

Public speaking and presentations

Marissa Hake, DVM, MPH
Edon, OH 43518

Abstract

As a new graduate, we often think that honing our technical skills is our number one priority. While being a technically-skilled veterinarian is incredibly important, we also have to build relationships with our clients. Effective communication and presentation skills can help young practitioners build trust with producers and the public. Unfortunately, the fear of public speaking or “glossophobia” is believed to affect 75% of people, making it one of the most universal fears. Armed with an understanding of how fear impacts your body, presentation tips and tricks as well as stress-mitigation techniques, veterinarians can begin to face their fears of public speaking and share information in a more impactful way.

Key words: public speaking, communication, personal development

Fear of public speaking is called “glossophobia” and it’s estimated that almost 75% of people suffer from speaking anxiety.¹ According to the National Institute of Mental Health, public speaking is the greatest fear that people have, even greater than spiders and death itself. In speaking with more seasoned practitioners, it seems that younger graduates are more afraid of failure in all aspects of their professional careers and more risk-averse. I personally attribute this to learning to practice medicine in a world full of social media attacks and “cancel culture”. We’re afraid to talk publicly for the same reason we’re afraid to be a bad doctor.

What causes public speaking fear? The fear often arises when people overestimate the stakes of communicating their ideas in front of others or viewing the speaking event as a potential threat to their credibility and image. It feels like a loop ► we need to communicate to gain credibility ► but if we’re bad at communicating then we lose credibility. Public speaking is scary because our lizard brains perceive it as a threat. We’re all doctors who work with livestock and we understand the flight-or-fight response. Once we understand how our body responds to fear, we can do things to help mitigate the response.

During the flight-or-fight response, our autonomic nervous system goes into overdrive. The adrenal glands secrete adrenaline, blood flow to your brain decreases to the frontal lobe which is responsible for LOGICAL thinking and planning. Your amygdala takes over – i.e. lizard brain.

Your heart rate goes up, blood pressure and respiration increase, your muscles tense, pupils dilate to better perceive the threat, and you get sweaty. You’re officially ready to run from a lion, not give a presentation.²

Since you know that your brain will turn off power to the frontal lobe, one tip when starting out is to have notes that you can read from verbatim. While this doesn’t lead to the most engaging presentations, it will help you settle into a presentation until your brain turns back on.

Tips to decrease your flight-or-fight response include regular exercise, reframing your situation, breathing exercises and channeling your nervous energy.³

Breathing is key to great presentations. Presenters should practice box breathing – inhale for 4 seconds; hold for 4 seconds; exhale for 4 seconds; hold for 4 seconds.

Now that we’ve covered the physical aspect of presentation preparedness, we will touch on what makes a good visual presentation. Presentations should always begin with a mapping of the presentation and organization of topics. You should know the goal of the presentation and your target audience. I prepare very different presentations for vet students than I do for a group of dairy owners. Presentations should lead with what’s important to them, should get their attention and should be delivered in their “language”. The normal attention span of an average adult is 15-20 minutes. This is why Ted Talks are so impactful! They are short, energetic and to the point!

Presentations should incorporate graphics that help reinforce the information being delivered. Data charts should be simple and highlight the big take aways. Presenters shouldn’t be afraid of videos, transitions and animations when trying to build a story. When appropriate, presentations should be personalized with client data or benchmark information. You should call out areas where people are doing well and encourage positive reinforcement. They should end with a list of action items and take-aways in priority.

Last, to be a good presenter, you must show up as your authentic self. To get buy in, people need to feel your passion, your dedication and they need to know who you really are! Burnout in veterinary medicine is wide-spread and not working in an environment where you can be yourself is a contributing factor.

Day of tips: breathing exercises, test technology, if using notes make sure you can see them when in presenter mode, and have water. After your presentations, ask for feedback in order to improve and don’t be afraid to fail forward!

Conclusion

Good communication skills are as important as great technical skills for a food animal practitioner. Veterinarians who can communicate effectively are better doctors, better leaders and more likely to advance in their careers.

References

1. Merriam Webster, 1. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glossophobia#:~:text=Definition%20of%20glossophobia,Robert%20Malone.
2. Cherry, K. “How the Fight-or-Flight Response Works.” Verywell Mind, Aug. 2019. www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-fight-or-flight-response-2795194.
3. Sawchuk, C. Fear of public speaking: How can I overcome it?, Mayo Clinic, 17 May 2017. www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/specific-phobias/expert-answers/fear-of-public-speaking/fqa-20058416.

Conflict of interest statement

I have a financial interest, agreement or affiliation with fairlife, LLC.

