

Six S's to a Successful Start

By Marsha Freedman, M.S.

Imagine being at the track and you've just bet one hundred dollars on the favorite. The gates open and all the horses take off running, except one -- yours! Think about how you feel during those first few seconds. Wouldn't you be disappointed? Wouldn't your expectations about the race drastically change?

A horse in a race getting off to a weak start is a metaphor for what happens in some presentations. The speaker may begin by fumbling with notes, adjusting clothing, looking around nervously or even worse, greeting the audience while looking down.

The all-important first impression takes place within the first three seconds, so an awkward opening leads to the assumption that the speaker is unprepared and unprofessional. In order to assure that you're in the best possible position to make a favorable first impression upon your audience, follow the "**Six S's to a Successful Start.**"

First S: Set up your notes silently.

Resist the temptation to talk; it's time to get yourself organized, so you're not fumbling for anything during actual presentation. If you're using index cards, make sure they're numbered.

Second S: Step back from the lectern or table.

Move about a foot back. This makes you appear more confident and gives you room to use your hands in gestures. Leaning on a lectern or tapping it nervously will not win anyone over.

Third S: Scan the room and smile.

You're sending a powerful, nonverbal message that what you have to say is important; you won't start until everyone is listening. If you're following another speaker, audience members may be chatting with one another or moving about, so scanning the audience and smiling will signal them to settle down. The brief time that it takes to do this affords you the opportunity to get acclimated to being in front of the group.

Fourth S: Seek two friendly faces.

Even in a hostile environment, there are always a few nice folks sending you positive energy. They're the ones smiling and leaning forward with the glint in their eyes. Once you begin speaking, make eye contact with each one for 10-15 seconds. Typically, the first 30 seconds are the toughest to get through, especially if you're nervous. So by the time you've completed making eye contact with your two friendly faces, you've made it through the 30-second mark.

Fifth S: Say something positive to yourself.

Say something such as "I'm going to do a great job!" or "This audience will be much better off after they've heard what I have to say!" Never think, "I can't wait to get this over with!" or "I'm dreading this." As Dwight Eisenhower once said, "No pessimist ever won a battle."

Sixth S: Start speaking with enthusiasm.

You should grab the audience's attention right away with your strong vocal projection and level of expressiveness. Pull them in like magnets; make them want to hear more! An effective way to begin a presentation is to use one of the following: quotation, question (one word response), startling statistic, story, date in history or

something creative.

Let's review the Six S's:

1. Set up your notes silently.
2. Step back from the lectern or table.
3. Scan the room and smile.
4. Seek two friendly faces.
5. Say something positive to yourself.
6. Start speaking with enthusiasm.

Remember, if you get off to a strong start right out of the "gate," there's a greater chance that the audience will listen to you throughout your presentation. This is important in any presentation, but especially so if you're seeking agreement on a proposal or asking for a sale. Successfully start with the six S's and you're a winner every time!

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