

All beginnings are hard.

—Chaim Potok

And Here's Johnny: The Art of Giving and Getting a Great Introduction

BY DEBORAH LONG

Any speaker will tell you about the importance of getting a good introduction to an audience and the disaster that can befall a speaker who receives a bad one. I've been fortunate to receive mostly eloquent introductions—largely because the session convener was reading one I had carefully scripted for myself! (And can I wax rhapsodic about my illustrious achievements!) But I've also suffered the slings and arrows of extemporaneous as well as awkwardly-delivered intros.

I frequently speak to groups ranging in number from 20 to 400. No matter the size of the audience, it is important for me to establish credibility with my audience, particularly if I am speaking on foreign soil. I consider myself a stranger in a strange land anytime I leave North Carolina's Piedmont

area (central North Carolina to you Yankees and Westerners) or speak to audiences who are not real estate professionals. Being a stranger occurs frequently since I am often hired by state associations or regulators anywhere

in the U.S., and I also speak to interior designers, engineers, and accountants. So providing my credentials is a necessary part of my introduction.

However, it's important that I am not the one who mentions



Off to a Bad Start: Stories from the Trenches



As a speaker and resident of the North Carolina Association of Realtors, I am introduced on a regular basis. Like all speakers, I've had good introductions and some not so good ones.

The worst tend to go like this: "...And she also did this, and um... she has all of these designations, let's see, (fumble, fumble) there's..., and she served in the following positions of..." The session convenors just go on and on, even though I sent my qualifications sheet and asked them to pick just the three things which would be of most interest to the group. They feel compelled to read the whole thing. Embarrassing!

—Cindy S. Chandler, DREI

2006 President, North Carolina Association of Realtors
Charlotte, NC

My job was to introduce a speaker named Butler Rupps. During intermission and other breaks, music was selected to play over the auditorium sound system. The volume was turned up to signal everyone to return to their seats and then turned down for the intro to the next event. Such was the plan. Someone had requested some "oldies but goldies" choices for the music, so a turntable was used to play old 45s. Just prior to my introduction of Butler, the tune "Butter Cups" (circa the 1950s) was played. No choice could have been worse.

Just as I was in the middle of introducing Butler, the turntable was accidentally started with sound at full volume. In a hurried effort to stop playing the music, the DJ bumped the record. All of us heard, "...oh Butter Cups, oooh, Butter Cups.... SCRATCHHHHHHHHHH!"

Without any thought, I instantly came back with "It appears that there is a Butterfingers on the Butter Cups so without further do-do, here is Butler Rupps." 350 attendees howled as I red-facedly left the podium and Mr. Rupps tried to regain decorum.

During the following reception, everyone who shook Mr. Rupps hand were heard to say, "Great talk, Mr. Butter Cups. Did you actually write that song, too? Can I have your autograph?"

Apparently no one had heard me say "do-do" instead of "ado," so only Mr. Rupps knows that "the Butler did 'not' do it"... at least, not this time.

—Philip Schoewe
Lubbock, TX

I was teaching a GRI course in Indiana. The introducer was excited as punch to introduce me. I provided him with a long resumé with some highlighted points. I asked him to keep it short. Of course, he read the whole thing! He also mispronounced most of the words and then finished by saying, "Please welcome our speaker, Marcie.... How do you say your name anyway?" From that moment on, I won't let anyone introduce me. I let the session convener welcome the group, and I take it from there.

—Marcie Roggow, DREI
Sioux Falls, SD

Last year, I was called at 5:00 p.m. by a speakers bureau rep who was in an absolute panic. The keynote speaker for a banquet dinner in Iowa City (about 1.5 hour drive from my house) was snowed in at the Chicago airport and was not going to be able to make it to the event. Over 600 top business people are already at the event, and they need a speaker to talk for 30 minutes. Since they were willing to pay my full fee, I agreed, and my husband, dear that he is, drove me to the venue.

