

5 Ways great speakers connect with their audience

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The art of public speaking is actually the art of connecting. So the lessons in this field apply to everyone since each of us needs to make connections. If you can connect with a room full of people, then you can also connect with an audience of one. And the people we remember most are not those with the smartest commentary or sharpest wit. We remember people we feel we connected with.

1. Tell stories

A good way to make connections is **telling stories**. Chip and Dan Heath wrote a whole book – **Made to Stick** – on the different types of stories we can construct from the pieces of our lives in order to make people remember us. The key is to have a storyline with conflict and resolution, even if it's very short. This takes practice because you need to know your stories before you start talking, but once you have the stories, your ability to connect with people improves dramatically.

2. Look deeply at individuals in the audience

Many people say they don't actually know how well they connect with their audience. Getting audience feedback is an art. **TAI Resources**, a New York City communications coaching institute, teaches people how to read the audience by searching for a connection.

TAI coaches clients to **look at one person until they've made one point**. You know you are supposed to look at your audience when you talk to them. But in a large room, it's easy to pick your head up without ever really seeing. That is, you scan the audience constantly and never let your eyes land.

We do this because it's so hard to talk in an unengaging way and look someone in the eye. And most public speakers are not particularly engaging. You can test yourself – to see if you're really connected – by forcing yourself to look at one single person while you make a point. Get out the whole idea before you let your eyes move to the next person.

This is a way to know for sure if you are connecting with your audience when you talk. Sticking with one person for each point is painful and nearly impossible if you are not truly connecting your material to that person.

3. Be honest about how you're doing

But what do you do when you see you aren't connecting? Some people ignore it, or trick

themselves into thinking there is a connection: Think about **all** the **deadly PowerPoint presentations** you've sat through where the speaker was oblivious to boredom. This tactic alienates an audience, and makes reestablishing a connection very difficult.

Comedian **Esther Ku** says the best thing to do when you can tell you're not connected is to acknowledge it. "If a joke fails, I poke fun at myself so I show the audience that I'm aware of what's going on." The audience doesn't need constant genius, the audience needs to know you are clued into how they are reacting. Then you get another try.

4. Smile, even if it's fake

Your nonverbal body language influences people's reactions to you more than what you say. For example, Allan and Barbara Pease spend a whole chapter of their book, **The Definitive Book of Body Language**, dissecting the power of a smile. If you smile at your audience, they are likely to smile back. And a smile engenders good feelings and a true connection — even if the smile is forced, because we are **pretty bad at recognizing a fake smile**. (This is because when we are forcing a smile, we are still genuinely trying to make a positive connection, so most people will read the nonverbal cue as positive.)

5. Relax

A fake smile is okay. But overwhelming nerves is not. And audience can read uptight pretty clearly, and they don't like it — it's not inspiring or trustworthy.

There are lots of ways to get yourself to relax before you connect. One is, of course, to know your material well. But a lot of relaxation is physical, not mental. Stuart Brody, a psychologist at the University of Paisley found that a reliable way to decrease nerves is to **have sex before speaking**. There are many physical activities that work to decrease the stress of speaking. For example, Ku prepares for a show by jumping up and down for two minutes before she goes on stage.

But what if you do all this and you still don't connect? Blame it on the audience and try again somewhere else. Because as Ku says, "Some audiences are just not right for you."