



**Consulting Tips from the Million Dollar Consultant:
The Ultimate Contrarian: Six Myths of Professional Speaking**

By Alan Weiss, Ph.D.

Many of us either speak professionally as an added component of our value to clients, or speak because we must in order to market our services to wider audiences. Whether we mount the platform with relish to gain additional revenues, or ascend with trepidation to try to convert a few more hearts and souls, we should beware of the myths surrounding professional speaking. As someone with a foot in both consulting and professional speaking camps, I thought I'd provide this public service.

Myth #1: You should always get nervous "butterflies" before you speak. I don't know about you, but if you're still nervous about speaking after scores, hundreds or thousands of talks, you ought to get some valium. I get an adrenaline rush, and I can't wait to go on, but I don't get nervous. Anxiety will kill your timing, deaden your reflexes and paralyze your movements. Athletes who perform well under pressure don't get nervous. They get good. Get some DDT.

Myth #2: You should always prepare for a talk for at least three times as long as the speech itself, no matter how many times you've given it. Well, perhaps you should do this if you're a fish, since fish have a measured attention span of four seconds (which is why the same fish keeps getting hooked-it forgets everything it ever learned 15 times a minute). This is utter malarkey. Prepare, perhaps, for the nature of the new audience, a new environment and some contemporary delivery, but if you still need to rehearse your signature speech for three hours every time, better check for gills around your throat.

Myth #3: If you have a speech, you have a book. This should be restated as follows: If you have a speech, you have an excruciatingly tiny book. Speaking and writing are discrete skills, sometimes synergistic but not at all equal. Don't give the published work short shrift: Books require extensive research, tight, Jesuit-like logic, brilliant metaphor and immaculate construction. If that sounds like it doesn't resemble a lot of books out there, that's because most are not very good. (Maybe they ought to be speeches.)

Myth #4: Carefully study your platform skills and get coaching. My evil twin, Jeff Slutsky, has observed that nothing has ruined more good speakers than speech coaches. Content and knowledge are what carry the day, and if you have those, decent platform skills will get you through nicely. If you don't have those, superb platform skills simply put the icing on a house of cards. I find that speakers spend inordinate amounts of time on delivery mechanics and not nearly enough time on research, new ideas, client familiarization and spontaneity.

Myth #5: Track your audience evaluations more carefully than you'd check your stock listings. Dr. Albert Bandura, whom I've had the good fortune to meet and work with at one point in my career, is one of the pre-eminent psychologists of our time. His work on self-efficacy raises an interesting aspect for speakers: People with low self-perceptions of their knowledge and abilities put a premium on external performance standards, to reassure them of their accomplishment. People with high self-perceptions of their knowledge and abilities place the emphasis on personally-established learning goals and his words-self-mastery. Think about that.

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Myth #6: Our self-worth is based upon our success and accomplishments on the platform. I don't think so. Our self-worth ought to be based upon our contributions to the environment and society around us, to our families and friends, and to our own vision for our futures. Speaking is simply a means-one of a great many-toward that end. People who tell me that all of their friends are in NSA or are speakers frighten me. We need a broad perspective, big gulps out of life, and a diverse variety of experiences. Those are what make us vital people, and better speakers in the bargain.

As usual, other than that, I don't feel strongly about it.

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