As I was setting up my equipment to do the talk, the meeting planner kept coming up to me and saying, "Be funny, funny, funny! And oh, by the way, throughout your talk, they may be talking since everyone is listening to the Iowa Hawkeye basketball game on the radio and yelling out when they score, but don't worry. Just keep going."

I tried to tell her I was not a comedian who did one-liners but a humorist who had a message, but she just brushed it off with "Remember—funny, funny, funny!"

Within 15 minutes after I arrived, the banquet host took the podium and announced, "Our REAL speaker couldn't make it tonight, so here's Karla Murphy!" Then he pointed at me and left the stage. Murmurs ran through the crowd, bodies turned away from the stage, and someone yelled "Score!" as loudly as he could. I looked over the cheering group (the cheers obviously not meant for me) and began the program.

I learned from this experience that I will never, ever do something like that again. EVER!

—Karel Murray

my credentials. Nothing turns an audience off faster than speakers bragging about how knowledgeable and educated they are! I once listened to a new staffer at the North Carolina Real Estate Commission (NCREC) introduce herself. She had been hired as an instructor evaluator, a daunting task if there ever was one. She wasn't liked *before* she arrived at the podium! Her self-introduction included numerous references to how well educated she was (something about the Ivy League, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel) and doomed her presentation and her longevity in her job. I recall that she lasted less than a year in her position at the NCREC. While mentioning credentials is an important part of any introduction of a guest speaker, it's the *session convener* who should

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provide some insight into the speaker's expertise so that the speaker can avoid sounding pompous and smarter-than-thou.

It's been my experience that conveners are either afraid of public speaking or think that they are the Toastmaster's poster child. Both types of conveners are nightmares. The ones who are afraid



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of public speaking don't wait for the audience to settle down. They just want to get the job of introducing the session over with. They start speaking in a whisper and avoid eye contact with the audience while participants are still looking for a seat, wrestling their papers, and spilling coffee on their neighbors. These session conveners couldn't rustle up enthusiasm for a guest visit from Elvis.

The know-it-alls spoil introductions, too. They say they don't need a microphone (they do) and don't need to read a prepared intro because they can "wing it" (no, they can't). Invariably, they screw up my credentials, the names of my home town and alma mater, and the pronunciation of my name. Of course, it doesn't really matter, because no one heard them except for audience members in the first two rows.

One of the worst introductions I ever received was—believe it or

not—from a DREI (Distinguished Real Estate Instructor) at a state association program. I offered a prepared intro to my colleague who immediately brushed it aside. During the first two minutes of the introduction, my colleague talked mostly about how well he knew me and how well credentialed *he* was. Then his cell phone rang—his phone was in his coat pocket on which was clipped the lavalier microphone. Forty-five students heard that phone ring and watched as, horror of horrors, yes, he answered the call in front of them. The course I was teaching that morning: professional etiquette. What a great object lesson that was!

Another poor introduction was from an education director who had heard my ethics program several times before. In his rambling five-minute introduction of me and my program, he referred to several of my surprise key

points and used one of my favorite stories where he basically stole my thunder as well as the poignancy of my conclusion. Another lesson learned: a five-minute introduction is way too long. Thirty to sixty seconds is plenty of time. More than that and you need to get your own talk show.

One of the strangest introductions I received was from a Realtor assigned to convene my session. As she reviewed housekeeping matters with the audience, she intended to say, "Would you please turn off all pagers and turn your phones to vibrate?" Instead she said, "Would you please turn off all pagers and turn your vibrators to telephone?" I didn't know vibrators had that function. Do they text message as well? Well, at least *that* introduction was funny.

A bad introduction puts me in a poor frame of mind before stepping up to the podium. I know it will now take me ten or fifteen minutes to warm the audience up or to win its trust. I teach ethics to many groups, and typically the students don't want to be there and don't believe that the subject can be taught anyway, particularly to them. If they are provided with a poor introduction to the speaker and the subject, the audience is now wondering, "Who is this woman, and why is she talking to us? Are we being punished?" An awkward introduction sets my timing off as well because I typically segued from some observations in my intro to why the

course content is important.

