

## Interview: Public Speaking Coach Lisa Braithwaite

Here's my interview with public speaking coach Lisa Braithwaite. This interview contains lots of great information on minimizing your speaking anxiety, how to effectively use PowerPoint, and tips on how to prepare for your speeches and presentations.

### 1. Why did you become a public speaking coach? What is your own speaking and presenting background?

Between 1989 and 2005, I worked in the nonprofit sector in Santa Barbara (including founding my own nonprofit and running that for eight years), providing community education, outreach and advocacy for various organizations.

My "trial by fire" was giving presentations on domestic violence to high school students, followed closely by teaching puberty classes to fifth graders – after first presenting the curriculum to their parents. I learned a lot about public speaking from dealing with uncomfortable issues like these and having to keep the wandering attention of teenagers.

I've always loved public speaking, ever since I was on the speech team in high school, and I've also worked hard to be good at it. A couple of years ago, after having been laid off by nonprofits for the third time in four years, I detected the faint glow of a light bulb over my head.

Why not combine my B.A. in Theater, my M.A. in Education, my sixteen years of professional public speaking, and my love of entrepreneurship, speaking, writing, and teaching, and create my own perfect career?

### 2. What are your top tips for overcoming the fear of public speaking? What do your clients find most effective in this area?

First of all, I don't encourage my clients to overcome the fear of public speaking. A little nervousness or anxiety, which we learn to reframe as excitement, can make a big difference between a speaker who is full of life, energy and enthusiasm, and one who is dull and dreary.

I work with my clients on reducing anxiety and then using the adrenaline that's left to propel them forward, like an athlete about to run a race.

My top tips for reducing anxiety include **putting the audience first**, **interacting** with the audience and **reframing** the way you see the audience.

**Putting the audience first** means that you focus on their needs rather than your own. Find out who they are, why they're there, and what they hope to learn from you. When you know your

audience and their needs, you can push aside some of your own nervousness in order to make sure you're giving them what they want. Build a relationship with the audience, human to human, like each person out there is a good friend and you love and respect them.

**Interacting with the audience** reduces nervousness for several reasons: 1) the pressure is off the speaker to be the center of attention; 2) breaking the audience into discussion groups or having them share their knowledge and experiences gives them some control over the event and lets them know the speaker respects them and their contribution; 3) it adds movement, fun and a little unpredictability to an event that might otherwise be monotonous. When your audience is engaged, feeling connected and enjoying themselves, so are you!

**Reframing the way you see the audience** means that you begin to perceive them as your ally, rather than your enemy. Much of public speaking fear is based on the notion that our audience is judging us, is out to get us, will snicker at our flaws and mistakes, and is generally unsupportive. If you start telling yourself that your audience only has positive expectations for the presentation, hopes to learn from you, and hopes you do well, this is one way to change your mindset before you ever step onto the stage.

### **3. What do you say to people who downplay the importance of public speaking skills? What are some unexpected benefits that come with success in public speaking?**

I'm not sure I've ever met anyone who downplays the importance of public speaking skills. If anything, I find that some people don't realize that **all** speaking is public speaking! They may not think they need formal public speaking training, but do recognize that they could use better networking skills, better interviewing skills, or better negotiation skills. All of which, by the way, are public speaking skills.

The benefits that come with public speaking success depend what you perceive as success. Some people might just enjoy the confidence boost and adrenaline rush they get when they give a well-received presentation. Others might count media attention or new clients as success. Others may find that those communication skills translate over into other areas of their lives, allowing them to speak up and be heard.

There are so many possible benefits to one's business and personal life from building skills and confidence as a speaker.

### **4. What are the biggest mistakes you see speakers consistently make?**

One of the biggest mistakes a speaker can make is to dwell on her own anxiety. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy to focus on the things that might go wrong and the ways that she might screw up.

Instead, focus on the audience, on meeting their needs and on making sure you're completely prepared. Being prepared can mean envisioning what might go wrong, but it also means having a backup plan for any possible occurrence (fire alarm going off, waiters clinking plates, computer failing to boot up . . .). If you have a plan, you don't have to dwell on those negative possibilities, because you've already figured out how you'll handle them.

Visualization, relaxation and reframing are all ways to get past these negative thoughts and turn them into positive thoughts.

Another big mistake is to focus on what you think they **should** know, rather than on what they **want** to know. I've heard speakers go on and on about something they found completely fascinating, while the audience nodded off. How about finding out what's important to the audience in relation to your topic, and focusing on that?

Another thing that some speakers don't think about is grabbing the audience right of the bat with a strong opening, and ending the presentation with a powerful closing. Too many speakers start off with "Good morning ladies and gentlemen, thank you for having me. I'm so honored to be here speaking to the Southside Rotary Club . . . yada yada yada." The audience has already dozed off.

And then they end with the question and answer period, which guarantees a big drop in energy and people forgetting your main points. Save your big closing and recap of main points for after Q&A – this will make a big difference.

