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The forensic style of speaking is completely out of place in the business environment. But forensics skills are everywhere.

Like most formal education, forensic competition provides an opportunity to artificially simplify life's phenomena in order to carefully examine individual aspects in detail. Just as Biology and Chemistry never are inextricably intertwined in the world, but offer two very different perspectives for examining the world, forensics allows us to focus on communication from a number of different well-defined perspectives.

Forensics is a speaking laboratory for controlled experimentation. Rigid time limits, consistent judging and clear goals relating to technique rather than content each allow us to focus on one small subset of skills at a time.

To speak of engaging the business world through forensics is, I believe, to ask how forensic competition serves to prepare students for the role of communicating in the business environment. This is worth considering to the extent that forensics is not an end unto itself, but is instead a laboratory preparing students to engage more successfully, more effectively and with greater satisfaction in post-forensic communication. In other words, how do the things students do here, in forensics, impact their ultimate success out there, in business.

Please bear in mind that I come at this not as an expert on business communication, nor as an expert in forensics. And any credibility I have is due solely to having recently attempted the transition from competitor to career communicator.

The claim that "Communication is an important skill" is so familiar and widely accepted as to be little more than an empty cliché, believed by all and felt by none. But it is a lesson I learn and relearn on a weekly basis.

I am a corporate rhetor. I communicate for a living – as do most working Americans. The time I spend on things other than presentations, meetings and email is negligible. In the past three years I have pitched investors, recruited talent and presented our vision of eTextbooks to untold numbers of instructors, publishers, partners and coworkers. I have been asked to explain the customer needs to the engineers and the engineering to the marketers and the marketing to the accountants and the accounting to the customers. I don't make things. I synthesize information, suggest perspectives, explain and persuade and debate for a living. If only I had spent more class time talking and passing notes.

The key challenges facing the Corporate Rhetor, or at least in my experience are communicating a complex message to many different types of audience members using a nascent and poorly understood vocabulary for rapidly evolving technologies in a rapidly changing business world. It's enough to make one pine for the simplicity of crit – an artifact, a method, three points, ten minutes.

Fortunately, competitive speaking provides many opportunities to prepare for these demands. Of which I will highlight four.

First among them is simply learning to speak.

In many ways, PA skills are the most directly applicable to business speaking. For the effective business speaker, every event includes informing, persuading and entertaining. Public Address brings to the fore skills such as researching, organizing and writing. Have a point. Support it. Reading an audience and making adjustments while speaking. Developing confidence as the center of attention, effective gestures, rate of delivery and other mechanics.

Of all PA events, however, After Diner Speaking stands out as the most beneficial for its ability to invite sincere audience engagement. The audience in a PA round is often struggling not to be informed or persuaded but merely to stay awake. However in ADS the audience has truly come to be entertained, and in this event above all others, the content can bump technique from center stage.

The second major skill is learning to prepare quickly.

Most public speaking is extemporaneous, by forensic definition – meaning composing on your feet to a skeleton outline that was rushed together. Most business communication – especially in meetings and answering follow up questions after a pitch – is impromptu. Meaning less than 60 seconds to prepare a position, state it and support it. You're probably not going to kick things off with an anecdote or provide two examples for each claim, but if you can state a thesis, support it in two or three ways and restate the thesis in 2-5 minutes you can accomplish a lot and keep the conversation headed in the right direction.

The third major skill, and these are not in order of importance, is listening.

Duo teaches careful moment-to-moment listening like nothing else I've ever done. A good performance requires more listening to what's being said without words than to the words themselves. This is crucial in the board room. People are, generally speaking, not great at asking questions. And often the key to providing a satisfying answer is simply in extracting the real question from what is said. A good duo has more going on outside the words than inside, and so does the typical business conversation.

At another level, Rhetorical Criticism provides important listening tools, helping us to deconstruct and analyze. Like duo, crit allows us to hear more than is being explicitly said, but on a more abstract plane. As a listener, observing the rhetorical tact and methods can often be more informative than the actual content. Is the speaker focused on building identification, seeking to reshape the audience or spinning a fantasy theme.

The final skill I'd like to discuss is that of keeping it fresh.

For me, Interpretive Reading brings to the fore a focus on the ethos, pacing, story shape and non-verbal communication. More than any other event, interp demands, again, and again, and again, a performance that exhibits strong emotional contact with very familiar content.

When we were looking for a second round investment, I eventually became comfortable with formal structure of the pitch and stopped PA style tweaking. Getting up to present it for the 20th time and the 30th time and 50th time really felt more like preparing for prose than anything else. Once again I needed to show the passion of a potentially successful entrepreneur. This is not to say that I wasn't sincerely passionate, but that accurately conveying the depth of my commitment to yet another group of casually dressed strangers relied primarily on skills derived from interp. Controlling my voice, my pacing, and my facial expressions, creating the character of a visionary, with credibility and drive.

