

The Proper Use of Notes When Presenting **Randy Siegel**

Some say taking notes to the podium is a crutch, but I say if notes help you feel more comfortable and stay on track, use them...but use them correctly.

Using the slides as your only source of notes and reading from a prepared script seldom work. When speakers use slides as notes, they tend to make the slide copy too heavy, and like a billboard, the slide should have as little copy as possible.

It is hard, if not impossible, to maintain eye contact and build audience rapport while constantly turning your back to the audience to read the slides. I counsel clients to use the “notes” feature of PowerPoint and write a few key notes below each slide. I also advise clients to print the PowerPoint presentation with notes, bind it, and place it in front of them so that they can maintain eye contact with the audience.

Working from a prepared script is often as ineffective as using slides as notes. Most prepared speeches are written for the eye and not the ear, and most speakers have trouble maintaining eye contact while reading the speech. .

Memorizing a speech shares the same disadvantage as reading from a prepared script; the delivery seldom appears comfortable and natural. Worse, when speaking from memory, many presenters panic and forget their next thought.

When not using PowerPoint, I counsel clients to write out their speech and then reduce it to a simple outline. This outline becomes their only notes.

Some experts advise speakers to use 3 X 5-inch note cards for presentations under fifteen minutes. The cards are less noticeable than sheets of paper and draw less attention to their hands if they shake when they are nervous.

When speeches are longer than fifteen minutes, standard 8-1/2 X 11 sheets of papers work well. I suggest using eighteen point type to ensure good visibility.

For both cards and standard sheets, Melody Templeton and Suzanne Sparks Fitzgerald suggest in their book *Schaum's Quick Guide to Great Presentations*:

1. Use only key words; use as few cards as possible
2. Use only one side.

3. Number all pages (this will avoid a disaster if you drop your notes).
4. Include transitional phrases in your notes.
5. Bring an extra copy.

How we use our notes is as important as the way we format them. Here are three tips for using notes:

One: Carry your notes with you to the podium. If you are using cards, place those cards in one hand inconspicuously. If using sheets, place them in a folder with pockets and carry the folder.

Two: Do not hold notes when you speak. When possible place them on a small table or on the podium.

Three: When you have finished one thought and need to check your notes for your next thought, finish that thought with confidence, pause, look at your notes and find the next point, reestablish eye contact with a member of the audience, and begin speaking. Take all the time you need to read your notes. Don't be afraid of the silence. Pauses can be quite powerful.

In conclusion, use notes when you speak. Notes when formatted and used correctly help speakers stay on point, find their way home if they get lost, and provide a security blanket for the nervous speaker.

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