

# Business Review

Meeting Planners Guide 2011

PRESENTATIONS

## SPEAK *easy*

A keynote speaker could be the difference between a hit event and a bust. Joe Yazbeck offers some ways to ensure a hit.

By MARK GORDON *Deputy Managing Editor*

**A**fter 3,600 speeches, presentations and public salutations, it's not a surprise that Joe Yazbeck has lots of advice for executives who are about to greet a podium.

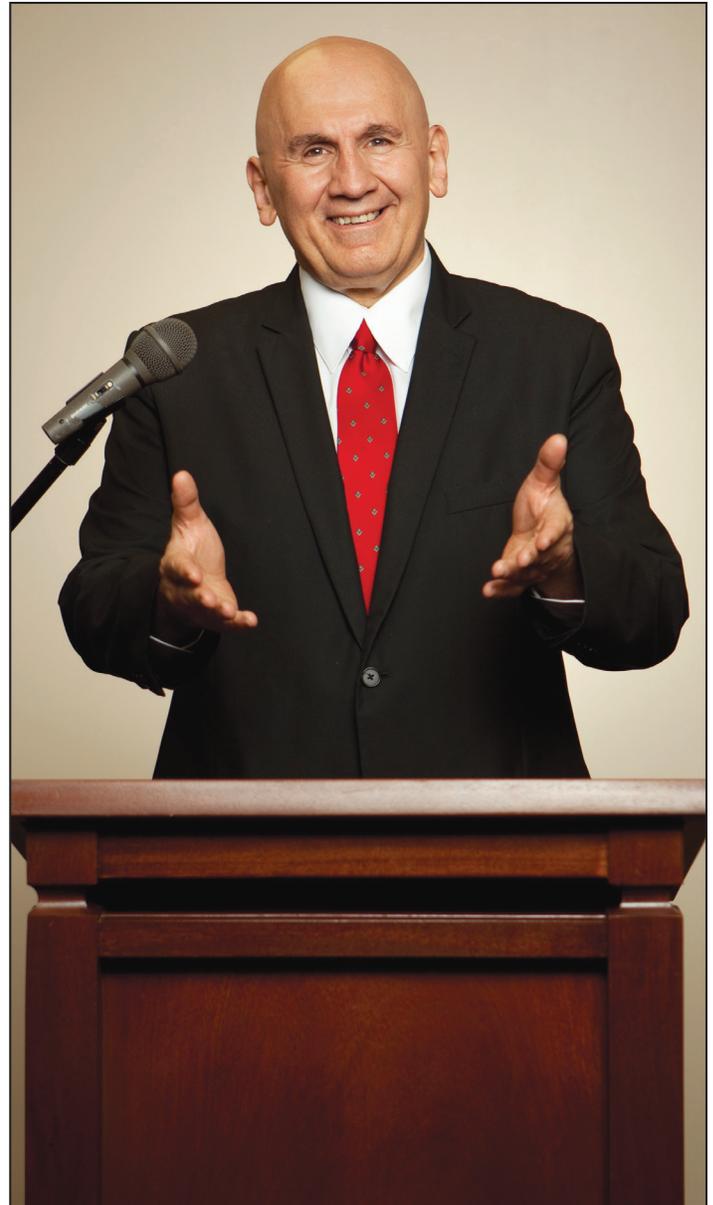
The clearest counsel: Don't think.

It might seem counterintuitive, but thinking could quickly lead to over-thinking, which in turn can paralyze a speaker. "Thinking," says Yazbeck, "is a destructive influence on speaking before a group."

The founder and president of Largo-based Prestige Leader Development, Yazbeck has built a three-decade career off public speaking and coaching others how to do it better. His clients have ranged from candidates for public office to business executives to a Broadway composer.

"Anybody can learn this," says Yazbeck. "This is a talent that can be developed."

While Yazbeck eschews thinking in the actual speech presentation, he wholly endorses it when in preparation mode. Indeed, before a speech, Yazbeck says the key is to prepare for everything and anything that could happen.



Mark Wemple

**Joe Yazbeck** has been in the public speaking development business for 30 years. His firm, Largo-based Prestige Leader Development, trains executives and others on the subtleties of public speaking.

Yazbeck offers many other tips, from storytelling and spacing to tone of voice fluctuations and time spent on stage. Another tip: An oft-repeated suggestion to pretend all the people in the audience are naked in order to calm nerves is really a waste of time, says Yazbeck.

Instead, Yazbeck says to look around for details, from the color of someone's sweater in the front

row to the style of sunglasses on someone's forehead in the last row. "Open your eyes and look at everything," says Yazbeck. "If you can perceive, you can present."

A tip often repeated in public speaking that does hold true, says Yazbeck, is the one that says a public speaker should be a storyteller on stage. Don't merely read words on a page.

"You don't want to be monotonous," says Yazbeck. "Speakers need to be conversational. Make it like you are sitting on your grandpa's lap."

### Speaker's beat

Yazbeck comes to public speaking from a career in theater and music. He also runs Heartbeat Productions, a music recording firm with a focus on vocal coaching and artist production and marketing.

Despite his career, Joe Yazbeck says he was a shy kid when he grew up in the blue-collar town of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., about two hours north of Philadelphia. He came out of his shell when he was six years old at a family funeral. Some relatives knew he could sing well, and they asked him to perform Little Darlin' by The Diamonds.

### TALKING TIPS

Joe Yazbeck, a Largo-based public speaker who trains executives on their public speaking skills, says homework is key to a great speech — no matter the subject or place.

"The biggest pitfall is not being prepared," Yazbeck says. Here are Yazbeck's three tips for acing preparation:

- Why am I here: There's a big difference between a roast for a colleague and a conference on the finer points of the federal estate tax. Yazbeck sometimes tells clients to write down the purpose of a speech on top of every page, so it's always there.

- Who is in the audience: Get to know the makeup of the audience early in the preparation process, says Yazbeck, because that can help set direction and tone. That means an assessment of the politics, religion and other aspects of the audience, if possible. This helps avoid gaffes during the speech.

- What's your product: The ultimate purpose of a speech, says Yazbeck, is key to preparation. For example, you could promote your company or sell something. You could also deliver a call-to-action speech to solicit volunteers or donors for a cause.

Yazbeck jumped on a table and belted out the doo-wop hit.

"The whole group started feeling better," says Yazbeck. "I thought, wow, I could make people happy just by doing this."

The son of a World War II veteran, Yazbeck later trained for theater and public speaking in England. His sessions included being heckled on purpose, so he could improve his concentration skills. He even dodged a few apples. Says Yazbeck: "I was trained to not be disturbed by anything in front of me."

Even Yazbeck, though, has had some regrettable moments on

stage. He recalls one time, in the early 1990s, he spoke before a large group of doctors and medical professionals at a conference. Yazbeck brought some of his personal beliefs about the flaws in medical insurance coverage to his speech, and he could see many in the audience weren't amused.

The double lesson: One, know your audience. And two, honesty and sincerity in public speaking are admirable aspirations, but overdoing it can backfire. "I came off as too much against the grain," says Yazbeck. "I was a little too extreme in my examples."

*'Anybody can learn (public speaking). This is a talent that can be developed.'*

**JOE YAZBECK**, Prestige Leader Development, Largo