To discuss it this way makes it seem deceptive and contrived, but I was rarely conscious of these elements, the application of these skills, until reflecting on the plane ride home, in effect writing my own ballot. And those are two of the greatest gifts of Forensics: 1) internalization of good communication habits and 2) the ability to reflect productively on my efforts – to self-coach.

In addition to the skills gained, there are a few unpleasant aspects of competing that turned out to have some really nice benefits, a sort of Competitors' Castor Oil:

- 1) Stupid judges. If you don't successfully communicate, it's tempting to blame the judge. In fact, if you're righteous enough, you can compete unsuccessfully in an event for years claiming that it's the judges that need to change. But if you can climb down off that high horse and begin to perform differently in order to satisfy the criteria of an ever wider variety of judges, you'll be a more successful communicator. Successful is the competitor who can earn a one from a DOF and a lay judge in the same round. She will do well in the board room.
- 2) Convention. Like training wheels, forensic convention limits range of motion, does much of the work for you, and allows you to focus on a narrower range of skills than would otherwise be possible. Most competitors bemoan the predictability of the preview statement, but will miss it

- sorely when they find lay audiences can't hear a preview without a power point slide, raised fingers and repetition.
- 3) Memorization. In any laboratory, consistency is mandatory for experimentation. If your speech is not stable from one tournament to the next, it's difficult to know what changes are making a difference. Memorization freezes the speech for a time, which allows revision, which is the basis for so much of forensic education.

So, these are a few of the ways Forensic competition helped prepare me for the business world. If these sound like they might be of benefit anywhere and not just in the business world, that may be because the business world is pretty much just like the rest of the world.

In the short time remaining, I'd like to briefly and humbly suggest a few strategies that can be explicitly pursued in an effort to more fully prepare a speaker to engage the business world.

- 1) Pentathlon. Limited prep, PA and interp each offer a different analytical perspective on every communication event. The more learned about each, the stronger the communicator.
- 2) Judge. Sure I ranked fellow competitors and collected snide remarks to share on the van. But the first time I wrote a real ballot I felt as if the scales had fallen from my eyes. To truly hear and analyze a speech, break it apart and provide constructive criticism was amazingly educative. I don't know how to implement this. It's taboo for a competitor to write while another speaks and tabbing for a "people's choice" category of awards sounds like a nightmare, but I think that good things lie at the end of the path that begins with the question, how might students write ballots.
- 3) Speak. Encourage competitors to speak outside of forensics while they are still competing. The opportunity to apply these skills outside of the lab was for me inspiring and illuminating and always brought me back to the lab with renewed vigor, understanding how these skills could be applied and wanting to hone them further.
- 4) Speak about Business. Of everything I've mentioned, this may be the most specific to the business world. I encourage you to see business topics as legitimate and significant. Try
 - an extemp question such as "will computer lease models significantly impact PC ownership over the next 12 months?"
 - An informative on Microsoft's acquisition strategy,
 - a crit on guerrilla marketing,
 - a persuasion on the benefits of direct distribution

Business communication deserves forensic attention because it is relevant to the future careers of most students, because it is an integral and important part of the world every student is entering, and because the social consequences of business actions are arguably larger than the social consequences of political action. But we don't need to decide whether Bill Clinton or Bill Gates have had a bigger impact on the world during the 90's to admit that both have played significant roles.

Well, that's it. To review: If a freshman were to tell me today, that she was seeking the best education possible for succeeding in business I would strongly encourage majoring in English or Philosophy and taking Forensics far more seriously than the young entrepreneurs society. For the small skills of vocabulary and process can be learned quickly and easily compared to the larger skills of listening, thinking and speaking. Participate in Pentath, I would tell this young speaker, and take each event seriously especially Duo, Crit and ADS. Compete aggressively, for the touchstone of judging is our primary guide in gauging progress. Speak as often as possible outside the forensics realm, to better understand the appropriate role of this laboratory. And give as much attention as possible to judging other competitors seriously, deeply, helpfully and honestly.

And when you move out of the lab and onto the stage where every idea must pay its own way, there will be times when a sentence comes out of your mouth, or a gesture arises from your limbs that you have never before seen outside of a round. For a moment you'll be distracted, thinking "wow, that was forensic" and

then your well practiced ability to refocus in front of an audience will kick in and you'll reengage the content using these skills that were learned so slowly and painfully, as yet another element of the subconscious collection of habits and behaviors that make us who we are.

Bonus

To better prepare students for the business world we should:

- Have the judge leave the room periodically
- Encourage the judge to disagree mid-speech then ask the speaker to continue
- Accept only white boards and power point as VAs
- Make the van riders longer, the seats smaller and the food worse, but give frequent competitor miles entitling competitors to free van trips on weekends off.
- Quit giving awards. You either win or you're off the team.
- Dress down
- Encourage other competitors to butt in, mid-round, with opposing views and inaccurate information.
- Replace sign in with business cards
- Dispense with ballots. Tell every competitor that this is exciting and that you'll be in touch.
- Use only lay judges, ideally coaches from other sports who are making a career change