience in Your Opening

by Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

Emily Kimbell is an older adventurer who bicycled across America and hiked the Appalachian Trail. She asked me how to make her presentations more exciting.

"How do you open now?" I asked.

"As I rode my bike slowly into the campground..." she replied. She continued giving me her typical presentation until she got to a crucial spot in her physical and emotional journey.

"Aha!" I said. I suggested putting her audience right in the middle of her adventure, starting like this: "Imagine you are with me on that September morning in 1999 as the gigantic boulder loomed ahead, blocking the road..."

Then she should continue: "As I faced this boulder, I realized something that you have probably realized. At some point you are going to run into an obstacle. You can climb over it, go around it, or turn back. Your company's boulder isn't literally in the road like mine was. Last year, a major competitor confronted you in the market. " Then her adventures becomes the story of the audience's. If she overcame her obstacles, they can too.

Engage your audience immediately with a powerful, relevant opening that includes THEM. For example, one of my favorites is, "You have an awesome responsibility." Then fill in what it is: increasing sales, reducing errors, cutting overhead, whatever you are there to help your audience do. Another excellent strategy is to research information on the company. You can do that in conversations, reading their corporate report, going to their website, checking their stock or visiting one of their stores or buying one of their products. Then you can say, "Congratulations on your company's recent success," and describe it. Or "I love your new commercials." Start by including your audience. Keep a high I/You ratio.

(303 words)

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