

Persuasive Presentations: The Will Rogers Way of Winning an Audience

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Will Rogers said, “You can never tell how a given audience will take anything.” That’s not news to HVAC professionals who make dozens of sales presentations to home and business owners, and speak at business meetings, trade association meetings, builder organizations, just to name a few. What’s fascinating to one group is merely ho-hum to another. We can learn from Will Rogers, the most sought after speaker of the ‘20s and ‘30s, who carefully honed the skill of winning an audience.

So what was it that people liked so much about Will Rogers? He was described as friendly to everyone and a man who genuinely enjoyed presenting to people, the working class folks as well as the rich and famous. People loved his common sense approach to dealing with complicated issues. He nurtured the skill of challenging people, without being confrontational. And in spite of his enormous success, he wasn’t arrogant, but supremely self-effacing. He focused on the audience, not on himself.

“I can’t think of a way to start my act.” Now that’s a common dilemma for many presenters, but a surprising comment coming from Will Rogers. It’s hard to imagine he ever faced such a quandary, but hitting on an attention-grabbing opening was a challenge. His audiences, just like yours, big groups and small groups, often showed up tired and distracted. Will quickly learned that the first actions or words out of his mouth must spark a flame of interest and crash through their apathy. That’s the first challenge— get their attention! The principles Will Rogers practiced still apply whether you’re speaking to hundreds or to an audience of one.

Here are some things I’ve learned from Will and from my own experience along the way.

- 1.** Be enthusiastic! Be filled with race-horse-ready enthusiasm, not wild out of control flailing and yelling, but genuine, controlled energy. Let the listeners see, hear, and feel your lively interest and great excitement. Put a smile on your face. It needn’t be a great big toothy smile, but your face should project sincere warmth. A smile has the power to relax you and your listeners, strip away anonymity, and help to establish rapport. On the other hand if you have a serious, intense look on your face, your listeners may believe you are arrogant. And no

audience will tolerate arrogance, they despise it. So put a smile on your face and let the audience see your enthusiasm.

Enthusiasm is contagious, but—so is yawning. Remember that the audience will catch your level of enthusiasm. Keep your energy level high from the beginning to the end of your presentation. If you begin to lag, they'll yawn. On the other hand if you get enthused, so will they.

2. Get excited about your audience and the opportunity to speak with them. Meet as many of them as you can before you make your presentation. Be cordial and sincerely interested in everyone you meet. When early arrivers ask to help you, by all means enlist their help, even if it's just passing out pencils. What a great way to begin connecting with your audience.

3. Learn everything you can about the audience prior to the presentation. How knowledgeable are they about your topic? Do they know each other? How many men, how many women? What ethnic groups are represented?

Will Rogers learned very painfully the wisdom of learning about his audience. In the early years of Will's speaking career he used an 80 foot lariat to do intricate rope tricks. One sure-fire way to bring down the house was to lasso an unsuspecting audience member and pull them to the stage. This was a guaranteed winner, always had been. However, when Will roped a fireman standing at the back of the ballroom, the German audience didn't think it was funny at all. In fact, they were outraged and wanted him arrested! With a little pre-presentation investigation, he would have quickly learned that this audience did not play around with fireman when they were on duty. Thanks to his host's intervention he was forgiven. He never forgot the lesson and neither should we. Know your audience.

4. Look at your listeners with friendly, attentive eyes. It isn't enough to just look at them, you must actually *see* your listeners. That requires sincere awareness to see the audience's responses—furrowed brows, blank stares, smiles of agreement, or leaning forward with genuine interest.

Whether it's a sales or trade association presentation, listeners want to be acknowledged. They like to feel they are somehow influencing what you say. For example, "I can see by the way some of you are nodding that you've tried this and it's working for you." Now, the audience knows you are focused on them. And don't forget, right-handed presenters have a tendency to favor the right side of the room and left-handed presenters the left side. Include everyone.

5. Practice, practice, practice your opening remarks. Be very sure you know exactly what you're going to say or do for your opening remarks. The audience does not like to watch a presenter struggle to get revved up. You can see the audience yawn when a presenter opens with, "The subject I want to talk to you about today is ...".

