



Setting the Stage for Eloquence

By DAN THURMON, CSP

Can you find the room but don't own the stage? Learn to act like a pro by improving your platform mechanics

It's show time. You wait off stage, simultaneously anxious and excited. You take a breath, relaxing with the knowledge that you are ready. You've researched the client, honed your expertise and crafted a message that connects vital content to the needs of your audience. Following your introduction, you take the stage and unleash your dynamite opening. Everything is perfect, except . . . *your microphone isn't on.*

After several distracted moments you realize the mute button on your wireless lavalier was turned on. But by then, you are in full recovery mode, scrambling to regain your composure. Meanwhile, the sound man, in an effort to help, has turned up your volume to full blast. So, the instant you unmute your mike, a deafening squeal of feedback blasts through the speakers and into your audiences' ears.

So much for first impressions. So much for eloquence.

Set the Environment Control

If you don't control your environment, your environment controls you, and it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve amazing results. Platform mechanics is a vital part of the eloquence competency, and includes audio, video, staging, lighting and other theatrical essentials. Using these elements deftly distinguishes you as a pro.

Since the age 12, I've been a professional entertainer. I've played thousands of venues of every description—from exquisite theaters to makeshift stages, from prestigious conventions to the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. Over the past 26 years, I've developed both a knack and a love for the art of owning the stage.

My first performance was “staged” by drawing a circle in the dirt at the King Richard’s Renaissance Faire and hawking the passersby to stop, stand on the line and watch my show. The festival echoed sounds of minstrels, shop owners and entertainers, each competing for attention. As I bellowed into the air (sans microphone), I learned my first lesson in word-of-mouth marketing, and quickly discovered if your audience can’t see you, can’t hear you or are not engaged by what you do, the show is already over. At the faire, they simply walked away.

“You are the author, actor, producer and director of your performance.”

Can You Hear Me Now?

Your audience might not as easily walk out of the ballroom, but they will certainly depart mentally quicker than you can say “Can you hear me in the back?” Here are some basic platform mechanics that will improve your stage presence:

1. **Know what you need and ask for it.**

My stage requirements are a part of my agreement. I specify sound requirements, stage size, lighting and even the proximity of the stage to the front row of the audience. I know what it takes to enable an optimum experience. I’m specific, but flexible and easy to work with. Often I find I have to educate others, explaining why my requests are important for the success of the event.

2. **Be the first one in the room.** There’s no such thing as having too much time. There will always be aspects of the set-up you can “tweak” to your advantage. If you are the first one there, you can do so without asking permission.

3. **Know your team.** Your client is important, but the success of your program depends to a significant degree on your ability to work with the hotel staff, including:

- **The meeting manager**, who works with you and your client prior to the meeting. Once the meeting begins, however, they are usually not involved in executing the event.

The banquet captain is in charge of the room set up, servers and overall plan of action. This person owns the event for all practical purposes.

- **The AV technician**, who may work for the hotel or be an outside contractor. AV techs are often responsible for multiple meetings at the same time, so they are usually on the move. Get to know this person by name and seek to understand and appreciate what he or she does.

- **The engineer**, who lives in the bowels of the hotel. This individual only comes up for light and air when his special skills are required, such as reprogramming lighting, replacing bulbs and other technical services.

I can’t emphasize enough how important engineers are to setting the stage. Learn what they do, meet them in advance, be courteous and appreciative, and speak their language.

4. **Know your equipment.** Even if there is someone else who runs your sound and

hooks up your laptop to the projector, you must understand how it works. A time will come when that person is not in the room and it will be up to you to solve a problem.

Working the Stage

Many professionals prefer to speak in front of the stage, rather than on it. This is a huge mistake. “But wait!” you cry. By stepping off the stage I am closer to the audience. That’s how I connect with them. It makes my speech more *personal*.

Here’s the deal. When you step off the riser you are more connected to the first two rows of the audience. You are less connected to everyone else. They can’t see you. Or, they see much less of you (your head and shoulders) and therefore miss out on your body movements and gestures. When they see less of you, you become less interesting and less engaging.

