

Using Props in Your Presentations

Want to add ‘zing’ to your presentation and, at the same time, make your message stick? That’s just what using props can do for you. Think of it this way. Which of the following choices is ‘more alive’ and generates more curiosity,

Standing in one spot in front of your audience and holding your notes in front of you and then saying what you have to say,

- OR -

Standing in the middle holding an unusual object between you and the audience and beginning to talk about the object and how it is related to your subject?

Why Use Props?

Using props in your speech can give your audience more. They add value to your spoken words by,

- Adding impact - Imagine which would be the best introduction to a speech a friend of mine recently gave. His title was “Leadership in a Hurricane of Change”. Instead of getting up in front of the audience, as he did, and starting to talk, what if he had carried an

umbrella with him and began by opening it up to reveal torn and shredded umbrella fabric; even better, what if it also hyper-extended simulating being blown backwards by a severe wind? What introduction has more impact? Then, near the end of his speech he could have ‘called-back’ and again shown the umbrella and explain how leadership can be torn and shredded if it does not keep up with the pace of change.

- Adding clarity - You reduce the number of words you have to use to explain a concept or event. Remember that old saying, ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’? Humans are picture-loving and pattern-matching animals. Props give you the chance to show a broad concept instead of having to explain it, often using the prop as a metaphor or simile of your message.
- Increasing your credibility - You become more believable through your audience seeing something that reinforces your words. Another old saying says it well, ‘Seeing is believing’. When we add ‘show’ to ‘tell’ our credibility rating soars. Instead of using notes, props can be the prompt you need to remember what you want to say to the audience.

Does this mean every speech needs props to make it more effective? The answer is, “No.” But often the carefully crafted use of a prop can make your speech more effective and, in so doing, make your message stick. Ask yourself: What could I show (or demonstrate) that would add value for my audience? Then, given your constraints such as presentation time and expense, judiciously add props that, well, prop up your message.

What Can You Use for a Prop?

Pretty much anything, but...

- Make sure your prop fits your topic. Don't do it just to entertain, you want to 'infotain'. Don't let your prop 'upstage' you or your message.
- Keep the prop in line with the taste and decorum you have decided is needed for your audience.
- Make sure your prop fits inside your time constraints.
- Make sure you can afford it!
- Choose a prop that fits the venue. For example, showing the favorite stamp from your collection in a huge hall is probably not going to play 'big enough.' Similarly, your prop is probably too big if, when using

it, you put the people in the front row at risk.

So, How Do You Use a Prop?

Here is a checklist,

- Usually, don't reveal your prop until it is time to use it. And integrate props throughout your speech instead to using them all at once, like at the beginning or end. Each time you pick up and display a prop you will signal your audience that it is time to sit up and pay attention.
- Talk about the prop only if it is necessary for the audience to understand what is going on. Remember, the point is to use the prop is to illustrate a point you are making not talk about the prop. Given enough information to set the prop up for success, use it to make your point, and then move on.
- Speak to the audience, not to the prop. Remember, your speech is for them, not for your prop.
- Have fun with your prop and let your audience see that you are having fun.
- Less is probably more. Choose the best single prop. Don't clutter the audience's minds with too many props on the same point or theme.

- Test before use. Rehearse so you can work out the timing and words you will use and, especially, to make sure you can manipulate the prop if it has moving parts.
- If you are planning to use electronic media for a prop, plan for failure. You want a back-up plan if the bulb burns out, you kick the projector stand over, etc. Know how you will proceed without the electronics.
- If you are using a range of props arrange them ahead of time (with labels if needed) so they are easily picked up, put down, and are not in your way when you are doing other things with the audience.
- Think again if you are tempted to use a live animal or pet. Can they handle the stress and will they behave the way you expect.
- If your prop requires other people to assist, make sure they know what to do and how to do it; including pre-speech rehearsals if needed.

How do You Script a Prop into Your Presentation?

Think of using a prop as a mini-performance inside your speech. As in any performance, you take the audience through a sequence of experiences so, when the performance is over, they have gone on a journey with you. Script writers call this ‘dramatic structure.’

Dramatic Structure	What You Do When Using a Prop
Introduction (the situation)	1. The Plot - the chain of events or thoughts you want to demonstrate <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Pose a question or make a statement that makes the audience say, to themselves, “Why did he/she say that?” Move to a place where everyone can see the prop and bring the prop into view for the audience.
Rising Action	2. The Reveal - introduce you prop to the audience as a bit of a surprise and let them see/experience it as well as ask themselves the question, “What is he/she doing with that contraption?” 3. The Story - Say something that connects your prop to the point you are going to make with it. The audience is not instinctively going to link your topic and the prop. Tell them how they are connected. Let your prop drive your words and you words drive your use of the prop—make it interactive.

Climax	4. The Demo - you can, a. Begin using the prop and then explain its meaning or b. Explain the meaning first that then demonstrate that meaning by using the prop.
Falling Action	5. The transition from prop to message.
Dénouement (the outcome)	6. The Analogy - Tell the audience your point now that they have seen the concept through your use of the prop; often using a phrase such as, "Our issue is like what we saw happen with [insert the prop's name]."