Instead, smile, look at your audience and see individuals, not a blurry mass of humanity. Then in a strong, full voice open with something that will arrest their attention. One option is to make a surprising or unusual statement such as, "Last week, a sweet little 5 year old, Jonathan Carter, was arrested for kissing Megan Browning, his adoring kindergarten classmate." Or, deliver a

quote from a famous person, such as ... “Will Rogers reminds us that, ‘It’s not always what you don’t know that can hurt you; it’s what you *know* that just ain’t so.’”

Another effective opening is to relate an anecdote or a short story that ties in with your topic. So much the better if it’s about a famous person. It will be interesting if they aren’t famous, but much more so if they are. For example, “Thomas Edison, the greatest inventor of our time, was a telegraph clerk who made pitiful wages and put in staggering hours. He had fantastic ideas and he devoutly believed his dreams would be real if he just kept working on them. This genius invented literally hundreds of things we can’t begin to imagine living without, not the least of which is electricity. And to think that this tired, overworked, and underpaid clerk perfected his inventions ... in his spare time.”

Steer away from jokes. It can rattle any speaker when an audience doesn’t laugh, especially during the opening. Jay Leno and David Letterman may be able to cleverly follow up with a wisecrack after a joke bombs, but more than likely you won’t be so lucky. It’s painful to watch a presenter struggle when an opening joke just doesn’t work. They manage a weak, “Well, I guess that wasn’t as funny as I thought. Let’s see, uh, I was, er, ...” and miserably flounder on. Why take that kind of risk? Instead, tell a story or anecdote that so clearly illustrates your point that it doesn’t matter if they laugh or if they don’t. It stands on its own and makes a legitimate point.

Audiences also tune in to fascinating facts, just be sure to give them a frame of reference, e.g. “That’s 40 billion ... that’s enough to “build a sidewalk to the moon.” Whatever approach you decide to use for your opening, do it with enthusiasm.

6. Next, remember that each person lives on an island of personal interest so it’s your responsibility to build a bridge that clearly answers the audience’s question: “What does that have to do with me?” Provide the facts and details firmly attached to an anchor. For example, “I bring up this subject because many people are floored when they realize how powerful the women’s market is. Women control more than half the commercial and consumer spending that contributes to the Gross Domestic Product of the United States. That’s more than the entire Japanese economy! Almost 8 million businesses are owned by women, twenty five years ago only 400,000 were. Women owned business log \$2.3 trillion in sales annually and employ 18 million people. What business owner can afford to ignore this formidable market?”

In a few sentences build a bridge to the listener’s island of personal interest and clearly answer the question, “What does that have to do with me?”

7. “Tell me a story,” children beg over and over. And, so do adults. We never outgrow examples that are delivered in illustrative story form. Give listeners what they want. For every key point you make, anchor it to a story or anecdote. They can’t just be interesting, they must also clearly make a point.

So what kind of stories? Remember that audiences strongly connect with stories about famous people, living and dead. Give your listeners stories and anecdotes from historical facts. Or, draw from personal experiences and incidents you’ve read or heard about. Audiences remember points when they are anchored to a story or example. They quickly forget without anchors. So use stories liberally. It’s a proven technique. It works.

8. Involve the audience. Some audiences are outgoing and very animated, but you can't count on that. As Will so accurately put it, "You can never tell how a given audience will take anything." So set yourself up for success. Talk to your host and get at least 3 or 4 names of audience members that like to get involved. Talk to those people prior to the presentation if at all possible. Make sure they are crystal clear about what you want them to do. Do a little practice session if time permits. Most of the time everything works out beautifully. But, take Will's advice and have a back-up plan in the event they are lackluster. It happens.

9. Talk conversationally to your audience. Audiences connect with a presenter that is both professional and approachable. Talk to your audience, don't read to them. Use an outline with key words and phrases, rather than presenting from a scripted page. The danger of presenting from a script is the urge to read it. You put children to sleep by reading to them and that works for adults too. Leave your script at home and bring your outline to the presentation. Key words will trigger your thoughts and allow you to focus on your audience.

Put inflection in your voice. Presenters who fail to change pitch, volume, and rate of speaking will soon hypnotize their listeners. Be sure to keep your voice up at the ends of sentences. Many presenters speak very rapidly, never pause and only take quick, shallow breaths. So relax, smile, pause, breathe and remember to focus on the audience.