### **5. How do you feel about the rise of PowerPoint presentations? What advice would you give to speakers who frequently use PowerPoint presentations?**

I used to hate PowerPoint, just because I had seen so many bad ones. I wasn't convinced that there was a way to use it that could really engage an audience and fit in with my theories of audience-centered speaking.

After having done lots of research, I've changed my tune. There are some great resources out there for PowerPoint design, including Cliff Atkinson's book "Beyond Bullet Points." This book completely turned me around, and now I make PowerPoint presentations for myself and my clients that are actually a joy to present – and to watch.

I have three things I would say to people who use PowerPoint regularly (I could go on and on, but there's only so much room on this page):

1. Use a remote presentation device, so you're not tied to the computer. Once you get the hang of pushing that little button to advance your slides, you'll feel so liberated you'll never want to go back behind the lectern. It allows you to move freely around the speaking area so you can maintain contact and your relationship with your audience.
2. Please, please, please don't read your slides. If you turn your back to me and read your entire presentation from the screen instead of engaging the audience, I feel ripped off. Why don't you just give me the handout and I'll take it home and read it myself?
3. Use as few words as possible and as many full-screen images as possible. I'm not going to go into detail about the research about titles vs. sentences or how many lines of text vs. using charts or diagrams. Just keep your text to a minimum and your images pertinent to the presentation, avoiding cheesy clipart as much as possible. Your PowerPoint is merely an enhancement to your talk. You should be able to turn off the computer and still deliver your presentation as intended.

## **6. How important is humor in public speaking? What are some effective ways to incorporate humor into speeches and presentations?**

I think humor in public speaking is very important, but not in the "priest walks into a bar" kind of way. Humor, in the U.S. anyway, is an important way of connecting with other people. Having a laugh together with one or many people is one of the great joys in life. As a speaker, humor and laughter humanize you to the audience, making you more accessible and approachable, rather than a robot reciting a script.

However, the use of humor makes people very nervous, and it doesn't have to. The easiest way to incorporate humor into a presentation is to make fun of yourself. Use a light touch, because too much of this makes you look insecure and might harm your credibility with an audience.

But pointing out your own human idiosyncrasies in the context of your topic is a great way to build that relationship with an audience. And you don't have to be a "funny guy" to pull it off. When I wear a lapel microphone, I regularly smack it while speaking. I use my hands a lot and I'm not very good at avoiding the mic. So I mention it as an example of what not to do, and point out that even the most seasoned professional speakers have their little quirks. And I give it a couple more whacks for good measure. Laughing at yourself makes the audience feel more comfortable with you.

Just be careful not to use humor at the expense of audience members. If you're not sure if a certain topic will be considered funny to the group, talk to the organizer beforehand to make sure.

## **7. What is the most effective way to practice public speaking? How important is watching other people speak?**

Everyone has her or his own way of practicing. Some people like to practice in front of a friend, or use a group like Toastmasters as their training ground. I prefer to practice alone; I don't like anyone to see my presentation before I deliver it. Maybe it's a superstition, but that's my thing.

I will say that over-rehearsing can be as much of a problem as under-rehearsing. Give your brain a break in between practices. I usually practice a presentation for a few hours at a time, then take a break until the next day, or maybe even skip a day. This allows the content to really sink in. When I come back to it, I have a fresh perspective and I also remember much more of the talk.

For a new presentation that I haven't given before, I might write in a few months in advance, but I don't practice it heavily until a week or so before the gig. I like it to be fresh. For one that I'm familiar with, I'll go over it three or four times in the week before the presentation and make any adjustments.

Also, I don't memorize my presentations. I use bulleted notes with key points, and memorize my opening and closing. I will have a pretty good idea of what I want to say for each point, but I don't go over it in minute detail. In the middle, I like to allow for some spontaneity by not over-memorizing exactly what I'm going to say. I've been doing this for a long time, though, and I'm comfortable with the unpredictability that adds to my presentation.

I do enjoy watching other speakers, and learning from them, but I never try to emulate another speaker's mannerisms or voice. It's important to have your own style and your own voice – the audience can see right through you if you're faking it.

There's only one Tony Robbins, there's only one Oprah, and there's only one you!

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Lisa Braithwaite works with individuals to uncover their challenges and build their strengths in presenting themselves confidently as speakers. She is a guest columnist for Santa Barbara's Woman Magazine and was recently quoted in Men's Health Magazine.

Before launching her public speaking coaching business, Lisa worked in the nonprofit sector in Santa Barbara for sixteen years as an advocate, educator and trainer, creating and implementing programs, curricula, and training materials for nonprofit organizations. Her areas of expertise include adult learning principles, communication skills development and gender equity issues.

In 2003, Lisa was honored with the Louise Lowry Davis award for co-founding the nonprofit organization Body Electric. The award is named for a local pioneer in women's sports. She received her B.A. in Theater from Pomona College and her M.A. in Education from UCSB.

For more information on individual coaching, group workshops or other services, please visit [www.coachlisab.com](http://www.coachlisab.com) or call 805-207-7647.