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What's Your Point? Speaking Skills Will Guarantee The Audience Gets It

By Marilyn Much

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George Schaefer has worked tough rooms in his 11 years as chief executive of Fifth Third Bancorp. One was the Economic Club of Grand Rapids, Mich.

Fifth Third's purchase of the city's Old Kent Bank in November angered the local press and some business leaders. They feared they'd lost a friend.

Schaefer meant to prove them wrong. His presenter helped break the ice by wearing a flak jacket and steel helmet — making light of the wary crowd.

Schaefer doesn't fancy himself a great speaker, but he knows it's crucial — for himself and his company. He's

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made public speaking part of Fifth Third's executive development.

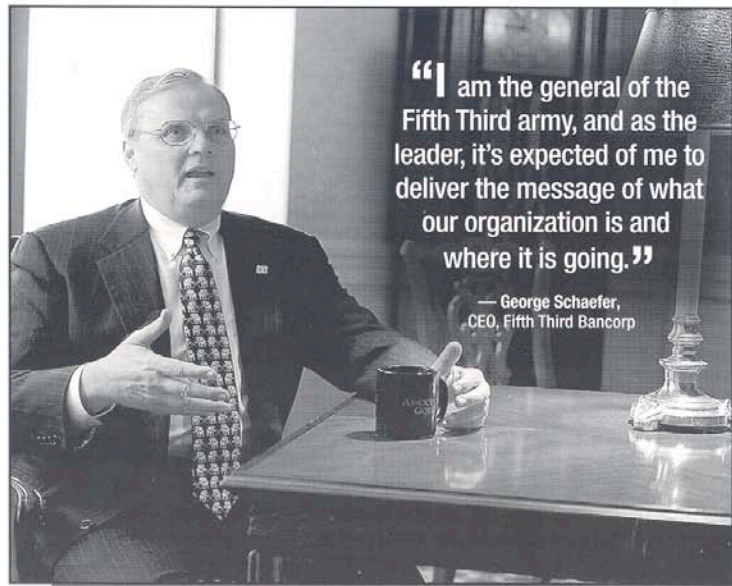
"I am the general of the Fifth Third army, and as the leader it's expected of me to deliver the message of what our organization is and where it is going," he said.

In speaking, he said, "You must understand your mission, pinpoint your direction and stay on that course." You also have to believe. That's the only way listeners will. And to really make your point, you have to repeat it.

Good presenters bring their own credibility and competence to their subject, says Lauris Woolford, who oversees Fifth Third's education and career development program.

Woolford offers these tips:

■ **Really know the subject.** Using slides, Schaefer covered how and why Fifth Third grew to \$70 billion in assets. He talked about the services and products Fifth Third would bring to Old Kent customers. One was Fifth Third's family of mutual funds.



■ **Set clear goals for an outcome and a response.** Schaefer set out to convince the group that Fifth Third is a good citizen. He called its \$5 billion purchase of Old Kent a big investment in the community.

■ **Analyze and know your audience.** Schaefer knew listeners worried that their own bank was gone.

■ **Brainstorm the main ideas you want to relay beforehand.** Schaefer stressed the benefits of having one of nation's strongest lenders in town.

■ **Develop an engaging introduction.** The presenter's bulletproof vest and helmet did that.

■ **Build your objectives with the end of the speech in mind.** The end should be a call to action, something that ties the speech together and benefits listeners.

The most compelling speakers master delivery and content, says communication coach Susan Peterson, who has trained about 40 senior managers for Marriott International.

Her key to effective speaking? A connection with the audience. She advises clients to use their bodies and their minds to cement the bond. That means having the right facial expressions and eye contact so people feel they're having a talk. She tells clients to use natural gestures. Never wag your fingers, she says.

To improve body language, Peterson trains people to think of the lectern as a music stand where they place their notes, so they won't hold onto it for dear life. She gets them to move away from the lectern to the side, or even lean toward the audience. Elizabeth Dole made her mark as a speaker at the 1996 GOP convention, when she left the podium and waded into the crowd.

One key to training executives, Peterson says, is giving them ways to be in control. She has clients call and talk to audience members beforehand so they can hear the concerns, issues and interests.

Continued on Next Page

Continued From Previous Page

To build their confidence, she has her clients sit back quietly, close their eyes for half an hour and visualize how they will look, feel and act as they come into the room, right down to audience reactions. She even asks them to see a standing ovation. That way, they feel like they've already "been there."

Once they have the speech together, she advises them to:

■ **Rehearse in front of someone.** Get the speech off the ground within 20 to 30 seconds. Grab the audience's attention with an anecdote — possibly one that lets them picture something. The speaker might begin with words like "Imagine yourself."

■ **Read your audience, pick up signals from them and do reality checks.** Does your audience look engaged or bored? If you're losing people, move closer. That should perk them up. Or change the pace of the speech.

■ **Ask questions in the middle to break the pace.** But make the questions genuine, not contrived.

■ **End the speech with a 20- to 30-second landing.** Sum up points, possibly with another anecdote to make a lasting impression.

Consultant Buck Heller also teaches motivational speaking at Marriott. He's trained about 30 of its executives in the past 10 years.

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— **George Schaefer,**
CEO, Fifth Third Bancorp

He figures you have 30 to 60 seconds to bond with the crowd. So Heller teaches executives how to "arrive." A pause before starting — as the executive looks at the crowd and vice versa — can do it.

"If you get that cue right, you can take control," he said.

Executives must speak clearly and be willing to stop when necessary.

To avoid rambling, Heller's clients break up their material so it's digestible in sound bites. It's also important for speakers to let the audience know when you're entering a new topic. A pause does it.

Good presenters mind the details. Heller teaches them to keep their body weight centered. He also teaches them how to breathe; steady breathing relieves stress, for instance. An audience can sense a speaker's anxiety by how he or she breathes.

Heller keeps talks short — no more than 30 minutes. He discourages humor at the opening: If it's not funny, you're in trouble. He prefers an exciting question or profound statement as an attention-getter.