



Mohammed Murad, Toastmasters' 2014–2015 International President, emceed the 2013 World Championship of Public Speaking. A good emcee makes speakers feel comfortable and the audience feel included.

When You Are the Emcee

12 steps to achieving excellence onstage.

BY GILDA BONANNO, CTM

When you are the master of ceremonies (also known as an emcee) of an event, your role is crucial to the success of the program, whether it's for your company, a professional association or a nonprofit organization. A bad emcee can ruin an event while an excellent one creates a seamless and engaging experience in which speakers feel comfortable and the audience feels included from start to finish.

Your energy, confidence and sincerity should match the spirit of the event.

From my experience as both an emcee and a professional speaker, these 12 tactics can help you shine.

1 **Be clear about your role.**

An emcee can play many roles, ranging from reading a few speaker introductions to writing remarks for all speakers. Each occasion has its own unique requirements and challenges, so confirm your role with the meeting organizer and be clear about your responsibilities and the organizer's expectations.

2 **Prepare speakers thoroughly.**

If your job is to prepare speakers, find out everything you can about the event well in advance—several months before, if possible, and again several weeks before, if necessary. Tell the speakers the theme, the audience size and background, and the expectations about the content and time limits of their remarks. It's also important for speakers to know the logistics, including the stage setup, microphone options and dress code. Keep speakers informed of any changes that may occur. If possible, request a copy of the speakers' remarks or outlines a few days before the event. Reference their remarks in your own comments and review the amount of time each one plans to speak.

3 **Opening remarks set the tone.**

The emcee is usually the first person who speaks at an event. Your energy, confidence and sincerity should match the spirit of the event. It should set the tone for the occasion. This is not the time for "ums" and "ahs," ad-libbing jokes or discovering problems with the sound system. Print your remarks or outline in a font size you can easily read, and make sure your words are relevant to the theme and the host company or organization.

4 **Don't "wing" introductions.**

An introduction should be short, relevant and prepared in advance rather than made up on the spot. Sometimes speakers send their own introductions; other times you create the introductions using material from the person's bio. Each one should only be a few sentences long. Write out an introduction for each speaker and read each one in a confident and engaging manner. Don't try to ad-lib or make an off-the-cuff joke during an introduction—it can prove disastrous. For more on this topic, see my blog post "Please Do Read the Speaker's Introduction Word for Word" at gildabonanno.blogspot.com.

5 **Names matter.**

Names are important to people. Just ask John Travolta, who flubbed Idina Menzel's name at the 2014 Academy Awards ceremony (he called her "Adele Dazeem") and was still being lampooned for it at the 2015 Oscars. Well in advance of the event, find out each speaker's name—including whether they use a middle initial or a hyphenated surname—and learn the correct pronunciation. Write it out phonetically and practice it out loud so you can say it with ease and demonstrate your respect for the person.

6 **Titles matter.**

It's important to use the appropriate titles for dignitaries and elected officials, and to follow protocol for the order in which such people should be introduced. Unless you're an expert in these matters, find someone who is. Search your network for a protocol expert or business writing professional who is familiar with proper salutations and titles.

7 **Staying on time matters.**

I once emceed a breakfast for the Women's Business Development Council. Nine speakers, three panelists, one moderator and I participated within a 90-minute time frame for an audience of 700 people. The program was to be followed by a networking event, so people needed to leave the breakfast on time to get to the networking program on time and get back to work on time. That kind of timing precision does not happen without planning and organization.

Prepare, practice and time each section you are responsible for. And while you cannot control how long other people speak (unless you are writing their remarks), you can emphasize in your early speaker preparation the importance of staying within the time limit. Build in extra time and know ahead of time what material you can cut or condense if you start late or something goes over time.

I kept my minute-by-minute schedule on the lectern and made sure I could see my watch easily to compare the actual time to the planned time. We started less than five minutes late and ended on time without feeling rushed.

8 **Do an on-site rehearsal.**

An on-site rehearsal before the event is crucial to the smooth running of the live event. The night before one of the events I emceed, I went to the hotel conference center and

practiced my remarks onstage. I did a sound and light check and found that the lights were so bright that I could not read my remarks. I asked the lighting technicians to dim them enough so I could see clearly, yet not so much that the stage was dark. Had I not rehearsed on-site, I would have been blinded by the lights during my opening remarks in front of a live audience.

9 **Don't introduce strangers.**

It's helpful to meet the people you are introducing before the day of the event. If that's not possible, seek them out on the day of the event, prior to showtime, and introduce yourself. Putting a face to a name will help both of you feel more comfortable, and you will sound more sincere in your introduction. You can also confirm name pronunciations one final time and determine where the people are sitting so you know where to look for them.

10 **Manage the stage.**

Many years ago at Toastmasters, I learned a crucial lesson: "Never leave the stage empty." If you introduce someone, wait for them to get onstage before you step to the side. (If the stage is small, or the person you're introducing is going to be making lengthy remarks, step offstage once the person gets onstage.) If appropriate to the event, start clapping when you introduce the person and don't stop until you shake hands with them or greet them onstage.

11 **Be prepared for the unexpected.**

As an emcee, you have to stay in control, even if the unexpected happens. Prepare for how you will respond if the fire alarm sounds, or a speaker forgets her notes or a technology glitch occurs. I once saw a CEO get completely flustered onstage when a video he introduced didn't play. He fumed and fussed, but he didn't know what to do or who to ask for help.

12 **Make sure to follow up.**

After the event, ask for feedback from the meeting organizer, other speakers and audience members, and review the video, if there is one. Ask what worked well and what could work better next time. I usually ask a colleague in the audience to time each segment so I can compare the actual timing against the original plan. Ask for the colleague's timing notes.

The information you gather can help you prepare for the next event you emcee. Be sure to follow up and thank all the speakers and everyone who helped make the event a success.

The next time you emcee an event, keep these 12 tactics in mind. With a little work and some careful preparation, you can create a positive experience for the company or organization, the speakers and the audience members. ■

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