

Professional Opinion: Effective Speaking Enhances Your Professional Image **By Marilyn E. Jess, MS, RD**

What is a professional image? One definition of image, from *Merriam-Webster*, is “a popular conception (as of a person, institution, or nation) projected especially through the mass media.”

In my years of speaking professionally and my study of the art of public speaking, I’ve learned that in the eyes of an audience, image counts. I’ve also learned as an RD that professional image and reputation are only as good as the perception held by colleagues, clients, or potential clients. It’s not something you can hold in your hand or an object you can show, and you don’t have control over all aspects of how you are perceived.

But what you can control is your message, your audience, and how you communicate. Despite all the technological marvels that speed communication today, speaking is still the most effective way to get your message across clearly. Speaking with confidence and skill enhances your professional image in ways that nothing else can.

Effective speaking supports your well-crafted message. Together with clinical and scientific knowledge, effective speaking can help establish you as an authority on your niche of dietetics. As proof, I offer examples of leaders in dietetics who excel at speaking, along with a key message they present. Each one has used speaking to become known as a subject matter expert. They are:

- Cindy Heroux, RD (business of speaking);
- Doris Derelian, PhD, JD, RD (food laws/policy); and
- David Grotto, RD, LDN (how to choose healthier whole foods).

With the prolonged economic downturn and jobs being eliminated in record numbers, it may be tempting to try to prove your expertise by speaking about any subject that falls into the nutrition category. Take a look at your website or those of your colleagues. Do you notice a long list of topics advertised there? With medical knowledge doubling quickly, how could any RD be a true expert in more than a handful of areas of practice? Most careers tend to narrow the number of areas that people become skilled in, and what you learned as a generalist in college or an internship becomes less useful over time. Your potential clients will ask that same question about how much expertise you have.

Branding yourself as a nutrition expert was not such a concern before the Internet was created, and the knowledge explosion we take for granted today became the new reality. For

example, knowledge expert Kevin Kelly studied a sample of people during the 2000s, and found that knowledge increased at the rate of 66% per year.¹

Today, the expertise you have spent years developing, both as a student and as an RD, deserves its special speaking niche. What I suggest is to become a subject matter expert. Yes, it's a risk, but there is so much demand for help with eating better, and being healthier, that carving out your niche is a risk that pays off. Play to your strengths, and your audience will trust you, and turn to you more often.

In this continuing education article, the value of proficient public speaking will be discussed, together with suggestions for developing your professional image through focused speaking strategies.

Develop Your Key Message

How do you decide what is a key message? Dilip Abayasekara, PhD, AS, former president of Toastmasters International, a nonprofit organization that teaches public speaking and leadership skills through practice and feedback, speaks about the importance of your individual "voice," meaning the overall message you send. Finding one key message that you speak about over and over may seem like a difficult quest, yet it can be done. Questions you can ask yourself to determine what niche you want to fill and what key message you want to send include the following:

- What can I tell audiences about, in depth, that could help them live a better, healthier life?
- What am I endlessly curious about?
- What kind of work have I done that is so interesting and challenging that I could do it for hours and time seems to stop?

By answering these questions throughout your career, you will stay in touch with what you do best and therefore can communicate best. The key ingredient for having a strong message is a passion for the subject. Speakers who embrace and promote a memorable key message command the highest fees and often speak for a living.² Even if you never earn a fee, your audience knows in just a minute or two that you care about what you say. They can also tell when you haven't done your homework, and the presentation is less than they expected. Think about it—how quickly do you channel surf or Web surf if a TV show or Web page isn't captivating? Learning how to grab 'em, as they say, will do a lot toward making your professional image shine.

The Value of Communication

In this digital age, honest, believable communication can seem as rare as a flawless gem. To manage your image and differentiate yourself from the many other professionals out there, speaking with confidence and passion gets you noticed. Career experts Randall and Katharine Hansen, who produce the website QuintCareers.com, even go so far as to say that communication, of which speaking is a key part, ranks No. 1 (along with listening and writing)

in the list of skills employers want. The Hansens add that communication is No. 1 by a wide margin.

A recent global survey by LinkedIn, the most popular business networking website, of 7,000 members from 15 countries offers more proof that communication skills matter. When asked what makes you lucky, which people saw as crucial to career success, these factors were ranked as the top five:

1. solid communication skills;
2. flexibility;
3. strong work ethic;
4. acting on opportunities; and
5. having a robust network.

It's clear that saying the right words at the right time to the right audience can not only help your image but can also enable you to ultimately be more successful.

