PROPS HELP BRING CONTENT INTO THE VISUAL REALM

By Andrea Nierenberg

What do a judge’s gavel, a clown’s attire and everything a magician puts up his sleeve have in common? They are props designed to gain and keep your attention. Prop is a short word for the theatrical term property. In the business world, they’re often referred to as visual aids, and before PowerPoint they were all most presenters had to work with in speaking situations.

More multimedia options than ever are available now, but the power of the prop should not be forgotten. By using a prop to engage the audience members’ senses of sight, sound and touch, you can grab and keep their attention throughout your presentation.

Propping, the decision

The main rule of using a prop is that the object or action chosen should illustrate or emphasize a key point. It essentially gives the presenter a shortcut; rather than talking through a point, the visual makes information tangible. To show the importance of making progress, for example, you could use a pair of sneakers or a bicycle tire. It’s easy for the audience to associate the item with the concept of getting from point A to point B.

Using a prop to trigger a story can also be successful. Consider the old sales technique of taping a $20 bill on the lectern. The speaker starts the presentation without mentioning the cash. After about 10 minutes, he asks listeners whether they noticed the money. Usually a number of hands are raised. The speaker then wonders aloud why no one asked about the money earlier, saying, “Whoever wants it, come up and get it.” Eventually someone musters the courage to walk up to claim the prize. And the speaker gains a perfect opening to discuss the need for assertiveness in sales.

Prizes or leave-behinds make great props. Maybe you want to hand out small prizes for every question asked. Or have a raffle that somehow connects with your subject. One of my personal favorites is to use candy as an ice-breaker when I want an audience to divide into groups. By handing out different candy bars, I can ask people to group themselves according to the type of candy bar they received.

Some presenters use humorous props such as a gorilla costume or a wig. Although these unusual items can be memorable and add levity to a situation, they won’t be useful unless you tie them to a major point.

Sleight of hand

So you’ve found a prop that makes your point perfectly. Now you need to integrate it into your presentation. Many a presenter has had a great prop only to have the scenario fall apart from bad delivery. Here are some things to keep in mind:

Make sure the prop is big enough. Props should be large enough for everyone to see. Sometimes presenters hold up a newspaper to show an unusual headline but fail to realize that the type is too small for anyone to read. In this case, put the headline on a PowerPoint slide instead.

Slow down. Always show props to the audience slowly. Remember that people need a few seconds to focus on the item and may have to raise their heads if they are writing notes. If you hold up something for only a few seconds, many people will miss the point. It’s best to hold it up, stretch your arm out far to the right and then slowly move your arm far to the left.

Know when to keep it a secret. Don’t let the prop be a distraction. In most cases, keep your props hidden until you are ready to use them. A funny, colorful stuffed animal sitting off to the side, for example, will pull attention away from you.

Don’t let the prop distract you. Props allow a speaker to release some nervous energy by focusing the au-
dience on the object rather than on the presenter’s face. This approach has two pitfalls. First, as the speaker, avoid staring at the prop. It’s important to keep your eyes on the audience to ensure they are still following you. Second, when you are done with a prop, put it down. Otherwise, if it’s a small item and you’re nervous, you risk playing with it, distracting the audience.

**Practice.** Always include the prop in your practice—and always practice. It’s the only way to know whether the prop will work as you envisioned.

If you’re feeling too tethered to a PowerPoint slideshow, take a good look at your content and consider using a prop. Its presence may be just what you need to add some interest at a key point within your speech.

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