



Speak Like A President Speak Like A President

by Ty and Pat Boyd

Presidential candidates get plenty of pricey advice about their speaking skills. But they don't necessarily follow it well.

As speaking coaches for executives in 30 countries, we've identified the high and low points in the Democratic candidates as speakers. See how you can incorporate their pluses into your own presentation styles, and learn from their lapses.

John Kerry - His face reminds us of Abraham Lincoln - long jaw, sad eyes. It's hard to inspire a crowd with that look in the age of television. Even at funerals, you can have a smile of compassion. We need the relief.

As Kerry campaigns, someone is counseling him to appear less glum and smile. We think that's building his appeal. He's adding more positive energy and fire to his speeches, but he still needs to remember to smile often.

At our Excellence in Speaking Institute, we teach that a good smile is like a million-dollar bank account. Only you can spend it. And it's worth nothing if you hide it from your audience.

When you give a presentation, you are the entertainment. Viewers watch the picture you make. Your expressions and gestures make the picture worth watching. People have short attention spans. Keep us engaged.

Howard Dean - Dean may never live down his primal scream. He crossed the line between passion and hysteria. In presentations, don't be afraid to show your passion for your subject. But don't lose control, either.

John Edwards - All those years as a trial lawyer taught Edwards how to sway the jury. His speeches blend facts and feelings. He's skilled at using a theatrical flair to convey his message. And his theme of two Americas - one for the rich, one for the rest of us - is effective because it answers his audience's primary question: "What's in it for me?"

Tell your audience what's in it for them. What knowledge do you have that they need?

Gen. Wesley Clark - Clark is a puzzle. His clipped, acerbic manner sounds like a general, not a politician. When he compares his four-star rank to Kerry, who was only a lieutenant in the Vietnam War, he comes off as petty and mean-spirited.

But, interestingly, Clark is one of the few candidates we've seen cry on camera. That raises the question: Is it ever okay for a speaker to cry? We feel you should never force tears. But if a tear comes naturally, don't pretend it didn't happen. Acknowledge your sentiments to the crowd.

In the 2000 election campaign, Bob Dole teared up as he introduced John McCain. The man who had been wounded in action cried for another who'd been a prisoner of war. Those few tears were the mark of a vulnerable and sincere communicator.

Joe Lieberman - Why did Lieberman never catch fire with voters? He's obviously bright, taking complicated issues and breaking them down so listeners understand his stances. He's warm, authentic, and likeable. What was missing was an assertive edge. His audience might not have believed he has the toughness to be president. Also, as a smaller man, he could have used the space around him better to communicate his strength. Forceful gestures add power.

Dennis Kucinich - Kucinich doesn't have charisma on the podium. Charisma can be learned. But it means using all the presentation tools you've got – from highs and lows in your voice to really listening and responding to questions and cheers. Remember how Bill Clinton could make listeners feel he was speaking only to them? That's charisma. With enough practice, you can get it.

Al Sharpton - Sharpton knows how to rouse listeners. He recognizes that facts simply tell, while passion sells. However, he sometimes seems to be performing by rote. He needs to make his message sound and appear fresh and new every time. That's important for any speaker who has to give a presentation more than once.

How do they all compare to the man who currently holds the job? George W. Bush found his voice as a communicator after September 11th. It gave him the focus of patriotism, of being gutsy and getting tough with the enemy. He speaks less of "I this" and "I that" and more of "we" in memorable anecdotes. His smile is genuine more often. And when he speaks, he appears to enjoy his job enough to fight for it.