

Winning Your Speech At The Starting Line

The race doesn't always go to the swiftest. Getting off to a good start is critical.

A speech should begin with a powerful opening which connects you to the audience. About a month ago, I had the amazing experience of attending the AC Delco National Drag Racing Championship in Las Vegas. To my surprise, what I learned at the drag strip can be applied to giving a humorous speech.

A drag race is where two cars race one-quarter mile (404m) from a standing start. And if you've never been there, it would be hard for you to imagine the amazing power and the blinding speed you would see as two top-fuel dragsters streak down the quarter-mile strip.

To begin with, let me describe a race that you might find believable. There is a class of cars called Pro-Stock. They look and sound something like a really hot car that you could imagine as being legal to drive on city streets. When drag racing, they can hit about 200 mph (322 kph) in the quarter-mile. Now if you were to race against a Pro-Stock car and you were driving in MY car, a Honda Civic, you would lose by a long shot. In fact, even if you were given a running start and passed the starting line at 100 mph where your competitor was waiting, you would still lose the race as the Pro-Stock car would accelerate from a dead stop and pass you before you reached the quarter mile mark.

Now let me share the amazing, pounding power of a top-fuel dragster.

Imagine, instead of getting into my Honda, you are getting into the driver's seat of a Pro-Stock vehicle. Your challenge is to race a top-fuel dragster. And they're going to give you a running start. When you pass the starting line where the top-fuel dragster is standing still, you are already going 200 mph. In spite of this huge head start, when you reach the quarter-mile finish line you would find yourself the loser as the dragster would have already passed you going more than 135 mph FASTER than you. Yes, that's going faster than 335 mph (540 kph). The record is a quarter mile, reaching that speed from a standing start, in under 4.5 seconds!

To put that power into perspective, here are some facts: A top-fuel dragster burns a blend of nitromethane and alcohol. A quarter-mile run consumes 16 gallons and costs \$4000 if nothing blows up. The fuel consumption is not measured in miles-per-gallon; the consumption rate is 84 feet per gallon. According to a web site I found in my research, the dragster burns fuel at the same rate as a fully loaded 747 jumbo jet. Except that all that power is placed in a 2100 pound vehicle carrying only one person. You get the picture. The power and speed is simply incredible.

It would be easy to think that winning was all about speed. Surprisingly, that's not the case.

An amazing thing I discovered at the drag races was that the fastest speed doesn't always win the race. A dragster reaching 325 mph could lose to one doing 310. The fact is, if the slower car departed the starting line quicker, the faster car would never have the chance to catch up. In fact, most races are won at the starting line. A good start and the reaction time of the driver and is the key.

And so it is with a speaker giving a humorous speech. Get off to a slow start and you will have a tough time recovering lost ground; spinning your wheels trying to come from behind. Let me give you some examples of slow starts as a speaker:

1. You don't bring a well-written introduction for the person who will be introducing you. As a result you get a bad or weak introduction.
2. You start a speech with some slightly-off-color humor and lose your audience.
3. You open a speech saying "I'm delighted to be with you in Reno this morning." And you forgot that you are, in fact, speaking in Las Vegas.
4. In your opening remarks, your mind goes blank and it's obvious to the audience that you are not well prepared.
5. As you begin your talk, your audio-visual equipment malfunctions and it destroys the flow of your talk.
6. You attempt a piece of observational humor to open your talk and it falls flat. Not a chuckle from the crowd. And you try to explain the joke to the audience.

You get the idea. A slow start. And you're behind right from the beginning, trying to make up lost ground. And if your start is slow enough, you'll never pick up enough steam to win the audience back by the end of your talk. A good speech, like a drag race, is also often won at the starting line. You want the audience energy and momentum with you right from the beginning. Otherwise you may be fighting a losing battle.

Let's look at some things you can do to get off to a good start.

1. Be well prepared and practiced. This gives you confidence and the ability to relax and be in the present moment as you start your talk.
2. Arrive early to allow you plenty of time to set up the room for your talk. This is part of your being fully prepared.
3. Prepare a great, written introduction for the person who will introduce you to the audience. Send a copy to him/her in advance and bring two copies with you to the meeting venue. I always like to include a bit of humor in the introduction to warm up the audience and make the introducer look good.

4. As you begin your talk, breathe and make good eye contact with the audience before you say your first word. This relaxes you and psychologically connects you and your audience.
5. If you can only know one part of your speech really well, make sure it's your opening. Of course it's really nice to know your whole speech really well.
6. Keep all humor in good taste...without exception. Off-color humor is the lazy speaker's attempt for laughter.
7. Observational and spontaneous humor tailored for the group can often hit the mark. But it can also be risky. Unless you're absolutely sure that an untested humor line will work, work it into your speech after you pick up speed rather than using it as an opener. To get off to a good start, begin your talk with material in which you have high confidence.
8. Develop your skills of handling the unexpected: When equipment fails, when your mind goes blank, when laughs fail to come. Keep your cool. Don't let the audience see you sweat!

You'll find that when you get off to a great start, your momentum will carry you through little bumps in the road. You'll have a great talk, get more laughs and you'll finish as a winner.

Copyright 2006 by John Kinde

"Copyright by John Kinde, who is a humor specialist in the training and speaking business for over 30 years specializing in teambuilding, customer service and stress management. Free Special Reports: Show Me The Funny -- Tips for Adding Humor to Your Presentations and When They Don't Laugh -- What To Do When the Laughter Doesn't Come. Humor Power Tips newsletter, articles and blog are available at www.humorpower.com."