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## Talking Up Your Trade

Speaking in public is an effective promotional opportunity. You know the feeling. Your mouth dries up, your breathing quickens, and your voice is shaky. You're speaking before an audience and you're nervous. Worse yet, it shows. But speaking at meetings is among the most effective ways to promote your company, meet new customers and sell your products.

"When I give a speech to a business group, I sell lots of books and people register to attend my seminars," says Cherie Kerr, a public-speaking trainer and author. "Any small-business owners, no matter their field, can do the same."

I, too, have sold many of my books when speaking at meetings, such as chambers of commerce, small-business gatherings and Rotary groups.




## Helping sales

Of course, not only authors and would-be booksellers speak at meetings; I have heard small business owners talk on anything from carpet cleaning to pet care to stock picking - and boost their sales as a result.

After all, instead of telling just one person, you are able to impress scores and perhaps even hundreds at once with your knowledge of a subject. When they think about choosing or recommending someone in your field, they're likely to think of you.

So, as tough as it might at first appear, you owe it to yourself - and to your business - to try your hand at public speaking.

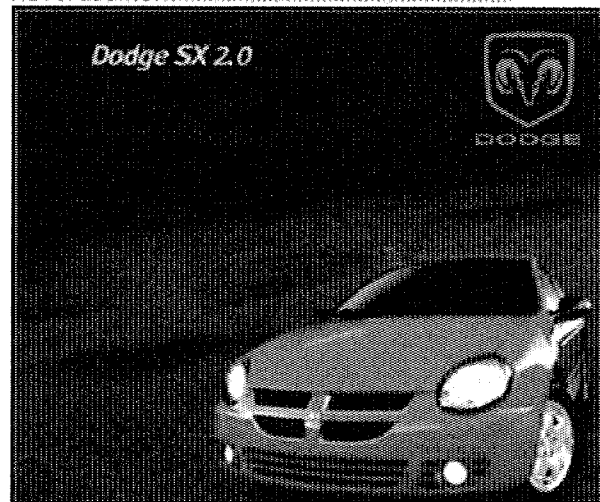
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If you are nervous about speaking in public, you're not alone. Surveys say it's what people fear most of all, even more than death. When I first spoke in public on how to start and run a small business (the subject of my book), I thought I would never make it to the 60-second mark, let alone the end of the 20-minute talk. But I followed the advice of experts to keep talking and soon I would be relaxed. They were right.

**Rule 1: relax**

Kerr suggests you pretend you are speaking to friends at home in your kitchen. Relax and be yourself. It's good to remember, too, that unless you are delivering a partisan political speech, everyone really wants you to succeed. Don't disappoint them.

The first step you should take to launch your public speaking career is to decide at which meetings you are going to speak. Generally, the best places will be those that relate to your business. If you are, say, the owner of a plumbing business, you might want to seek out contractor organizations or even gatherings of real-estate agents or interior designers, suggests Kerr, who owns ExecuProv, which offers classes on speaking and one-on-one communications.

To get your feet wet, you might want to start by delivering a brief 30-second or one-minute "elevator pitch" (so-called because it takes about the same time as an elevator traveling between ride). Opportunities to give such brief talks often arise during meetings. Your preparation for such a talk should be almost as extensive as for a longer speech. Make sure what you say is concise, precise and meaningful. Describe what your company does and how its services will benefit your audience.

**Selecting a topic**

To take the next step, to being the main speaker at a meeting, decide on a subject relating to your business that you think will interest members of the group to which you are speaking. Often a discussion of new trends in your industry will intrigue your listeners. Try also to make the topic something that will be of practical use to your listeners.

Find out the person in the organization responsible for finding speakers, introduce yourself to that person and offer your services. You could telephone or you could write a letter. You'll be surprised at how eager they are to have you speak. Soon, you will be on your way to finding new customers and new avenues for sales resulting from your speaking engagements.

Other tips:

- Have your biography and introduction printed out. Hand them to the person who will introduce you. That way you can be sure the biography is accurate and that the introduction does not repeat what you want to say.
- Never read your speech word for word. Make notes that will prompt you. Be thoroughly prepared and comfortable with your material.
- Illustrate your presentation with creative use of newspaper clippings, quotes, cartoons and, if possible, a PowerPoint presentation.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Don't pretend to be knowledgeable on subjects on which you are weak.
- Avoid profanity. Even mild "swear words" may alienate some of your audience.

- If you have promotional products, even pens with your company name on them, put one at each attendee's place before you speak. Everyone likes a free gift, no matter how small, and it'll help the audience remember your company.

Every small business owner should seize the opportunity to speak at meetings, says Kerr. "If you are a young company, you have to get out there."

For more online tips, visit:

- [The Toastmasters;](#)
- [The Allyn & Bacon Public Speaking site;](#)
- [A Houghton Mifflin piece](#) on overcoming your fear of public speaking.

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