

HOW I SUFFERED

FROM FOOT-IN-MOUTH DISEASE: Mistakes I've Made as an Emerging Speaker

By Craig Harrison DTM

Sometimes I'm mellifluous. Other times just mistake-prone. Over the years, on my ascent from Competent Toastmaster to successful and respected motivational and humorous speaker, I've made my share of mistakes, malapropisms and misstatements. Put another way, I am periodically afflicted with foot-in-mouth disease. But it's not for naught. There's much learning in one's foibles, as well as in others'. Laugh and learn from my mistakes as an emerging professional speaker.

Are You A Fluid Speaker?

When I first spoke at events and felt nervous beforehand I would make sure to drink some cold water. At one particular event my nerves threatened to overtake me altogether. I consumed glass after glass of cold water to quell my nervousness as I waited to be introduced to speak. After five glasses of ice water, when I finally stood up to speak I hardly recognized my own voice. It seems the cold water had the effect of constricting my vocal chords. What a lesson I learned that day. *Now I make sure to drink warm water or tea before speaking, so as to loosen my vocal chords.*

As a new speaker I often drank sodas before speaking, theorizing that the sugar and caffeine lifts would enhance my speaking. I learned the hard way that carbonated drinks also like curtain calls: they tend to want to re-emerge from whence they came. On more than one occasion a burp intruded in the middle of an important sentence of mine from the platform. *I must say, amplified belches are the best argument against drinking carbonated beverages before speaking.*

Another common mistake I made as an after-dinner speaker was choosing to eat a big meal before speaking. Convincing myself I needed all my energy for my big evening presentation, I gorged on a heavy meal of corned beef and cabbage, a baked potato with all the toppings, vegetables, a salad with a rich chocolate cake and French bread. When I rose to speak I did so haltingly. Throughout the presentation I felt sluggish. I appeared bloated. Clearly I had over-eaten. Adrenaline gave me the energy I had sought through carbonated tonics and meals. Overeating had simply overtaxed my body at a time I needed to feel light and fluid. *Now I will often arrange to eat my meal after finishing speaking, when I am finally ready to eat leisurely and in a relaxed manner.*

You May Be On Without Being On Stage

As an emerging speaker I partook of a Speakers Showcase with a chapter of the local meetings industry association at their trade show and educational conference. In showcases a number of speakers give short presentations to help the audience get a glimpse of a series of speakers, subjects and styles. In rapid succession a number of

speakers receive their five-fifteen minutes of fame. Backstage speakers are constantly handing off microphones to the next speaker and mentally preparing for their moment in the spotlight.

Often there is a break between groups of speakers to give the meeting planners a chance to digest what they've seen, take a biological break, and otherwise stretch and relax. Through the luck of the draw, I was to be the first speaker after one such break. The first five speakers gave their presentations. I waited nervously backstage to be fitted with my lavalier microphone. I had never used one before. I attached it to my neck tie, fed the cord inside my suit's jacket and clipped the cordless transmitter on my belt behind me. The sound tech flipped a switch and asked me to test it: testing, testing, one-two-three. It worked. I was feeling pretty frisky!

He told me to return several minutes before the break ended, and to enter from stage right upon being introduced. Suddenly I had ten minutes on my hand. How fortuitous. I would go to the bathroom, and then find a quiet place to rehearse my opening one more time. I strode off to find a men's room. What a relief to relieve some of my nervousness. Then I entered the hallway, but there was nowhere to rehearse. Ah, I would duck outside to the sidewalk where I could speak loudly and not disturb anyone. As I rehearsed my opening, I made a few mistakes. Nervously, I chastised myself out loud. I repeated my opening until I finally nailed it. Praising myself with positive self-talk, I was ready to return to the auditorium.

As I returned it seemed more than a couple people had been feverishly looking for me. Oops, the entire break my microphone transmitter had been on. The auditorium could hear me, but couldn't find me to tell me to turn off the microphone. So much for my surprise opening! *Microphones often have an on-off or standby switch on them. Know your equipment and always make sure it is in the off position before going to the bathroom or having any backstage conversations!*

When Confusion Reigns, It Pours

Memorizing has its place in speeches to be sure. I have also found that both over-memorization, and last minute cramming, can muddle a speaker's mind unnecessarily. I have spoken at District Conferences outside my own and accidentally referred by number to my district. Oops, an unintentional mistake that may be overlooked the first time it's done in a speech. Just don't keep making that mistake, as I did.

Similarly, while in Canada I was speaking to a conference audience and relating a story of one of the attendees I had met the previous night. I was so focused on getting his name and its pronunciation correct that I mistakenly described him as being from Edmonton when fact he was from Winnipeg. To this audience my mistake turned out to be no little thing. Sometimes an ignorance of local geography, customs or rivalries can have major consequences. *When speaking outside Toastmasters know your localities, the organization you're speaking to, their product lines and who their chief competitor or rival is. You wouldn't praise Pepsi at a Coke Convention!*

Humor is Where *They* Find It

Sometimes in our quest to infuse humor in our material we forget that the best humor is what the audience finds funny. In many cases, it's not what we may have intended they laugh at. But let's not get in the way of our audiences having a good time.

