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WASHINGTON 2/15/2013 @ 11:52AM | 1,135 views

'Own The Awkward' And Three Other Presentation Lessons from Senator Marco Rubio's State Of The Union Response

It's that time again to see what, if anything, we can learn from those who have to influence legions of people who do not report to them, do not know them personally, and could not care less about public policy. . . . namely, our elected



US Senator Marco Rubio, R-FL (Image credit: AFP/Getty Images via @daylife)

officials. This time we have [President Barack Obama](#) and his [State of the Union \(SOTU\) speech](#).

1. Own the Awkward – I knew it was coming. As Senator Rubio's rebuttal speech went on, I sensed from his rate of speech and enunciation that he was going to need water to utter another word. I envisioned him grabbing his throat and pleading for water, in fact.

Rubio's [water grab](#) was an awkward moment for him and his viewers. But he wisely owned it, and probably won some friends in the process. His

team tweeted [this photo](#) as a part of his “response” to the State of the Union address. It shows a sense of humor and just makes you more human.

As to how he got himself into that predicament, we do know from the communications literature that we tend to speak faster when we are excited to share our message, as well as when we are nervous. So I attribute this to his genuine enthusiasm for his message and also that he had to be just a little nervous. If he wasn’t nervous, I would be worried. After all, this was not a speech to the Tampa Rotary club. If you are not nervous on that kind of stage, it makes me think you just don’t care about what you are saying.

The Bottom Line #1: If you have an awkward moment, (tripping over cords, spilling water, your phone ringing during your talk, etc.) own it, just like the Senator did. It’s hard not to like someone who can laugh at him or herself.

The Bottom Line #2: There is nothing awkward or wrong about getting a drink of water, but, believe it or not, it’s how you do it that matters. Have it near to you, so that you don’t have to lunge or take a hike to reach it. I also think a glass of water is better for a quick sip than a water bottle. It’s faster (yes, I’ve timed myself), there’s less chance of missing your mouth, and more natural. More elegant, even.

2. Control the Setting – This is one of the most intractable parts of the rebuttal speech that impacts the perception of the message and messenger. There’s just not much to pick from — compared to the House floor, any setting other than the Senate floor or Oval Office will be viewed with less authority. And Rubio wasn’t getting access to either of those.

It’s like being asked to present a strategy presentation from a cubicle when your CEO just did it from the boardroom. However, I do think his setting, Speaker Boehner’s conference room, was one of the best in years. The [background](#) showed the Capitol’s 19th Century neoclassical architecture, complete with one marble column visible on the right of the screen. Better than a library setting with potted plants.

The Bottom Line: When you make a presentation, do you control the setting? It's your show, and you should arrive early so you can arrange the room in a way that makes you comfortable. Don't use the podium because it's there – move it. Don't sit at a panel if you speak better standing up—get up and stand at the end of the panelist table to deliver your remarks. If you move around the room when you give a presentation, and it is set so that there is no strolling room, change the seating. It's not about the meeting organizer's comfort, and the audience could not care less. I've been doing this for a while and have yet to hear an audience member (or client) demand a “do over” because I rearranged the setting.

3. Inoculate Your Audience – Senator Rubio stated that Obama's “Favorite attack of all is that those who don't agree with him – they only care about rich people.” Rubio is letting the listener know the tactics that will be used to counter the Republican position, thus inoculating the listener.

He went on to say, “So Mr. President, I don't oppose your plans because I want to protect the rich. I oppose your plans because I want to protect my neighbors.”

The Bottom Line: Alert your audience to what those who disagree with you not only think, but what they will say about the issue. How will they try to discredit your views? What tactics will they use to do that?

4. Respect Your Opponent – Senator Rubio began his remarks by congratulating the President on his re-election. In his conclusion, his “God bless our President” sentiment was a gracious and unexpected touch. It's hard to dislike someone who expresses good wishes to someone with whom he disagrees.

The Bottom Line: No matter how vociferous the disagreement, is there anything nice you can say about your opponent or their logic, position, style? If so, hold your nose and do it. It never hurts to be nice.

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