

You Are the Message – Preparing Your Public Appearances

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Abstract

This paper reviews some basic elements intrinsic to successful public experiences. It seeks to address how these elements relate to the job of professionals who work for Church communication offices. The paper discusses the importance of defining a goal or goals for each public appearance, i.e., what does the speaker want to accomplish as a result of the appearance? The paper focuses on three key elements successful public appearances include: **content preparation** – having a clear agenda and key messages prepared prior to the appearance, knowing information relevant to issues that may be discussed; **audience preparation** – researching your audience prior to the appearance. If the public appearance involves a journalist, that person constitutes an audience unique from the viewing (listening or reading) audience; **personal preparation** – the importance of one's appearance, disposition, and affability.

You Are the Message – Preparing Your Public Appearances

Set Goal(s) for Public Appearances

Whether appearing on a national TV news segment or at the pulpit of a local parish, each and every public appearance constitutes an opportunity to communicate important ideas and truths to people. Public appearances allow communicators the possibility to define, promote, protect, and bring to life important issues. In a sense, any speech is all about getting your message across – and you are your message. Public appearances allow communicators to be proactive rather than simply passive. To paraphrase St. Augustine, communicators should try to *move, delight and instruct* in interviews and public appearances.

For professionals who work for Church communication offices, any ideas and truths communicated should potentially carry a spark of truth, beauty, goodness even when mundane themes are being discussed. This is because the work is done directly in the service of the mystical body of Christ.

Therefore, any goal(s) established prior to a public appearance should respond to the question: “How will the audience perceive Jesus Christ through my public appearance?” Examples of responses to this question could include: “my goal is to come across as responsible, caring, respectful, merciful, hopeful, truthful, kind and joyful,” or “my goal is to demonstrate contrition, sorrow and charity because of the gravity of the matter being discussed,” or “my goal is that my audience somehow feel respected, encouraged and loved by God.” People listening or watching Church

communicators have an innate expectation that Christ's Church, as well as His love, truth, mission and mercy will be reflected somehow in each public appearance. This is a responsibility which goes with that office.

Along with the God-entrusted-mission goal question, the professional, real-time, "why I am making this public appearance anyway" goal(s) questions need to be asked. For example: "what do I want to accomplish for the archdiocese and its faithful when I speak about the sale of the chancellery building and property to a local university?" Responses to this could include: "My goal is to communicate the truth in such a way that people listening will understand that the archdiocese is acting responsibly given its current circumstances. This in turn will increase the credibility of the bishop and the archdiocese among the faithful and others." Before any public appearance, try to establish one or several key goals.

Agenda, Key Messages

Once goals have been established, the presenter then needs to have a clear, articulated agenda of what s/he wants to address during the public appearance. The speaker should identify his/her purpose and set the public appearance parameters accordingly. Another way of approaching this is to ask: "what does the audience expect me to say based on the facts on the ground within the context of the mission of the Church and the particular Church I represent?" Speakers should try to anticipate and envision any negative and positive perceptions and responses (whether mental or verbal) the audience may have.

Develop three to five key messages. The first one or two messages should explain in simple terms the organization and/or department/commission the speaker represents. The organization-defining messages should be custom tailored to the audiences being addressed. For example, there are different ways to define the Catholic Church, e.g. the people of God, the mystical body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the Roman Catholic Church, etc. Messages should resonate with listeners, not simply be legitimate as descriptors in a broad sense. If it's an evangelical or ecumenical audience, then it makes sense to describe the Church in ways most inclusive, understandable and attractive to them.

Often, there are multiple ways to speak the truth; it is worthwhile to always try to communicate the truth with charity. Most of the operative charity that a communicator exercises will occur in the level of preparation and forethought of how best to say the truth to people without watering it down or rendering it meaningless.

Other messages should seek to better communicate truths about the Church, the clergy, pastoral work, Church-related programs or the hierarchy – obviously pressing issues take precedence.

Messages usually arise out of simple formulas, e.g., *there is a problem, we need to do something about it, and this is what we plan to do*. Earlier the sale of a Church property was used as an example. Message formulation around the sale of the Church property could look something like this: "The Archdiocese can no longer afford the expensive property of the chancellery. It needs to practice greater fiscal responsibility

and spirit of poverty. Therefore it is selling the property and relocating the chancellery to a more affordable neighborhood.”

Whatever is said needs to be relevant to the audience, not just to the speaker or the organization being represented. The idea is to communicate in simple statements what needs to be communicated, and to do this in a consistent way. Messages, once established for a particular campaign or response, should be repeated again and again. Moreover, responses to difficult questions should always in some way echo the key messages. This creates consistency of message, and enables the Church or organization to take greater control over what it is saying, and what others are saying about it.

Should a public appearance be part of a TV or radio segment, messages should be formulated into sound bites, i.e. 8 to 15 second encapsulations of messages. Electronic media, often tight on time, edits their segments using sound bites. Thus it behooves communicators to know how to prepare, practice and speak well using sound bites. Do not respond to negative questions with a negative answer (i.e., a negative sound bite).

Audience Preparation

When possible, speakers should try to elicit a relationship with the audience before speaking. This is not always possible, but the opportunity should be seized when it is. The more a speaker can know the audience intimately, the more likely s/he will connect to them. For example, try to show up early before a speaking engagement or interview to get a feel for the audience through personal interaction.

