

Lee Iacocca, chairman of Chrysler Corp., credits his career success in large part to communication skills.

When he took command of the near-bankrupt carmaker in the early 1980s, Iacocca had to persuade Congress to loan the company hundreds of millions of dollars. He had to inspire dejected Chrysler employees to work hard and build reliable products. And he had to convince American consumers that "Chrysler was back."

Today, Iacocca is one of the most sought-after public speakers in the country, receiving more than 3,000 speaking invitations each year.

But he wasn't always a captivating speaker. In fact, Iacocca says he was a "terrible" speaker until he took a public speaking course at age 25.

Becoming an effective public speaker takes a great deal of time and practice. But you can become a better speaker by avoiding the most common mistakes of public speaking.

In a recent survey, 34 professional speakers enumerated the biggest mistakes public speakers make. The five most common were:

■ **Not Knowing Your Audience** – Ineffective public speakers don't really know their audience's needs or interests. They fail to educate themselves about the specifics of the audience, such as age, gender, business, problems and challenges.

Smart public speakers often conduct interviews or surveys of their audience before or after each speech.

■ **Being Poorly Prepared** – Ineffective public speakers don't spend enough time researching their subject, preparing presentation materials or rehearsing.

Smart public speakers are always prepared, and it shows. A case in point is the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates. Accepting a pre-debate TV rehearsal, Kennedy and his aides practiced for hours – fielding questions from fictitious reporters, standing under the hot lights of the studio, speaking and gesturing at the TV cameras.

Most people watching the historic televised debates saw Kennedy as the winner. Preparation, it pays!

■ **Trying to Cover Too Much Material** – Ineffective public speakers want to tell their

audience everything they know about a subject. This usually bores listeners.

Smart public speakers present their audience with two or three main points. Psychologists say audiences retain very little of what they've heard hours after a speech or presentation.

■ **Failing to Make Eye Contact** – Ineffective public speakers spend too much time looking at their notes and visual aids and not enough time looking at their audience. Such actions create emotional distance, since audiences tend to mistrust public speakers who don't make and maintain eye contact.


Smart public speakers treat a speech or presentation as if it were a conversation with a friend or an acquaintance. They "tune in" to the audience instead of being preoccupied with themselves.

The 5 Biggest Mistakes Speakers Make... and What to Do About Them

■ **Being Dull** – Ineffective public speakers are often dull because of poor speech delivery or poor speech content.

Smart public speakers choose topics they're excited about. They prepare interesting materials; have a strong interest in communicating their message; and let their enthusiasm shine through during each presentation.

Most audiences ask very little of a public speaker. Sadly, many public speakers deliver just that – very little. If you want to keep your next audience on the edge of their seat, know your audience, be prepared, make only two or three points, make lots of eye contact, and be energetic and interesting.

You may not speak as well as Lee Iacocca, but don't despair. There was a time when Lee Iacocca didn't speak like Lee Iacocca. 

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