I was giving a customer service keynote to an audience of mortgage brokers. I was extolling the virtues of professionals with a great "bedside manner" who comfort customers, listen to them and thus uncovered hidden needs. I contrasted two physicians I had. One came in, sat down, opened his laptop, started asking questions, and never even looked up to say hello or make any sort of contact.

I then described my new physician and how she enters the examining room, smiles, greets me, and makes a modicum of small talk to relax us both. She uses questions to draw me out. I asked them to visualize our interaction: "can you see my doctor probing me?"

Well, before I could say another word, 170 realtors were laughing hysterically at the image of my physician probing me! I was speechless. My face turned red. I lost my train of thought. And they kept on laughing, now more at my being flummoxed by what I'd said. But wait, we were bonding. This unexpected laugh was far more effective than some of my planned humor that morning. In fact, the rest of the speech went much better. *Let your audience decide what is funny. Sometimes it's the unexpected or unplanned situational humor that connects best. In a manner of speaking, run with it, not from it!*

The Fall and Rise of A Speaker

Sometimes there can be a language or cultural barrier between the speaker and an audience. I spoke once to a group of college students from Asia at a North American university campus. My topic was creativity and the spirit of invention. Most attendees weren't native English speakers. Since much of that presentation's humor was built around puns and word play, expert knowledge of English was assumed. Thus many of my jokes were falling flat and my humor was going for naught. It was affecting my confidence. Then, while walking across stage, in mid-sentence I tripped on the microphone cord and took a pratfall. Suddenly the entire hall erupted in laughter. My stumble was hilarious to my audience. This was humor they recognized...slapstick. In my rush to resume my train of thought, I cut short their cathartic need to laugh. After several more minutes of delivering my dry material I was scheming to stage a second stumble, knowing that for this audience I could connect best through physical humor. *Tailor your humor to your audience and take your cues from them. Ultimately humor is in the eye of the rejoicer. They determine what is funny. Be audience-centered!*

Band Aid To The Rescue

Toastmasters are called to speak in many capacities outside of the club. I have been pressed into service to make toasts at functions, to read proclamations at public events and also to serve as a master of ceremonies. It's a tribute to our skills and confidence level that others ask us to handle these often important roles.

Several years ago I was invited to introduce a reggae band at a radio station fundraiser. Since I was a fan of this band it was a particular treat. The previous bands had vacated the stage and my favorite band had set up and was ready to begin. All they needed was to be formally introduced. The lights dimmed and the PA announcer introduced me, the chairman of the board for the radio station hosting the event. I came out onto a dark stage with the band members already at their instruments, poised to begin. A single spotlight shone on me. The smattering of applause was more to indicate the audience's excitement the show was continuing than any recognition of my importance.

I told the audience: "You are in for a big treat, this band is one of my favorites, they're local, they're talented and I want you to all put their hands together and give a big KKUP-FM radio station welcome to, the one, the only ..."

And my mind went blank. I couldn't remember their name. At first the audience thought I was pausing for effect. I was frozen at the mike by this spotlight, unable to think and not knowing what to do. This band DID need an introduction. What was their name?

Suddenly, from behind me I heard the drummer whisper "Raskidus, Mon!" And as I privately thanked the Lord for his Angelic drummer who saved the day, I blurted out "Raskidus Man" and ran from the stage. Raskidus was not amused.

In the heat of the moment we can potentially forget even the most basic of information: who the audience is, the event we're at, the name of the next presenter, etc. Make a note, carry a back-up crib sheet and avoid overtaxing your memory banks. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Don't Save the Best For Last

The best presentations seem to have powerful beginnings and endings and much in between to stimulate listeners. Especially for humorous speeches it's important to have humor throughout.

I was hired to present a closing keynote at a users conference held over a weekend in San Diego, California. I was to speak their last morning, Sunday, following remarks of the president. I was closing the conference, from 10AM until noon.

That morning the president spoke and introduced me and I launched into my program. All went well for the first hour. Then, in the middle of one of my stories, three people got up and quietly left. I press on. Ten minutes later another table got and left. It was curious since the timing seemed to bear no relationship to what I was saying at the time.

Soon it was time for my big close. It was 11:45am and in my last fifteen minutes I had some of the best humor of the program. Suddenly a mass exodus was occurring. Entire rows were vacating. There hadn't been an earthquake, a fire alarm or even a dirty diaper to induce mass movement. Finally, as a few people near the front arose to leave I barked out "wait, you can't leave yet...you'll miss my big close." Sympathetically, a

woman responded back “it’s between missing your big close or my flight back to Minneapolis.” Just then another man chimed in to remind everyone checkout time was noon. Suddenly the entire room emptied. *As professionals speakers must be able to shorten our presentation on short notice. Often too we are competing against variables beyond our control: check out times, flight schedules, traffic and even alcohol. Insure your presentation contains value throughout, and have a back up plan in case your full time allotment to speak gets cut.*

There are days I feel like a professional speaker, like an emerging speaker and sometimes even like a submerging speaker. But each time out I try to learn from the experience. May each of you avoid foot-in-mouth disease in your development as speakers.

Professional speaker Craig Harrison DTM founded Laugh Lovers (596430-57) in Oakland, CA laughs and learns from each presentation. Visit his website www.ExpressionsOfExcellence.com for more speaker resources.