The best introduction I ever received was from Anita Burt at the North Carolina Real Estate Commission. I can't remember the occasion for the introduction—it may have been an instructor development workshop—but I remember that Anita did some very simple things: she read every word I wrote on a prepared intro. She practiced it several times before she read it out

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loud. She asked me how to pronounce names in my statement. She made sure that she had everyone's attention at the start of the program and then read my intro with aplomb, enunciating every word with precision, waiting for the appropriate audience reaction at two small chuckles built into the script, and then led the audience into applause at my entrance. Now that was an introduction! Oh, I wish I could take Anita with me everywhere just to warm up my audiences. Now I know why Johnny Carson had Ed McMahon.

Since Anita was not available for this meaningful employment

opportunity, I decided I had to do something to minimize the chances of another poor introduction. I started to listen carefully to other introductions to determine what made them successful and made an effort to incorporate them into mine: brief statement of education, areas of expertise, something personal, something humorous. REEA colleague Tripp Anderson also helped by offering me a template for a scripted intro that I could customize for my programs and hand to conveners before my session.

Here's a sample:

**INTRODUCTION
of DEBORAH LONG
for fair housing/diversity classes**

Notes to session convener: Your job is important. It sets the stage for my whole presentation. Please be upbeat and enthusiastic! They won't remember what you said—just "how" you said it. Please obtain the audience's attention before you begin.

Deborah Long is a first-generation American whose parents came to the United States after World War II. Her parents believed that it was their duty to become American citizens as quickly as possible, so even though they could speak eight languages between them, Debbie heard only English spoken after she was four years old.

Even though she has four college degrees including a doctorate, she sheepishly admits

to being able to speak only her native English—slightly colored by a Chicago dialect. But because of her parents, she has always had an interest in people from diverse backgrounds.

A veteran educator and real estate professional for over 30 years, Debbie is a D.R.E.I., (Distinguished Real Estate Instructor), one of only 120 such instructors in the U.S.

She is also the award-winning author of 18 books and many educational programs.

After living in Florida for 20 years, thanks to her husband's employer—IBM (I've Been Moved), she and her family currently reside in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Convener: Please welcome Debbie. (Now, please lead applause to bring energy to the group. Thank you!)

I now *insist* that my conveners read every word on my script for them. To make sure they can read it, I type it in 16 point font so if the conveners have forgotten their reading glasses, they still can make out the print. I use very simple language and avoid words and names

of more than three syllables.

If my conveners state they don't need the intro, I advise them that every word was carefully crafted for the purpose of introducing this program, and I need those precise words to be read to cue



up my opening remarks or my timing would be irretrievably lost during the entire program, and it would be their fault if I was a failure and the entire program went down in flames. And I say this is a whiny, needy voice without taking a breath.

I ask conveners to read my intro aloud so that I can coach them on pronunciation and timing, particularly if there are some really

