

## **Persuasive Communicators Resemble Trial Lawyers**

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Successful speaker and sales trainer, Terri Sjodin, describes how, as a young woman fresh out of college, she was floundering in a commission sales job. On a particularly low day, Sjodin went to visit her college debate teacher. The teacher convinced Sjodin to listen to an audiotape of her own sales presentation—with the ears of a debater.

The listening revolutionized Sjodin's career. Sjodin realized she had been focusing on informing and educating her prospects when she should have been focusing on persuading them.

Sjodin revised her presentation to reflect the principles of debate—the same ones used by trial lawyers. She began to experience success as a salesperson and as a presenter. By age 34, Sjodin became one of the youngest women ever to earn the designation of CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) by the National Speakers Association. Later, Sjodin's book, *New Sales Speak*, was published by John Wiley.

*Sjodin's perspective involves thinking of all business presentations as persuasive. It means bringing the perspective of a debater or a trial lawyer to work with you. As I think of Sjodin's point of view, the following recommendations emerge:*

1. **Prepare for high stakes.** By nature, a trial involves high stakes. Trial lawyers do not walk casually into a courtroom and “wing it.” They don't allow other projects to dilute their focus. And trial lawyers don't cut and paste presentations from previous trails.

Trial lawyers thoroughly investigate the facts that apply to the case at hand. They carefully think through the tactics the opposing counsel (competitor) might take. A trial lawyer plans and plans and plans. After the planning comes rehearsing.

2. **Use a straightforward structure.** From the first moments of a trial, the lawyer boldly recommends an outcome to the jury. The first words of the trial are known as opening arguments—they go straight to the point. “The defense will demonstrate why you should find my client not guilty.” Opening arguments involve a strong recommendation and an overview of how the evidence will support that recommendation.

Opening arguments are followed by evidence, each piece carefully selected to support the recommendation. Evidence is followed by closing arguments—a summary of how the evidence all points to the lawyer's recommendation. The closing arguments are followed by a confident call to action.

3. **Keep the jury in focus.** A trial lawyer has the jury keenly in mind during every step of the presentation process. He or she knows the case is not about the history of the law firm, the morality of the defendant, or even the truth. The case is about the values

of jury members and their perception of the truth. A good trial lawyer always plays to the jury.

In the same way, good business presenters understand that a presentation isn't necessarily about the best firm or the best solution to a problem. A business presentation, to a large extent, is about the values and perceptions of decision makers. A successful business presenter plays to the decision maker.

4. **Avoid information for information's sake.** A trial lawyer builds a tight case, void of extraneous information. The evidence, even that which is educational by nature, is chosen for its persuasive value. Everything in the presentation is strategic.

Terri Sjodin reports that when she revised her sales presentation, she threw out a lot of information. Sjodin realized that she had front-loaded her presentation with features and benefits in a way that lacked urgency. To use Sjodin's words, she had been "lingering in the information zone." Here's a bit of advice from *New Sales Speak*:

*Debate would have us do one thing before we walk out the door with our list of features and benefits, or value-added service.... We would have to identify our 10 best arguments for why our clients should work with us, why they should work with our company, and why they should do it now. You would create your most persuasive argument at the beginning and put features and benefits at the end. This is how you develop a case that is balanced.*

5. **Engage in a bit of theater.** A good trial lawyer is aware that he or she must make an emotional as well as a logical connection with the jury. The winning lawyer delivers passion and conviction. The presentation is scripted and rehearsed for power and impact.

Business audiences aren't much different from juries. Decision makers have their own set of biases, values, and emotional hot spots. Successful presenters blend the objective with the emotional in subtle and convincing ways. Many successful presenters script and memorize their opening and closing remarks. They end with a confident call to action.

When Terri Sjodin began to think of all business presentations as persuasive, her results changed dramatically. Take Sjodin's perspective—that of a trial lawyer—to work with you. It may revolutionize your career.

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