Communication as a Professional Tool

Technical knowledge will get you only so far. The average nutrition professional spends a minimum of five years in formal study at the college level, and about one-half of RDs hold an advanced degree as well, according to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. We also spend hours each year earning continuing education credits to maintain the RD credential. However, technical scientific and clinical knowledge is most valuable when you can deliver key messages in ways that your clients or colleagues can use.

Effective communication should not be confused with presentation. Using software such as PowerPoint or Keynote to create slides is not the same as a well-prepared speech. Many professionals stop short by mastering the art of the slide show, which alone does not connect with people. While slides can enhance words and certain messages superbly, they cannot build trust with an audience. Picture the late Apple CEO Steve Jobs attempting to sell an idea without using a set of slides. His reputation and professional image made most products he helped create instant successes. However, his slides and the technical components of his presentations were only icing on the cake.

Additionally, to maintain your image, it's important to be in harmony with your current career focus, and speaking belongs on the list of skills you should always keep sharp. Speaking is a self-development project, and you create the coursework and study at your own pace throughout your career.

For example, if you're asked to host a webinar to promote a new program your company offers, will you be up for that challenge? Will you do a mediocre job, reading from a script, or

will you challenge the remote audience with interesting content delivered in a unique way that makes them think, makes them laugh, and helps them remember your key messages?

When you join a conference call, even as a participant and not the main speaker, can you state your thoughts clearly and concisely? Phone meetings or teleclasses today can include thousands of people. If you are speaking to that size audience, can you do so confidently?

If you have an idea on how to make your clients' care better, grow your practice, or increase your employer's bottom line, and you want to get that idea to as many key decision makers as possible, speaking about it will be necessary at some point. Asking for support for your idea requires persuasive speaking on your part. As noted professional speaker Patricia Fripp says, "Life is a series of sales situations, and the answer is no if you don't ask."

Potential Pitfalls

So far I've made a case for why speaking is an essential element in creating a professional image. Now, let's learn about three common professional images that nutrition professionals attempt to adopt and why these images may not serve as appropriate models for you.

White Coat Wizard

You've all seen health experts on the news, on a website, or even speaking live at an event. They may actually be wearing a white lab coat when they're interviewed; that coat sends a subtle message of authority and credibility. Is this a strong image? Sure it is, and it does the job of establishing a certain expertise and trustworthiness for a segment of professionals.

While the white coat wizard image has its advantages, including that the public easily recognizes the person as someone with a medical background, it can work both ways. If you adopt this image, it can limit which messages you send to audiences. If you're comfortable with this image as a communicator, the risk is that someone else always knows more or can quote another study.

A white coat style can also trigger memories of poor communication with healthcare providers in general. Don't underestimate the emotional charge that can stay with many members of the public.

This communication disconnect does not just apply to underserved or minority populations. A large segment of your potential audience may be struggling with a chronic condition, such as being overweight, and may avoid getting care or listening to so-called experts due to their perception of what the white coat wizards may think or say.

Celebrity

You've seen and heard glamorous celebrities selling the latest health/fitness/diet book or program both on air and online. Have you secretly wanted to be one? Beware—celebrity status does get you noticed, but is it really what you want your clients to remember?

Celebrities get a lot of publicity and huge audiences. But what's underneath all the sizzle they sell? The answer is good promotion and often acting skills, voice training, and special

wardrobe fittings that people in healthcare don't have. You can learn a lot about by watching and listening. Spend some time watching daytime talk shows, YouTube videos, or half-hour infomercials on TV about health and diet products. This may sound like time wasted, but consider it market research. Pay particular attention to the visual images in these promotional pieces. You'll learn a lot about how to capture an audience, what images sell, and what makes speakers believable.

Some in the nutrition profession have adopted these sales techniques to promote their messages. If this style is a natural fit for you, it can work well. All the more reason to be sure the real message is one you are comfortable selling. A higher profile also means that audiences can sense any hint of a message not matching your image.

Food Police

Like it or not, dietitians have all been put into this category by the culture we live in. If you work in a traditional clinical setting or wear that white lab coat, people can have strong perceptions about your image and strong reactions to it. No doubt you have a story (or many stories) about clients or even family members who are embarrassed by what they ate in your presence and assumed you are judging their food choices. Your own food choices can also be judged by people who hold the food police image as typical of the dietetics profession.

Judging food and lifestyle choices can put you in a corner as a speaker. Certain audiences may say they want that type of speaker—one who can tell them what the “food rules” are and why they should follow this or that diet or exercise plan. Ask yourself, however, “Does that image help me build rapport with my audience?”

In the short-term, it may make you popular because the media would have us believe that the perfect body is just one diet book or exercise plan away. As professionals, we not only know better, we also have the responsibility to deliver messages that make sense and help clients while keeping our image and integrity intact. Unless you can document the actual success of a specific program, you may wish to rethink messages that convey a food police image and use your speaking in a way that better serves your audience.

