

Understanding Teleprompters:

HOW TO USE THEM TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

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It is no secret that being a good communicator is key to success in business. We value those who have the ability to communicate well, and that often includes public speaking. One proven tool to aid in the delivery of a speech or presentation is the teleprompter. However, knowing when and how to use one may be just as instrumental in earning that standing ovation.

History of the Teleprompter

A quick search on Wikipedia reveals a rich history of the teleprompter. Simply put, a teleprompter is a device that “prompts” the person speaking with a visual text of a speech or script. This allows the reader to read the text word for word, ensuring a consistent and accurate speech, while maintaining the illusion of spontaneity.

In the 1950s, actor, Fred Barton, Jr. came up with the idea of a teleprompter. He later helped found the TelePrompter Corporation, which built the first devices. Although in some countries it may be referred to as an AutoCue (a UK brand name), the corporation TelePrompter became the generic term for these devices in many parts of the world.

The earliest teleprompter was nothing more than a scroll of paper with a script printed on it that was then run over a mechanical device operated by a hidden technician. It wasn't long before the initial version was improved upon by becoming automated and mounted on a television camera. These improvements, though better than cue cards and a standalone prompter, were not enough because the speaker was still looking slightly off camera. Thus came the next, and most important improvement: reflective glass. Instead of being mounted facing the speaker, the prompter was mounted below the camera and facing up, or mounted above the camera and facing down and the text was controlled and advanced by an off-camera operator. The placement and construction of this glass prevented it from being seen by the camera and also eliminated the speaker's slightly off camera look. This is important

because this advancement allows the speaker to look directly into the camera, and more readily connect with the audience. It appears as if the speaker is looking the audience in the eye, and, as most people know, good eye contact engenders a sense of trust. As such, most presidents and top-level politicians have used teleprompters since Lyndon Johnson's first use in the 1960s.

The computer revolution in the 1980s brought many advances. Scrolling paper rolls were replaced with monitors and computer-generated text as early as 1982, but were still in use as late as 1992. The advancement of technology has also enabled teleprompters to become lighter and thinner, straying away from old bulky ray tube monitors to ultra-slim flat screen monitors. Voice recognition software has also played a part. For example, high-end news organizations are testing teleprompters with the ability to be voice activated, eliminating the need for a separate teleprompter technician, and ensuring that the prompter is always going the right speed for the speaker.

Today's Types of Teleprompters

The three main modern types of teleprompters are camera mounted, presidential, and floor or stand mounted.

The camera mounted teleprompter works with text being bounced off special glass placed in front of the lens. This type of prompter is used mainly for pre-recorded videos for speakers, guests, or top-level management. They come in a variety of shapes, sizes, weights and need to be coordinated with the AV provider to make sure that the right type is used and used correctly. With tablets, and camera phones, becoming more and more popular in today's society, a new breed of lightweight and portable camera mounts are available, making it easier and cheaper for on-site shots.

The presidential teleprompter works basically in the same manner as the camera mounted monitor, except the mirrored glass is mounted at the base of a thin pole instead of on a camera. However, just like

the on-camera models, the speaker is able to look directly at the audience through the glass as if it were not there. This is great for a live event. They are almost always used in pairs - one to the left and one to the right of center - encouraging the speaker to change focus and look at the entire audience. Remember to take this into account when getting pricing. Additionally, the presidential prompter allows for clear camera angles down the center of the room for recording or projection purposes.

The floor/stand teleprompter can be placed at an angle on the floor, mounted on a stand, or hung from rigging points in the back of the room. When using them by themselves, floor mounted prompters can be just as good as presidential prompters but it can cause the speaker to look down more or make them appear as if they are only talking to the first two rows of attendees. The more familiar the speaker is with their speech, the more likely they are able to get away with only glancing at the monitors to keep their place. Placing additional monitors in the back of the room can help with this as well, but has the disadvantage of allowing anyone in the room to simply turn and read the speech, detracting from the illusion of spontaneity.

In addition to the actual teleprompter itself, there are some components that are also essential -- the software and the remote control. Both camera mounted and presidential prompters require images to be reflected off of a piece of glass, which then requires that the original text be reversed resulting in almost all prompter software having this feature. Teleprompters also require a way in which to stop, start, and manipulate the speed of text. This is almost always a kind of hardware device used by the teleprompter operator. It is essential that whatever company the teleprompter comes from includes the appropriate hardware and software for operation.