I’m not saying you have to stay on stage all the time. What I’m saying is that your stage is the most powerful tool you have. It gives you tremendous leverage. Use it—especially when you:

Begin your presentation. Once you start on the stage and establish it as your home base, you can move into the audience for variety. However, if you begin on floor level, in front of the stage, it is awkward to transition to the stage later.

Make your strongest points. You can anchor your message by moving to a specific spot on the stage and delivering your most memorable concepts.

Need to be seen or want to connect with the entire room? Let’s face it. That is most of the time, which is why when performing I live at the front of the stage, toes dangling off the edge. This is where you have the most power and the greatest command of your environment.

Perfecting the Sound

Unless you deliver your entire speech from the lectern, you'll want to use a wireless microphone. Decide your preference: handheld or lavalier. Hotels or the AV companies they contract with will happily provide either, but you must request what you want in advance.

Handheld microphones deliver the truest sound replication and greatest dynamics. Therefore, this is often the choice for vocalists, storytellers and speakers who wish to add character and variety to their voice or "punch up" stories with sound effects, interesting voices or impressions. The drawback: you have to hold it next to your mouth, which limits your gestures and physicality.

Lavalier microphones clip to your tie, shirt or jacket and give you hands-free operation. The downside is sound quality. The sound spectrum is extremely limited, and the microphone itself is directional. This means if you turn your head away from your tie or jacket, the mike doesn't pick up what you said, and neither does the audience.

Headset microphones offer the best of both worlds—great sound reproduction and hands-free use. But they are not standard equipment for most AV companies and hotels. My solution: I bring my own Countryman Isomax E6 headset. It's a beautiful mike that costs about \$400 and fits in your shirt pocket. It's nearly invisible from the audience's perspective. My E6 is configured with the proper connection for a Shure Wireless system (standard equipment at 90 percent of hotels). When I arrive for a presentation, I plug my mike into the facility's lavalier system, which I have requested in advance, and it sounds awesome.

Your microphone and other audio inputs (additional microphones, your laptop, musical instrument, CD player and iPod) plug into a mixer. This piece of equipment allows you to control the volume level for each

input source independently. The different channels are numbered. The mixer also has a master volume that will raise or lower the level of all inputs simultaneously. Once the master level is set, you will want to leave it alone and control individual channels as needed. You must be able to:

- locate the mixer
- identify which channels control which inputs, especially your microphone
- adjust the levels accordingly

Feedback is caused by excessive volume or by moving your microphone directly in front of or under a speaker. If you hear your mike beginning to ring, lower the volume. You are dangerously close to feedback.

Shining in Your Light

Hotel lighting is predictably inadequate, unless you're presenting at a large event with a production company and contracted lighting crew. So, what can you do? Be conscious of where the light is. There will be a brighter spot somewhere on the stage. Find it. Spend most of your time there.

You can request a follow spot. Understand that this is an added expense for your client. Hotels do not usually have follow spots and will have to rent the light and hire an operator. Still, if it's what you need to deliver your best, go for it!

Lighting trees are another option and another rental expense. These freestanding lights are set in advance and provide a general wash over the stage area.

Here's a low-budget solution: Bring a portable work light, available at Home Depot. These powerful lights operate on stands and are adjustable and highly effective. I used these regularly when performing on military bases in the Middle East.

If you need to adjust the lighting during your presentation, you will encounter other issues. Larger ballrooms are actually multiple rooms, and each section will be controlled by a separate panel. In most facilities, these rooms can be chained together, allowing you to adjust all sections from one control panel.

If you are using a laptop-driven presentation, such as PowerPoint, be sure your projected images are clearly visible (no light washing them out) and you are still well-lit on the stage. This takes planning. To accomplish this balance, you might need to ask the engineer to unscrew the light bulb directly in front of the screen.

Running the Show

You are the author, actor, producer and director of your performance. You call the shots. No one is more vested in the success of your presentation than you are. It's up to you to use every advantage to engage and persuade your audience. Amateurs get ready to deliver a speech by finding the room. You are a pro. Your career is on the line every time. Make sure that you own the stage. **S**

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