Highlighting Speaking Expertise

Effective public speaking is a skill that can positively impact the career of nutrition professionals through the development of a positive professional image. The following are practical suggestions for honing your speaking skills:

Stay on Topic or in Your Niche

With the current knowledge explosion, it's impossible to be all things to all people. As dietetics professionals, we're trained in a variety of skill areas, and the public (and even our employers) expects us to know about every aspect of nutrition. You may know a lot about nutrition, but in truth, you as a speaker and professional can't know everything.

What the market is now demanding is the subject matter expert (or whatever term you want to use to describe someone who is focused on a narrow range of expertise). In other words, create your image in a niche you love and make sure your message is consistent. We all know

a dietitian who is the expert on a specific aspect of nutrition. Be that person, in whatever area you choose, and your credibility increases. Speaking helps you deliver your message in a personal way to your chosen audience.

To be known as a subject matter expert, you'll learn that saying no to some speaking requests makes you stand out from other professionals. Why should you say no, especially in challenging economic times?

The learning curve for each topic in which you are not expert increases your preparation time exponentially. That can end up costing you precious hours for which you aren't compensated either in time or money. If you want to keep your presentations tailored to fit each new audience, keep the content fresh and current and retain that expert status; staying narrowly focused and going deep helps you do that. This is not to say that each presentation on your chosen topic should be identical. Every audience, just like every individual, has unique characteristics and needs that make careful audience research a must before you speak. Your professional image will shine if your audience knows you spent the time to relate to them. To accomplish this, do the following:

- Have coffee or a meal with people you know will be attending the event.
- Read local publications, such as newspapers, to find out what is happening in local neighborhoods and what people are talking about.
- Visit the Facebook page of the organization and city where you are speaking.
- Speak with some members of the audience briefly just before your talk begins.

Closely related to this issue of tailoring your talk to fit your audience is the generic talk. This is another trap that you can easily fall into if you're not careful. While it is tempting to take a set of slides someone else has created and skip the preparation, your audience can easily tell when a speaker is doing this and will lose interest. According to brain researcher John Medina, audiences can tune you out in seconds, and you have about 10 minutes to capture their attention.

Putting your own spin on a professionally developed set of visual images helps you avoid sounding "canned." Adding personal stories that illustrate key points is just one highly effective way to make material you didn't create different and memorable.

Speak

How often are you speaking in front of any type of audience? It seems like an obvious question to ask, and as every world-class athlete knows, there is no substitute for practice. We can include virtual audiences here. The conference call, webinar, telehealth session, Skype, and so on are business essentials in professional life today, and they also count as speaking. With travel costs rising and staff spread out over the globe, it's likely that you will be speaking to virtual audiences more than ever.

To enhance your image in any area of practice you pursue, nothing takes the place of speaking, and speaking more—much more—works even better. The advice of the 2001 World Champion of Public Speaking, Darren LaCroix, is, “Never turn down stage time.” He goes on to say that more time in front of audiences of any size is the most effective way to improve your speaking.

What is stage time? While the exact origin of the term is unknown, it’s often used in the world of stand-up comedy and describes the time a comedian is on stage entertaining people. What does this have to do with your skill as a speaker? Everything, because nothing takes the place of actual speaking practice. For maximum effect and to polish your professional image, experts advise that you don’t wait for stage time, you pursue it.

If you get paid to speak and speaking takes up most of your time, this is no problem because you are always on the hunt for more stage time. What about those who don’t speak for a living? How do you get more speaking time? Overcome that urge to say yes to every speaking opportunity that comes your way by fine-tuning what you are good at and know the most about. Those subjects are your stage time opportunities to pursue, and don’t worry, there are many opportunities out there. You do not have to accept invitations that aren’t a good fit for you if you expand your list of places to look for stage time. Here are some ideas that may help provide stage time:

Business meetings: If you attend these, there will be opportunities to give your colleagues an update on the latest research or product or propose a new idea. Don’t wait to be asked. A colleague may welcome your help with an upcoming talk. Presenting with a colleague shows teamwork and leadership.

Journal clubs: Whether you have a formal or informal presentation, taking the time to prepare a top-notch, easy-to-understand review of the latest research will help everyone with whom you work.

Community meetings: Volunteer groups always appreciate a speaker who informs and entertains. If you’re a member, you’ll become known as the go-to speaker. Groups to which your clients belong are a potential resource you may want to consider.

