

Going Blank In The Board Room

What To Do When You Forget What To Say

By C. Peter Giuliano and Frank J. Carillo

Imagine this: You're delivering a make-or-break business presentation and things are going smoothly when, all of a sudden, you go blank. You clear your throat. Your eyes begin to dart about in desperation. Signs of distress appear, revealing just how lost you are. And, without a safety net, a sense of panic begins to set in.

What now?

First, recognize there are steps you can take to avoid the situation in the first place. But if it does happen, there are time-tested techniques to get you out of that jam and back on track to a smooth and successful presentation. Recognize, too, that sudden surprises, like going blank at the worst moment, are commonplace; these, and many more things, can and do go wrong everyday. The trick is how you recover and deal with it.

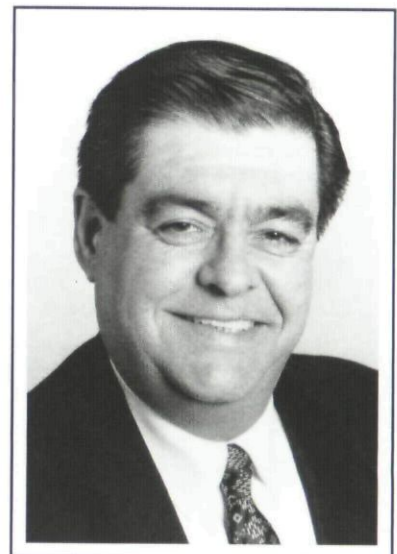
The key to avoiding these unwanted surprises lies in proper preparation. Setting clear objectives, knowing your audience, anticipating worst-case scenarios, rehearsing your presentation — these are among the essentials that will assure your success.

And what if you do go blank? Here are some solutions.

- If you've tried to memorize your remarks, you've only increased your chances of going blank. If you've prepared properly, you will have internalized your key messages. You'll understand *why* you're speaking the words you're speaking.
- Your preparation also should include rehearsing out loud. Do it often enough to become comfortable with your key points. The precise words will not matter as much as the underlying thought.
- Use your visuals as a road map. Don't pack them with detail. Your visuals should be at-a-

glance visuals that serve, not as a script, but as a series of points that trigger thought. Done right, your visuals will not only help you, especially in tense situations; they will also better enable your audience to focus on and understand what you're saying.

- Keep your notes nearby. Make sure they're in large enough font so that you can read them easily.
- Repeat what you just said. That will buy you even a brief moment that can help trigger memory.
- Pause for a moment and ask if anyone has any questions bearing on what you've covered so far. That too can allow you time to recover.
- Ask for help. You can ask, "Where-was-I?" Forgetting momentarily is not an uncommon occurrence. If anything, your audience is likely



C. Peter Giuliano

to empathize with you. Be casual about it; just don't do it repeatedly.

There are plenty of ways to assure your success when your turn comes to present. For example, we've long insisted that one sure way to bolster a presentation is through adept storytelling.

Knowing how to tell a story, within the context of your presentation, adds immeasurably to the impact you're likely to make. Storytelling reaches peo-

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ple on an emotional level and, in doing so, it grabs people's attention, makes them feel something, and helps them understand and remember what you say. We've been saying for many years, and it's well documented: People may forget what you say, but they won't forget how you made them feel.

Let's take a simple example. Suppose that your neighbor, a devout technophobe, is among those few remaining holdouts still without a cell phone. On the urging of friends, he agrees half-heartedly to visit his local phone store to see what the "fuss" is all about. Which of the following pitches would be more likely to convince him?

- "This model has voice-activated dialing, voice recorder, data capability including USB, triple band for global access, vibrating alert, call divert, and a whole lot more."

- "One night, my wife was driving home late after visiting our son. It began to snow heavily. So, instead of the usual route, she takes a back road. Just then, a tire goes flat, in the middle of nowhere — no house, no street lights, no other cars, nothing. She calls me on her cell phone and I'm able to get there, replace the tire, and follow her home safely."

Which of these approaches carries a greater impact? Which do you remember? Which would lead you to purchase a cell phone, even if you were an avowed skeptic?

What Makes a Good Story?

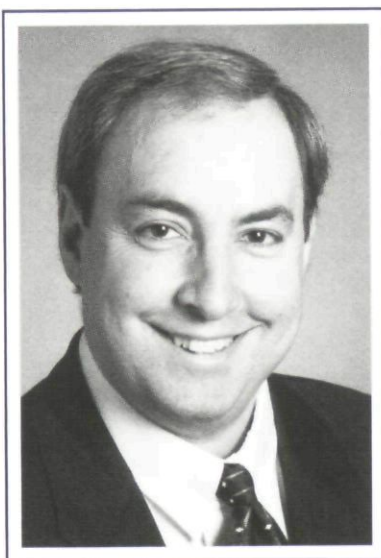
On a small scale, this illustrates the power of storytelling to clarify complex data quickly. Again, studies, and our own experience, have shown repeatedly that stories are how we best visualize, learn, and remember information.

And just what makes a good story?

A good story is short — two to three minutes at most. It's appropriate. It's linked to your message. It underscores the point being made. It's simple and to the point, allowing you to demonstrate an idea instead of just stating it. It paints a picture, enabling your listeners to 'see' what you're saying. It creates an emotional response. It's a story you're comfortable telling. It endures, and adds punch to the best prepared but too often uninspiring business presentation.

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C. Peter Giuliano is chairman and **Frank J. Carillo** is president of Executive Communications Group, Englewood, NJ. It counsels executives and professionals in the development of leadership and communication skills.



Frank J. Carillo

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