

Strengthen your speeches with props and sound effects.

By Dean Sheetz, ACS, CL

As Toastmasters we spend a lot of time demonstrating, discussing and practicing public speaking. We analyze content, method of delivery and use of voice, as well as gestures and body language. Yet our speeches can become even better if we add depth to them with props and sound effects.

Props: Anchoring the Audience's Attention to the Speaker

A prop is any item that the speaker interacts with physically. Toast masters are encouraged to use visual aids in their speeches, but only a few advanced projects have the use of props as a focus. Props are distinct from visual aids in that their role is more than simply visual: Props are thrown, dropped, picked up, put down, talked to, fondled, broken, swung, flung and more. This active quality adds spice to your speeches.

For one of my own advanced projects, I stood in front of a crowded meeting of my club – the Dubai Men's College Toastmasters in Dubai, United Arab Emirates – to tell the legend of John Henry. John Henry was a big man, and as the great singer Johnny Cash once told the tale, "From his heels all the way round to the ground he had a stroke of nineteen feet." In the modern world, less and less of us have experience with driving fence posts, splitting rocks and hammering spikes, so talking about John Henry's mighty swing will not convey much real meaning to your audience. To give that deeper understanding of John Henry's swing, I pulled out a sledgehammer and swung it through that arc from the back of my own heels, up over my head, and all the way around to the ground in front of my toes.

With this simple use of a prop, I helped the audience visualize that big, muscular hero driving a spike with a single blow.

It just takes a little advance planning to bring a speech to life. Add a few more-than-just-visual items, and you'll discover amazing results. In some cases props may make a difficult point easier to express. *The daily portion of food for a refugee, the uniform worn by George Washington's troops at Valley Forge, a bear trap or a bag of coins* – all can have their place in your speeches, given the right context. "When you are struggling to find the right words, sometimes a prop can speak for you," says Srinivas Achar, a former Toastmaster who recently moved from Abu Dhabi to Dubai.

When you use props, the audience feels like it can see and touch what you are talking about. But if you feel that there is still something missing, there's another avenue to explore. To add even more depth to a talk, you can use sound.

Sound Effects: Adding Depth to Visual Images

"We shall see about that," said Vulic. Again he cocked the weapon and aimed at a forage cap hanging over the window; a shot rang out..."
– from the story "The Fatalist" by Mikhail Lermontov

For my first project in the Interpretive *Reading* manual, I read a selection from this Lermontov story. In my initial practice session, I quickly realized that saying "a shot rang out" is not nearly as dramatic as hearing the sound of a real gunshot. Sound triggers physical responses in the body that can't be activated in any other way. Imagine if the "shot" in my speech could be punctuated by a real shot.

Of course, I didn't bring a gun to a Toastmasters meeting, but with a little planning I was able to surprise the audience with the sound of a shot and got much the same reaction.

Props are seen by the audience, so it can be difficult to find an object that fulfills your purpose; sounds, on the other hand, are usually easier to simulate because they are only heard. Popping a balloon, for example, can simulate explosions, gunshots, squeaky shoes and flatulence. A metal spoon clanking against a tea mug can simulate the sound of a hammer hitting a rail spike. Riffing a deck of cards can simulate tearing clothing or, well, the sound of a deck of cards being shuffled.

A large number of sounds can be replicated by common, everyday objects found around the home or office. Of course, the ever-adaptable human voice can also be used to imitate an incredible range of sounds.

The only limits to the use of props and sound effects in public speaking are the limits of your imagination. If your imagination needs a jump-start, however, you should focus on applying four fundamental principles:

1. Support Your Words. The use of props and sound effects can engage your audience more in your presentation. But it can also easily distract them and send their minds wandering. Thus, the **number one rule** is: Whatever you do must directly support your words. The impact should be carefully calculated. Props and sound effects are not used to set a general mood: You can introduce items into your stage "set" for that. For example, if you're giving a presentation about gambling, you can place a deck of cards and some poker chips within view of the audience to set the tone. However, if you're going to show people how to play poker, the cards are props and every interaction must be directly related to your presentation.

2. Timing. It may not be everything, but I learned of its importance the hard way while presenting the following quote in a speech:

"I picked up an ace of hearts from the table and threw it up; we watched with bated breath, our eyes wide with fear and an undefinable curiosity, shifting back and forth between the pistol and the fateful ace which was now fluttering downwards." – "The Fatalist" by Mikhail Lermontov

In the 19th century, playing cards may have "fluttered," but modern-day playing cards drop to the floor like rocks. Fluttering is the last thing you can get them to do. I found that out when I used playing cards as a prop in my presentation of the Lermontov story. The above excerpt took 16 seconds for me to read to the audience – while the cards took one second to reach the floor. This is an example of how poor timing negated the effect of a prop.

Props require proper planning and rehearsal to achieve exact timing. A prop should be immediately at hand when needed. Plan and practice your movement about the stage so that the prop you need will be ready at the precise moment. Timing for sound effects is even more critical. Saying, "A shot rang out," and then pausing to run behind the podium to pop a balloon will not work. There must be just enough time between what you are saying and the sound that accompanies it for the audience to build up an expectation – less than half a second. In the case of repetitive sounds, you must plan the timing for both the introduction and the cessation of the sound.

3. Moderation. Choose your props and sound effects well. In a good speech, the audience's focus must stay on the topic and not shift to the mechanics of the presentation. Too many supporting elements will be distracting. Don't become like the one-man band where the music becomes secondary to the sheer spectacle of one person doing so many things at once. Like a good coach, you must assemble only a top lineup of props and sound effects that add the most value to your speech. Leave the second stringers at home.

4. Assess the mess! This rule is very closely related to the principle of moderation. When you choose your props, think about how you will use them and, even more importantly, think about what mess, damage or injuries may result. If you throw one deck of playing cards into the air, you will have 52 things to pick up. If you set fire to a love letter, you'll want to put the fire out without involving the fire department. You must realistically evaluate your physical condition (and double-check your health insurance policy) before you start swinging that 20-pound sledgehammer around. If your speech involves a frenzied exchange of cream pies with your audience, cover yourself (and everything else in the room) with plastic first.

Preparation: The Key to It All

When planning the use of props and sound effects, always think about the mechanics of what you will do. When should such performance tools be introduced? How? For what purpose? When will they stop being the focus of attention? How will you make sure the audience's attention leaves your props and comes back to you when you need it to? These questions all must be answered in order to ensure that such elements add value to your speech.

Remember the four fundamental principles for using props and sound effects, and you should be well on your way to making a big impression with your next speech.

And always keep a few balloons in your pocket...just in case!

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