Radio interviews: Local and Internet radio stations are always looking for fresh news and people who interview well and spark audience interest. Questions can be prearranged between you and the host so you can prepare your answers. Some radio shows offer you the opportunity to take questions live or via e-mail, which is a way to highlight your impromptu speaking expertise.

Government business: Healthcare reform, reimbursement for your services, better access to healthful foods, and many other issues that come before legislators require expert testimony or visits to the legislator or his or her aide to explain your position. These speaking opportunities can have a lot of impact if you’re well prepared to persuade.

Children's groups: If you are asked by a local school or other community program that serves children to speak with them about what you know best, this is a communication challenge that can reap big rewards for your professional image. Keeping the attention of a younger audience requires skill and is used as a litmus test by many professional speakers preparing material for adult audiences.

Include Speaking in Your Digital Presence

There's no doubt that potential clients, employers, and even friends perform Internet searches on people they know or want to hire. Internet search results can be defined as a digital presence. Speaking belongs in your digital presence as much as having a website or social media fan page. Do you have a website that includes audio and video clips, or do you have a YouTube channel? If so, you're in the lead already since video is the leading destination of people seeking information on the Internet. In fact, people watch more YouTube videos than they conduct Google searches. In 2009, they watched videos 1 billion times more than they conducted a Google search.³ And in October 2011, people in the United States viewed 42.6 billion videos from all sources, with YouTube being the number one video website accessed.⁴

Giving your audience small tastes of your speaking engages them at another level. Not only are visual learners tuned into an interesting video, people who learn best by hearing you speak can quickly connect with your message in a short, well-produced video or audio clip.

Creating your own video is easier than ever since there are many devices that take video images, and sound levels can be adjusted without using a microphone. Even a conventional digital camera can record a few minutes of high-quality video. It's worth learning a few basic editing techniques so you can post video on your website or a website where you are affiliated.

Short video means just that—no more than two minutes. It is better to break up a message into shorter segments that are easy to understand and use rather than tell the audience more facts in a longer video. This is a key reason that blogs are so popular and widely read. The most successful blogs highlight shorter messages and get to the point quickly. Take your cue from television advertising and aim for well-edited video clips that do the same.

Speaking Pays Dividends

Speaking is still the communication skill most often used and ranks in the top tier of skills valued by employers.⁵ In every facet of your personal life, speaking matters, too. Speaking helps build and maintain positive relationships, which people highly value.

To make your image one you can be proud of, learning to speak with confidence and power is well worth your time and effort. The rewards you will reap extend far beyond that next audience, and can build a lasting legacy as you become known for your key message, trustworthiness, and professional image.

—*Marilyn E. Jess, MS, RD is a certified Wellcoach who has studied the art of speaking since 1998, offers workshops on speaking skills for healthcare providers and is the author of the e-book **Ignite Your Speaking Skills**. A member of Toastmasters International, she earned the designation of Distinguished Toastmaster in 2006.*

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Examination

1. Which of the following is not a question you should ask yourself when trying to determine what niche you want to fill as a speaker?

- A. What am I endlessly curious about?
- B. What topics are most popular so I can book the most speaking engagements?
- C. What kind of work have I done that is so interesting and challenging that I could do it for hours and time seems to stop?
- D. What can I tell an audience about, in depth, that could help them live a better, healthier life?

2. Based on a survey of LinkedIn members, which of the following is not one of the top five factors considered crucial to career success?

- A. Likeability
- B. Solid communication skills
- C. Flexibility
- D. Strong work ethic

3. Which of the following is an example of stage time?

- A. Giving expert testimony before your state legislature
- B. Heading a committee for the PTA
- C. Asking a question during a video conference
- D. All of the above

4. A generic talk is a good way to get a message across without having to prepare a group presentation.

- A. True
- B. False

5. Which of these is not a technique that can help you become a subject matter expert?

- A. Learn all you can about a particular subject.
- B. Speak about any nutrition topic.
- D. Consider speaking about a topic you have endless curiosity about.
- D. Say no to speaking requests outside your expertise.

6. Which audience offers you the best chance to test your message for its believability and simplicity?

- A. A PTA group
- B. A city council meeting
- C. A third-grade health class
- D. A webinar for nurses

7. Radio interviews offer you a chance at both prepared and “off the cuff” speaking.

- A. True
- B. False

8. People watch more YouTube videos than they use Google to perform Internet searches.

- A. True
- B. False

9. Why does a white coat wizard style of speaking work for some speakers?

- A. Audiences are familiar with it.
- B. The speaker is perceived to be an authority on a particular subject.
- C. The media prominently features white coats.
- D. All of the above

10. Which of the following aspects of your image is beyond your control?

- A. The audience you speak with
- B. Your key message
- C. How audiences rate your presentation
- D. Your communication style