Sometimes several audiences are present. Moreover, a group of parishioners can be quite different from a TV audience of 2.1 million. The speaker needs to decide, then, to whom the appearance should best be focused. It is possible to address multiple audiences during a public appearance. This is evident in the public appearances of political candidates. The golden rule is always, when ever possible, to *seek first to understand and then to be understood*.

Rather than worry about multiple audiences, the most important thing is to try to understand and appreciate who they are, what concerns them, how they perceive Church organizations, etc. Along with the public being addressed, if a member of the media is a part of the public appearance, s/he constitutes a distinct audience too. It is important to recall that members of the media increasingly want controversy, and thus may try to elicit responses that detract for the speaker’s pre-established goals, agenda and messages.

Thus, it is important to try to be cordial and respectful with the media person, and at the same time to stick to the pre-established goals, agenda and messages. Otherwise, the appearance may become watered down to meet rating goals of the media person and not the goals for the Church-related organization. When answering questions, you always want to respond in a positive way, not repeating anything negative in the wording of the questions, and you want to somehow transition your response back to your message. This takes practice.

Personal Preparation

Appearance

In general, elegance and appearing well groomed should be the goal. People tend to develop an impression of a person within the first ten seconds of meeting that individual. Projection for stage and screen are two different skills, and we naturally fall more to one than the other. If appearing on television, keep in mind that the camera exaggerates everything, every roll of the eye, every movement of the hand, so watch yourself and stay contained in the sense that your image is being projected via a television frame. Try to project emotional and physical enthusiasm and personality, without being too exuberant or unnatural. Do not force or fake external facial expressions or emotional reactions. Be natural and try to smile whenever possible, unless the matter being discussed would be rendered ridiculous by a smiling face. Keep your eyes on the interviewer or other persons present when they are speaking. Try not to look up or around the space unless there is a reason to do so. Remember, the camera acts like another interviewer and tends to be constant and unforgiving. When possible, practice using a camera at home or at work before going on a real TV interview. Watch yourself – perhaps with someone else – and see how you do, assess your facial expressions throughout, your posture, your attentiveness. Viewers can get distracted, but you never want to count on that. You need to be at your best game when you go on a TV interview or appearance.

Disposition

During public appearances, and especially on television, it is important to try to appear at ease, self-possessed, quick-witted, articulate, open, interested and entertaining. It's also important on a television talk show or within a news segment to get to the point quickly, all the while appearing unrushed and even relaxed. If the setting involves several different parties exchanging ideas, make an effort to listen attentively to the others, and show that you are listening. At the same time, it is important to jump in and show some aggression without being rude. Seasoned interviewees are accustomed to getting their messages and comments in early and often. This brisk kind of exchange should not put you off, but rather you need to get into the game and be a part of the discussion.

Focus and attentiveness to the audience (or interviewer) and others involved are important. It is also important to be as energized and engaged as possible. Body language is constantly at work, so gesturing is fine, but should be appropriate and balanced. Care for posture should be taken when standing or sitting. If seated during a TV segment, it is good to and sit forward a bit, as opposed to sitting back.

When on television or even before an audience, how you say things is often going to be more important than what you actually say. Think of interviews you have watched. It is all about the delivery. And television is visual; television is about impressions, especially visual impressions. People some times lose elections because of their public persona.

Affability. It is good to try be a protagonist, a positive force. Keep in mind that saying: *if you want to be loved, be lovable*. Avoid being negative. Try to love the

subject matter being conveyed. This engages audiences. Viewers and audiences are more interested when the speaker is passionate and interested and, therefore, often more interesting. Audiences take their cues from the speaker's gestures, eye contact and overall demeanor and will be drawn down if the speaker is somber. They will be drawn upward when gestures, eye contact and overall demeanor are positive.

In interview segments, always avoid becoming defensive. Tone of voice and modulation of volume when speaking play a part in this as well. Speakers need to be careful of the pace, volume and pitch of their voice. They need to fight against a tendency to rush or get louder when nervous. Moreover, short silent pauses interspersed in a presentation can signal control and inner peace to the audience, which often leads the audience to have more confidence in the speaker. In general, speakers need to come across as good humored, informed, and even at times able to laugh at themselves.

Addendum – Helpful Tips

“Ten Most Common Problems in Communication Are:

1. Initial rapport is not established with listeners.
2. Body movements are stiff or wooden.
3. Material is presented intellectually, not involving the audience emotionally.
4. Speaker seems uncomfortable due to fear of failure.
5. Eye contact and facial expression are poorly utilized.
6. Humor is lacking.
7. Speaker's intentions are not made clear due to improper preparation.
8. Silence is not used for impact.
9. Energy is low, resulting in inappropriate pitch pattern, speech rate, and volume.
10. Language and material are boring.”¹

Useful Media Training Materials

- List of key messages (These should be reviewed and updated periodically)
- List of difficult questions and answers (These should be reviewed and updated periodically)
- Copy of You Are the Message (This is a must read for anyone wanting to be an effective public communicator.)
- When possible, video camera for practice
- List of tips of what to wear, etc. especially on camera
- Watch/Clock with a second hand to time people's responses: need 15 second sound bite responses.

¹ Ailes, Roger (with Jon Kraushar). *You Are The Message. Getting What You Want By Being Who You Are*. Currency Doubleday (paperback), New York, 1988. (User's Guide, Chapter 1).