

Translating Actuarialese

ACTUARIES KNOW THEIR NUMBERS, but they're not always as effective as they might be at conveying that knowledge to their employers and clients. In my presentation at the annual meeting of the Society of Actuaries in Chicago, I outlined 10 tips for actuaries who want to communicate more forcefully and efficiently.

- *Know your objective.* What's your purpose? Is it to inform or persuade? Is it both? If simply conveying information is your goal, make sure the audience knows what your topic will be. Tell them what you're going to be talking about. If you're there to persuade them, make sure they understand the benefits of what you're proposing.

- *Give value for their time.* If you feel you have only 30 minutes to tell about a topic you could spend three hours on, edit yourself. As a speaker, your job is to pack as much value into your talk as time allows. Make your main point quickly and start with the most important material. Save the background and supporting material for last. That way, if you run out of time, your audience will get what they paid for.

- *The visuals come last.* Don't worry about the visuals until you've organized your talk and made sure it's tight and on target. Let the charts and graphs and PowerPoint slides support your talk; don't let them drive it.

- *Make your visual aids VISUAL and AIDS.* Have you ever attended a presentation where the writing on the screen was too small to read? It was probably more a visual hindrance than a visual aid. Make sure the people in the back row can see your visuals, which means large letters and graphics. But again, don't forget that you and your information are the focal point of the presentation. Let your visuals support your message, not distract from it.

- *Practice.* When you've finished your outline, perform your presentation in front of a video camera, or at least a tape recorder. The first time through you'll be doing it for time and content and doing whatever editing you'll need to bring it in on time. After that, you'll be practicing for delivery. This should be done in five-minute periods, then play back the tape. This technique will separate your speech into segments, so if you need to cut, you can do it quickly.

- *Overcoming nervousness.* Nervousness when speaking in public, no matter how large the group, is perfectly natural. The best way to overcome nervousness

is to prepare. Practice means you won't have to worry about what you're going to say or whether you'll be able to fill the time. Another way to help you relax is to greet people as they come in the door. Even if your audience is huge, meeting 15 or 20 of them will make you feel more at ease. When you start to speak, look first at three or four of the people you met, then look at the other people in the room.

- *Eye contact.* We all know you need to look at people when you talk, but for how long? The best eye-contact technique is to keep a person's gaze for the length of a sentence. Then go to another person and do the same thing. To your audience, you will appear to be calm, natural, and in control, rather than looking like a deer caught in the headlights. But you'll also be connecting with your audience. And if somebody reacts to something you've said, you can incorporate your response into your talk. In that way it becomes less like a lecture and more like a conversation.

- *Use your voice.* Hard as it may be to believe, not everybody shares your enthusiasm for numbers and actuarial math. Nor does everybody you need to talk to (your CEO or client) understand it. If you take your audience's interest for granted, thinking the subject itself is sure to excite them, you'll end up losing them. Let your passion for the subject show, but be subtle about it. You don't have to yell and stamp your feet to convey your enthusiasm. Vary your speaking pace and volume. Speak clearly and enunciate carefully. And be sure to practice this several times with the camera or tape recorder before trying it on a live audience. Sometimes natural enthusiasm needs to be rehearsed.

- *Use your body.* Avoid the two extremes. If you stand stiff as a board when you talk, you'll look unnatural and uncomfortable. It will distract from what you're trying to say. At the same time, unfocused and arbitrary movement will be equally distracting. Judicious body movement, used to emphasize a point or draw the audience's eyes to a visual, will help convey your passion and keep your audience's interest.

- *Answer questions concisely.* Resist the temptation to share everything you know in response to a simple question. Your purpose is to make your audience understand what you're saying, not to show off. If someone has a question, it means you haven't quite achieved your purpose. So keep your answer simple and direct until your purpose is achieved. ●

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