

4 key public speaking tips for physicians

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Many physicians and medical students want to make an impact beyond the exam room or the classroom by engaging in the public discourse—whether it be through speaking to the news media or advocating policy changes with government officials surrounding those issues.

Kathy Schaeffer, an expert in strategic communications, recently offered several tips for physicians who shape the conversation surrounding pressing health care issues by speaking publicly. Here are a few key takeaways.

Know your goals

Schaeffer led off the session with what she called the “golden message.”

“Communication must be strategic,” she said. “You don’t want to waste your time or other people’s time on things that don’t have a clear purpose for why you’re communicating about them.”

Strategic communication requires speakers to understand who their audience is, what unique qualifications they have to deliver a message, and why that message will resonate with that audience.

Create a clear, succinct message

Most effective points are well thought out, logical and crafted to respect dissenting viewpoints, Schaeffer told the packed crowd during an education session at the 2019 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago.

“Preparing your key message involves having conversations with people who disagree with you or someone who’s willing to play devil’s advocate, so that you can practice framing your argument

without getting into an argument, without getting defensive or getting upset,” she said.

Draw from your experiences

Specific anecdotes are far more effective than general statements. They will resonate more with the public, the press and policymakers.

“It’s disappointing when you spend time preparing for an interview, talking to the reporter and then it doesn’t get included in the story, which happens all the time,” Schaeffer said. “So what you want to do is come up with those pithy tonics, those great quotes, a story to illustrate something you can talk about from your own experience with your patients that will help make it more useful.”

Know your stuff

Anecdotes will go along way, but you’ll need facts to back them up. Ideally the factual information you choose to present will lead your audience to an “aha moment,” of sorts. You also don’t want to overdo it.

“You want to cite well-respected sources of information, but don’t go on and on with tons of data,” Schaeffer said. That might be great if you’re talking about a scientific topic in front of a scientific association, but it’s not comfortable to most audiences.”

Essential public speaking resources

Download the following tools and resources:

- Building my public forum participation strategy: A step-by-step outline (PDF)
- Community involvement and outreach (PDF)
- Defining my public communications goals (PDF)
- Fundamentals of crafting an effective public presentation (PDF)
- How to tailor my health care key messages (PDF)
- Media relations and social media outreach basics (PDF)
- Presentation best practices (PDF)