

Openings That Entice

By Dianna Booher

Television networks spend enormous amounts of money on startling headlines, splashy visuals, engaging teasers and trivia, mood music, and intriguing storyline leaders to keep you tuned in for the upcoming show. Similarly, the introduction you craft for your presentation can either tempt your audience to tune in or tune out.

Your opening must engage the audience immediately. They will want to listen to you only if they think you can help them, entertain them, or inform them. At the least, they want to know you identify with their feelings, attitudes, or values. Therefore, you have to establish credibility immediately. Why should they listen to you? How are you similar to (or different from) them? What qualifies you to talk on the subject? The opening sets the overall direction of your presentation and lets the audience know what is about to happen and why they should listen.

Prepare an Opening to the Subject

Do not just “drift into” your subject. Select your opening according to your purpose, the occasion and audience, and your topic. Once you’ve established rapport, immediately let your audience know that it is to their benefit to hear what you have to say. Keep in mind that your audience is wondering, “What’s in it for me? Should I tune out? Sneak out for coffee?”

Grab attention; do not just hope for it.

Ask a Rhetorical Question

Examples include “What makes a great leader?” “What would it take to triple our sales in the next two years? Is this wishful thinking or could it be reality?” “Is it possible never to feel depressed again—for any reason?” “Can we improve our health care benefits to employees for less than we’re now paying? I’d like to present some figures for your consideration.”

Make a Startling Statement

Examples: “Your pension funds may not be there when you need them.” “One out of four girls between the ages of 10 and 19 will be assaulted sometime during her teens.” “One out of three people will need long-term care in a health facility during their lifetime.”

Challenge the Audience

Examples: “I dare you to leave tonight unchanged in your attitude about the poverty in our community.” “I challenge you to set a quota for your sales territory that will motivate even your best performer.” “I urge you to seek out the training you need to acquire the skills that will position you to move ahead in your chosen career.” “We need to lay off 12,000 employees in the next 60 days—I need your help to lay out a plan to do it in the least painful way possible.”

Declare Your Purpose

Examples: “My purpose is simply to present both sides of this financial issue.” “After you see our designs, I’ll request your approval for the funding needed to begin construction immediately.” “My hope is that you’ll write out a check for any amount—\$50, \$100, or \$1000—to underwrite this memorial.” “I plan to introduce you to the project team, tell you a little about each person’s responsibilities, and then present our recommendations as a committee.”

Brief Your Audience

An example: “I have three points to make tonight. First, our school-age population has increased 48 percent in the past 13 months. Second, we don’t have adequate school facilities. And third, we’re going to have to choose between a tax increase and an inadequate education for our children that will eventually cost us millions of dollars in welfare, crime, and lost wages.”

Reveal a Startling Statistic

Examples: “In the last 3 months, we’ve spent more than \$465,000 on shipping charges.” “Our company has increased profits by 380 percent during the last 10 months.” “Six to one. That’s the new rep-customer ratio.”

Share a Commonality

An example: “How many of you have eaten in a fast-food restaurant at least three times in the last week? [Look around at the raised hands.] Now let me describe the kitchen conditions at the restaurant where I ate breakfast this morning, and *you* tell *me* if we need to push for tighter inspection standards in this city.”

Another example: “Maybe some of you are having the same difficulties I face in handling these 360-degree performance reviews. Here’s what happened to me last week. . . .” Then continue to relate a situation that you think members of the audience can identify with as you make your key point.

Define a Term

An example: “GNC is a term you’ve seen in the company newsletter for about five issues now. GNC: the Get-Next Command. Think we’re talking about computers? No, this term refers to. . . .” Another example: “This year we have one goal: strategic partnerships. Let me define what that means to us—exactly what we’re looking for in our supplier relationships.”

Compare or Contrast Two Things

Examples: “Men look at garage shelving and say, ‘How functional!’ Women look at it and say, ‘How ugly!’” “Our number one competitor, Glabbco, has increased its market share by 20 percent during the same period that ours has decreased by five percent. There’s a big lesson to be learned here—my topic for today.”

Promise Benefits

General audiences want peace of mind, more money, self-satisfaction, accomplishment, faith, love, approval, and success. Business audiences look for benefits such as increased productivity, lower costs, higher revenue, increased profits, better customer service and satisfaction, less downtime, improved quality, smoother processes, higher retention rates, improved customer loyalty, improved supplier relationships, more profitable strategic partnerships, and more referrals.

The more specific you can be about these issues, the more attention you will garner. For example, “At the conclusion of this presentation, you’ll have at your disposal three techniques for increasing your income through your part-time hobby.” Or: “After this session, you should have a clear, four-step process for solving customer complaints in your department.”

Don’t Routinely Begin with an Unrelated Joke or Anecdote

Few humorous openings work because the humor rarely has anything to do with the topic and merely leaves the audience hanging. It is like having someone rush up to you in the grocery store with a broad smile and arms extended and then slink away without a word when she realizes she has mistaken you for someone else. Even a funny story that relates to your subject usually works better later in the presentation. At the beginning, the audience is still deciding how to react to you as a person.

Stay Away from Openings That Focus on “Background,” “History,” or “Your Story”

The highest point of audience attention is the first few moments. Do not squander those precious minutes with trivia, known information, or boring information. Examples: announcements, the history of the organization or division or product, an organizational chart, and the names and contact information for team members. Another mistake, particularly in sales presentations, is to start with the story of your organization—an “all about us” opening. And all the while, the client wants to know, “But what about *me*? What can you do for *me*?”

Start with the message of interest to the listeners—the “what’s in it for them”—not ancient history or ancillary, nice-to-know-sometime information.

Nix the Negatives

Do not complain about the room setup. Do not denigrate the city or state you are in. Do not explain that you are unprepared. Do not apologize for a boring topic. Do not use offensive language or make prejudicial statements. Rather, an opening should arouse interest, establish rapport, and convey credibility to your audience. The following illustrates the difference an appropriate opening can make:

Uh, I don’t know why I’m up here, but I guess it was my unlucky day or something. Anyway, I think I’m supposed to be giving you an update on the Monroe survey. Shipping costs. I’ve got my notes here somewhere. The gist of our findings is that we’re wasting a lot of money at that plant site. And we’ve got a few suggestions for making some changes throughout the division.

versus

Would anyone like to take a guess at how much we spent on express shipping services last quarter? Twenty-three thousand dollars in the Monroe office alone! A survey just completed by an independent auditing firm reveals that 85 percent of that cost was waste—shipping charges that could have been avoided with scheduling that met our manufacturing deadlines. As a result of that study, we have three recommendations for reducing shipping expenditures from \$23,000 to less than \$3000 over the next 30 days.

Start with credibility so that you can gain attention in order to end with impact.

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***Dianna Booher** works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.