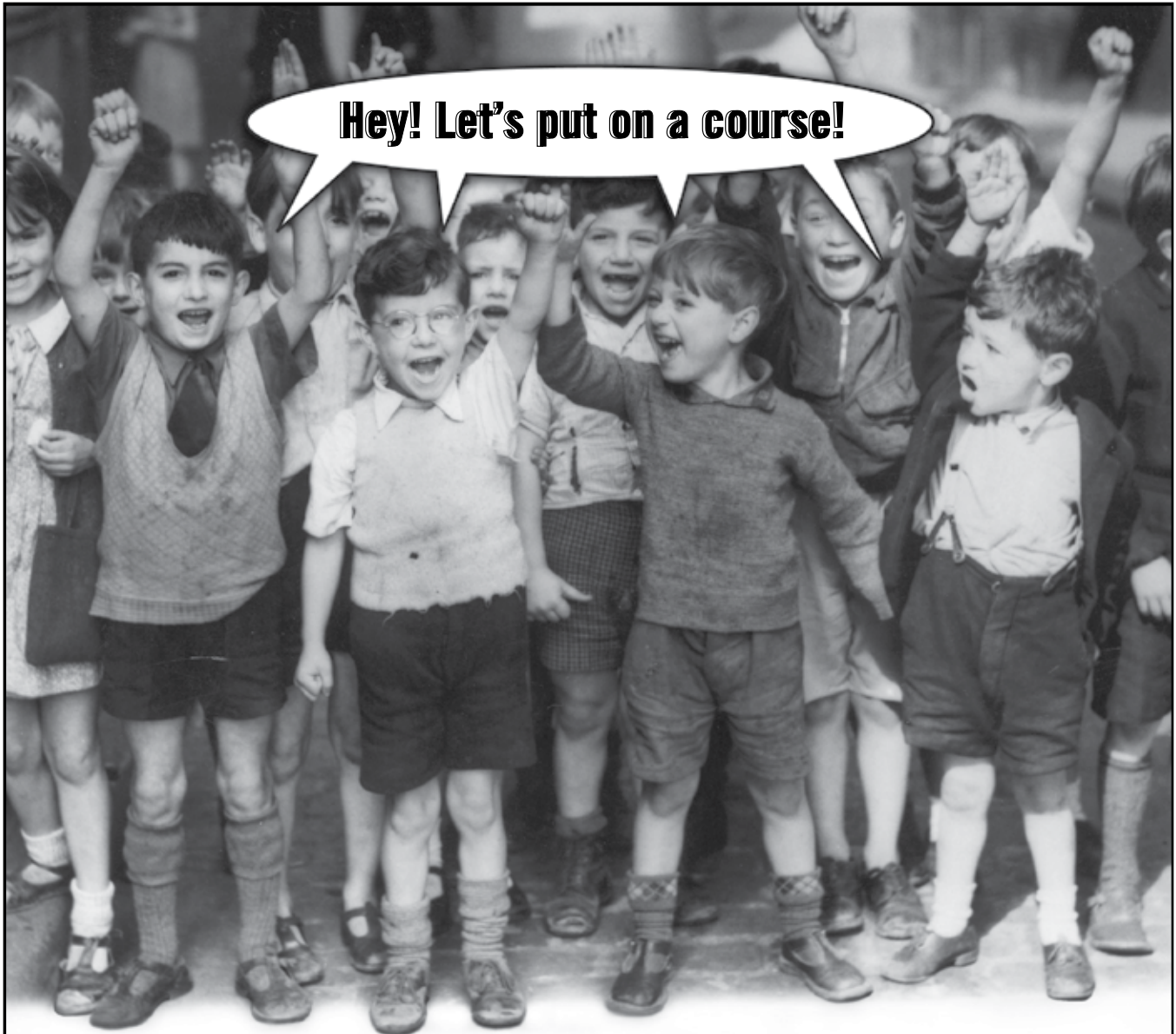
important points or some humor that needs a little pause or two for audience reaction. Spending five minutes with the conveners before the delivery of an introduction coaching them on an opening is a good investment, I've found. If possible, I e-mail my intro to the convener before the program.

If conveners need help getting the audience's attention before delivering the intro, I may turn the classroom lights off and on, or turn my projector screen on with an opening slide, or for a really unruly crowd, I take the microphone and say, "It's time to get started. I'd like to introduce the session convener, Blake Johnson. Let's welcome him..." and then begin to applaud.

I'm sure all of this effort just to get a class started may seem unnecessary and may characterize me as a prima donna. But I've found that a solid preface to a program is just as important as meaty content and a dynamic conclusion. Not all session conveners are professional speakers or prepared for the job they've been given. It's up to speakers and educators to help them help us.

Debbie Long, DREI, has been an educator for over 30 years. She teaches "on the road" because no one will listen to her at home. She can be reached at d_long@mindspring.com.





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