There is no substitute for practice, so practice your presentation to family and friends. At the very least audio-tape or videotape your presentation. Practice, so you'll know how long your presentation really is. Experiment with emphasis and inflection and work out the bumpy transitions. The audience deserves your very best—don't practice on them! The risk is too great.

10. When you deliver a presentation your natural personality should include gesturing. Move your arms fluidly from the shoulders, not just the elbows. Wild, jerky gesturing is distracting. And so is the person who is nailed to one spot in the rigid fig leaf stance, with their hands tightly folded below the waist.

Walking is also a natural part of presenting. Pacing is not. Prevent pacing by walking with a definite destination in mind.

11. Visuals can be very effective tools to capture and keep the audience's attention. Used improperly they can destroy audience attention and your presentation. Regardless of the visual you choose—computer presentation, overhead transparencies, slides, props, etc., talk to the audience. Remember that *you*, not the equipment, are the most important visual to the audience.

The purpose of visuals are to:

- Support and expand the content of your message
- Focus the audience's attention on an important aspect of the presentation
- Clarify meaning

Make sure:

- They can be seen by everyone
- You talk to the audience—not the visual!
- When you are finished with it, that you remove it or turn it off

Many presenters inadvertently distract their audience, particularly with computer projection presentations by commenting on the spectacular features, “Isn’t this slick, watch this, now it’ll ..., now watch this” The visual’s purpose isn’t to dazzle or confound—it is to get your message across.

Check out the equipment *before* your presentation. Make sure it works and you know where all the necessary switches, buttons, and levers are. Of course, in spite of all the checking, sometimes the equipment fails. That brings up the very important topic of magnificent recoveries. Plan your presentation for the event of equipment failure.

12. One of the greatest lessons from Will Rogers is how to make a magnificent recovery when something goes wrong. In fact, he learned those could be some of his shining moments. And, it definitely gets the audience’s attention. Now Will didn’t have to worry about a malfunctioning computer, but there are plenty of other ways to be snared. Many people get rattled simply by losing their train of thought. Or, how about the man who set his pants on fire while nervously flicking the lighter in his pocket. Now there’s an opportunity for a magnificent recovery!

Will planned for what could go wrong. Some people think that’s a bad omen and you should only plan for success. I’m all for planning for success, but a large part of the success process is imagining the worst, and then making adjustments to prevent it. Will had as many as eight options for dealing with every bad situation he could imagine. By the way, for equipment failure you might want to borrow one of Will’s favorites, “I’m sort of handicapped up here, the management won’t let me swear when this happens.”

Above all, keep a sense of humor. The audience will take their cue from you. If you laugh and have a great quip just for this eventuality, they’ll laugh along with you, and often are very helpful. If you are agitated they will be awkward and uncomfortable.

13. Many presenters prefer to make a presentation standing behind a lectern. Bear in mind that the lectern is a blockade between you and your audience. The audience wants to connect with you, so move away from the “blockade” frequently and “connect” with them. When you step behind the lectern lean slightly forward, make friendly, alert eye contact with your listeners. And, keep your gestures above the lectern, otherwise your hands look like distracting little flippers popping out from time to time.

14. Finally, end the presentation with a strong, memorable close. Don’t just leave the audience hanging. The close must end on a strong note and should answer the question, “So where do we go from here?”

Sometimes the same statement you opened with is also a great closer. Never underestimate the power of a great story, anecdote or famous quote for persuasive impact. For example: A New York City chef was interviewed by a newspaper feature-writer. He said, “Tight budgets have forced me to get very creative when preparing elaborate menus for many an important banquet. But there is one thing I have not scrimped on—and never will. The coffee! Because that’s the taste people go away with.”

Plan, prepare, and practice for the unexpected, because “You can never tell how a given audience will take anything.”

About the Author

Sharon Roberts is president and co-founder of Roberts & Roberts Associates, a Texas-based management consulting firm established in 1990. Sharon is a personal coach, keynote speaker, and seminar leader with clients ranging from law firms, to product manufacturers, to service contractors. Her engaging, content-rich speeches have been heard by tens of thousands throughout North America. She is also the author and co-author of two books including the path-breaking book: *Selling To Woman & Couples: Secrets of Selling in the New Millennium*—a book that many companies have adopted as required reading for their sales and marketing professionals. Sharon has appeared on CNN, Let’s Talk Business Radio in New York and numerous other mass media forums. She holds a degree in business and public relations from the University of Texas.



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