

Follow the “Law and Order” Formula for your Next Presentation

By Joey Asher
joeyasher@speechworks.net

To keep audiences tuned in to your speeches, begin with a corpse.

That’s what television’s “Law and Order” does. Good speakers use a similar dramatic formula.

“Law and Order” fans know that the show always opens with a similar scene. Maybe some kids are playing basketball. Chasing a ball, one kid looks behind a dumpster and – oh my goodness – there’s a dead socialite. Viewers stay tuned to learn the answers to the questions raised by the murder.

Similarly, great presenters grab their audience’s interest by opening with a “metaphorical corpse.” They lay out a BIG PROBLEM. And like “Law and Order,” the audience stays tuned, waiting for answers to questions raised by that problem.

Start with a BIG PROBLEM

Let’s say that you’re speaking to 50 human resource executives about age-discrimination. Of course, you can’t begin with an actual corpse. But just as effective is a BIG PROBLEM. Begin by briefly describing a serious issue facing your listeners. Maybe it’s class action age-discrimination lawsuits.

You might lay out the BIG PROBLEM this way.

“Imagine this. You wake up in the morning and walk to the curb to pick up your Wall Street Journal. To your horror, on page A7 there’s a headline that your company is targeted in a class-action lawsuit alleging age-discrimination.”

The BIG PROBLEM approach grabs the audience by focusing on something important to them. The challenge is in knowing your audience well enough to frame a problem that they care about. This is easy if you know your audience well, do some research, or speak to attendees in advance.

Present Answers to Questions Raised by the Big Problem

The corpse at the beginning of “Law and Order” raises basic questions that drive the plot. Who did it? Why? Will he go to jail?

Similarly, once you’ve laid out your BIG PROBLEM, you set up your own “plot” by laying out basic questions. Keep your speech simple and audience-centered by focusing on the three questions your listeners would most likely ask.

For the age-discrimination presentation above, you might follow the description of the BIG PROBLEM by saying:

I'm going to talk about how to stop that ugly headline in the Wall Street Journal. And I'm going to answer three key questions.

"How do you know if you have a problem?"

"What can you do about it?"

"How can you prevent a problem from occurring in the first place?"

By raising the three questions, you've now teased your listeners' interest, making them want to stick around as you answer the questions. You've outlined the "plot" for your presentation.

Once again, the key is making sure that you lay out the right questions. If you're focusing on questions your audience cares about, they'll hang on every word.

Drive Through the Presentation by Answering the Key Questions.

Once you've set up your presentation's plot by laying out the BIG PROBLEM and the questions you plan to resolve, the rest is easy. Fill out your speech by simply answering the questions.

Make the answers compelling by telling stories. Give examples of companies addressing age-discrimination issues.

"Law and Order" adheres to a traditional dramatic formula. The show creates tension with a corpse, an opening situation that raises questions. Then it resolves the questions. You can use that same formula to keep your audiences tuned in.

Joey Asher is President of Speechworks, a selling and communication skills coaching company in Atlanta. He has worked with hundreds of lawyers and with dozens of firms helping them grow their business and connect with clients. He is the author of "Selling and Communication Skills for Lawyers" and "Even A Geek Can Speak." He can be reached at 404-266-0888 or joeyasher@speechworks.net. His website is www.speechworks.net.