
~THE PORRO PASSAROUND - TIPS FOR COMMUNICATORS~

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TIME AND STATISTICS WAIT FOR NO ONE

In this issue we explore the importance of time and timing in speeches and OpEds. And we even manage to say some nice things about statistics, for a change.

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1. Speeches: why longer isn't better

In a recent article for The Washington Speechwriters' Roundtable (www.washingtonspeechwriters.com) Bill Dunne quotes Mark Twain's advice to ministers: "No sinner was ever saved after the first 20 minutes of a sermon." Everyone who writes a speech should heed those words.

Two things happen if a speech stretches much beyond 20 minutes -- both of them bad. First, the audience's attention starts to wander. It's hard for anyone to avoid tuning out after 20 minutes, no matter how good the speech is. Second, as Dunne points out, a speech tends to lose focus if it goes beyond 20 minutes. The speechwriter is forced to throw in extraneous material to fill in the extra time.

Combine an audience with lagging attention with a speaker losing his focus, and you've got the perfect recipe for a speech that falls flat.

So how to the 20 minute limit. Dunn reminds us that Lincoln's Gettysburg address was not the "featured" speech given at the battlefield that day. Another speaker gave the "oration," a two hour stem winder. Nobody remembers it. But Lincoln's brief remarks are literally carved in stone.

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2. OpEds: timing may be more important than you think

While it's important that an OpEd be well written, timing can often make the difference between publication and rejection. In particular, if you want to tie your OpEd to an event (a press conference, the release of a report, a meeting, an anniversary, etc.), try to get the piece to the editor at least two weeks in advance. Editors like to plan their OpEd pages as much in advance as possible. If you wait too long, the editors may not have any slots left open. Also, you

may not leave yourself enough time to try another paper if your first choice turns you down.

Also, consider this little know fact: OpEds often fill the space made available when regular opinion columnists are away. That means summer can be an especially good time to pitch OpEds. In fact, Boston Globe op-ed editor Marjorie Pritchard recently told Bulldog Reporter (www.infocomgroup.com), "Many of our staffers go on vacation in August, and there's more of a chance to get on the page that month."

3. OpEds: statistics are fine, in their place

Past issues of this newsletter have warned against leading speeches, press releases or OpEds with statistics. It's far better to grab an audience with a story about human beings than with a bunch of numbers. But statistics do have their place, especially in OpEds.

The purpose, after all, of an OpEd is to persuade readers. To do that you first have to grab their attention. But then you have to overwhelm them with nuggets of information (all of which support your viewpoint.) Statistics can be a powerful tool for that. Just remember they don't speak for themselves. You have to put stats in context. Here's an example of a piece I worked on recently, arguing against cutting state spending on mental health services.

[STAT]Conservative estimates are that 19 percent of Ohio inmates and as many as 75 percent of teens held in juvenile-justice facilities suffer from mental illness.

[CONTEXT]If we could treat those people so they could stay out of the prison system – the most expensive social-services agency we have – we could save hundreds of millions of tax dollars, while restoring people to productive lives.