

Guide to talking to community groups

Community organisations meet regularly and often have an invited guest speaker. Their need to find regular speakers can provide you with a wonderful opportunity to meet people and to practice your communication skills. You might also be motivated by your desire to promote or raise money for "a cause", your need to have people participate in your research, your desire to sell your latest book or to share the results of your research.

Here are just a few tips:

The 'President' and others

Community organisations are often run entirely by volunteers, often very busy people giving up their spare time and offering their experience for no financial reimbursement. You need to understand the history of the organisation and the role it wishes to play in Society.

Being on the committee usually takes up a great deal of time and often requires considerable expertise and great relationship skills. In order to set the key people apart and to earn them the respect they deserve, they are usually decorated with medals or some other emblem that easily identifies them. It is essential that you know the names of these people, that you meet them before your talk (if possible) and that you address them at the beginning of your talk. Start your talk with either "Madam President" (her name or equivalent, whichever seems most appropriate), ladies and gentlemen. You would usually face the key person and make a very slight bow. In Rotary Clubs and some other groups, the appropriate address is "President Barry", "Rotarians" or "Fellow Rotarians" (if you happen to belong to Rotary).

You also need to know who it was who invited you and discover what they've said about you in advance! This person is often just fulfilling the duty of organising speakers and is sometimes not there on the day. Sometimes this person will have written something about you in advance of the occasion but sometimes no-one has any idea who you are or why you are there. If you can't discover this in advance you will just have to "go with the flow" on the day.

Researching your audience

This should be your rule before every talk of any sort but is even more important in a talk to a community group. You need to know the audience's age, gender and socio-economic profile, average educational level, special interest, needs and characteristics. Are they sick or disabled? What is their likely knowledge of your subject? What are their needs? What are they expecting from you? Are there any taboos? Are there any particular religious, political or racial issues that affect the people in this organisation or issues to which you should be sensitive?

'PowerPoint' or not?

Your presentation will usually be held in a club or restaurant of some type and you will usually have about 15 to 20 minutes for your talk. It is generally better not to use a computer unless there are some images or a video that you must show. Some of the reasons for avoiding technology are: lighting is likely to be too bright for the projector to work properly, people are likely to be sitting in positions where it is difficult to see the screen and the whole system mightn't work very well. If there are not many images then you are better to have a handout or some posters to display them.

Apart from these, the most important reason for NOT using slides is that they reduce your engagement with your audience. Community groups want to get to know you as a person and the best way to do this is just to speak to them from your heart, without notes (if possible) and without electronic devices. Try to develop your art of storytelling and engage your audience by telling your story as naturally and with as much passion as you can muster amongst the clanking of spoons and the smell of fried eggs or equivalent!

If you are really clever, you will work out a way of involving at least one of the audience in your talk - get them to hold something or do something (very safe). And don't forget to reward them with a gift!

Support materials, gifts and volunteers

You will usually want to leave your audience with some take-home materials. If you can disguise your promotional materials as gifts, this will be all the more effective.

If you want to sign up volunteers, try to do this on the day or at least get contact details from people who are prepared to give you permission to contact them. Things change rapidly in community organisations, so don't expect them to do any follow up on your behalf. There is no time like the present. Next week you will be last week's speaker!