

# What Physician Speakers Want and Need

Science is not boring. Research is not boring. Yet despite these two obvious facts, there aren't that many doctors in our speaker's bureaus who are wowing their colleagues with their presentations. What's going on?

## Rewarded for being right

First, let's look at the reasons why doctors might struggle as speakers, and then figure out what we can do about it.

First of all, they sat in school longer than most of us. They were always rewarded for being right, precisely right and thoroughly right. Medical school did not reward them for having big hearts, or big personalities, for being expressive, kind, or interpersonally skilled. It rewarded them for being cool, calm and collected and for memorizing facts.

## Lacking liberal arts

Speaking in public is a liberal art, just as writing is. Our schools try to teach us to write well (we don't until college or later), but schools and colleges pay little attention to speaking, and medical schools--none.

As a result, doctors lack exposure to any kind of education in speaking.

## Humiliation in public

Not only are doctors trained to keep calm in the face of danger and uncertainty, everything they say is scrutinized by their peers. After all, when you're a doctor and you're wrong, patients can pay a hefty price.

So if you're standing in front of people who hope to catch you being wrong, you're likely to be pretty...darn...cautious...as a speaker. And of course, you keep an expressionless mask of calmness on tight at that moment, because the only thing worse than being humiliated in public is acting like you've been humiliated in public.

In fact, in our surveys of physician speakers, they've revealed what they want from speaker training is how to:

1. keep it clear and simple
2. keep it interactive
3. not be boring
4. be humorous

All of these concerns reflect anxiety about losing the interest of the audience, maybe because as listeners, they've suffered through many poorly delivered talks.

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## A culture of skepticism

One of my favorite quotes about speaking is from William Butler Yeats, arguably the greatest English-speaking poet of the 20th Century. He said, “I don’t think anyone convinces us by force of reasoning, but rather because he is visibly enjoying the beliefs he wants us to accept.”

Yet doctors are trained to be skeptics, not passionate partisans. Trying to inducing belief goes against the culture of science, yet good speakers must do just that—inspire enough confidence in other practitioners to equip them to use a new approach.

## Looking indifferent

Our poor doctors are asked to speak from our slides, about our products, in front of their skeptical peers. Not one of us enjoys speaking from another’s slides. The underlying logic of the talk is not our own. It makes us tentative, and we fail to “visibly enjoy our beliefs.”

## What to do?

Similar to their own mantra, “See one, do one, teach one!” physician speakers need to talk through the slides, get a feel for the logical flow, debate with each other, see someone deliver it, and, if possible, re-arrange the slides to suit their own style.

But more importantly, they need to be given guidance on how to make a data-rich talk appealing to any listener. As the great Roman statesman Cicero said, “Unless the delivery stands guard over the material, the material will evaporate, no matter how precious it was in itself.”

All of us mastering new content need some gentle nudging as we get up on our legs to speak it aloud, just as a colt needs its mother’s nose under its belly when it first tries to stand.

If we can do these two services for physician speakers, more will succeed. They really only get once chance to demonstrate their ability. Train them effectively and your promotional speaking will yield better results.

Please let us know if we can help.



### Sims Wyeth

**SIMS WYETH & CO.**

Business Communication Training and Consulting

**Tel:** 973-783-4205

**Email:** [swyeth@simswyeth.com](mailto:swyeth@simswyeth.com)

**Website:** [www.simswyeth.com](http://www.simswyeth.com)