When should/shouldn't you use a Teleprompter?

Using teleprompters, such as a presidential monitor, infers professionalism and makes a speaker look more "presidential." In general, prompters make the speaker look better as they allow them to connect with the audience, whether live or prerecorded, through eye contact, and studies have shown that eye contact can be a major factor in whether or not we trust someone. Not only is the physical interaction between the speaker and the audience important, but so is the speaker's ability to relay the message accurately and confidently. Many times the person giving the speech is not the one that wrote it. As such, a carefully crafted message and the ability to deliver it, via a teleprompter, is essential to being successful.

The average person (not a trained actor, or someone with a photographic memory) has a difficult time memorizing large chunks of text. This is why many speakers use PowerPoint or notecards to keep them on-track. However, these methods can be cumbersome and make the presenter feel the need to add graphics or slides when they may not be relevant or useful. Teleprompters are also used when a speaker needs to convey a lot of detail or technical specifications, but more often than not a speaker will want to use a teleprompter to feel more confident in speaking. If a speaker doesn't have much experience speaking in front of crowds or in front of a camera, a teleprompter can help relieve the nervousness or insecurity of forgetting their speech. However, though teleprompters are a great aid, it is still key to train an inexperienced speaker.

Just as knowing when to use a teleprompter is important, knowing when NOT to use one is just as essential. The fact is that most events don't call for a teleprompter and it's important to determine if it's really needed. The budget of an event can play a very big part in the use of a teleprompter, because you not only have to pay for the equipment but you have to pay for the person to operate it. Depending on the duration of the event, the costs can add up, especially when using the presidential prompters or

floor mounts, as they are always rented in pairs. Cost is not the only factor when considering a teleprompter; the environment is just as important. If the room and audience are small, the use of a teleprompter might be awkward if used. Imagine being in a small breakout session and having the speaker behind a pair of presidential monitors. Considering all these factors will help any planner make the right decision, but the best advice might be to “know thy speaker.” Working with the speaker on the decision may be the most important decision of all.

Preparing Speakers for a Teleprompter

Picking the right equipment is only half the battle when it comes to delivering a good speech. The speaker and the speech itself have to be a finely tuned machine. Options include hiring a speechwriter, which is surprisingly inexpensive, and they can work with the speaker to hone a message and to use language comfortable for the speaker. It is very important to write as one speaks, because if the language isn't familiar, it often sounds stiff and awkward. Everyone has their own idiosyncrasies in the way they talk, and writing those into the speech may make it sound more natural. Using small interjections like “so” and “now,” for example, will help with that familiarity.

Not only does the speech have to be well written, the speaker delivering it has to also be well trained. Training is very important, especially if the speaker has never used or has limited experience with a teleprompter. The speaker should rehearse in the space before the event and allow plenty of time with the prompter itself. Even the most experienced speaker can find a prompter a little unsettling for the first time. Otherwise, a prompter will likely hurt the presentation, rather than help it. One of the most important tips is to make sure that the speaker knows they are in control, not the teleprompter. It's the operator's job to make sure the speaker has the words they need, when they need them, not the job of the speaker to try and “keep up” with the prompter. The operator should be at the back of the house tech table, or backstage, and preferably with

his or her own speaker or headphones in order to monitor the speaker carefully. Having a good operator is very important and is worth the extra money. Budgeting training time with the operator as well as with the teleprompter can be the difference between a disaster and a great speech. The more time spent practicing and memorizing the speech the more likely the speaker will be able to look away from the monitor and engage with the audience. Not only that but they will also be able to deal with and accommodate for last minute changes or hiccups.

Conclusion

Knowing your audience, your prompter equipment, and your speech will ultimately reward you with a successful presentation. It is wise when budgeting to accommodate for not only the equipment itself, but for the operator and a possible script writer as well. Also, make sure that plenty of time is allowed for rehearsal and practice. Practicing with the equipment and with the operator can help make or break a perfect prompter presentation.

About

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After graduating from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. in 1995 with a degree in Technical Theatre, Brandt found himself working for a theatrical equipment rental company. It was there that he made initial contacts that would draw him away from the theater and into hotel ballrooms around the world. Just under a year later, he was hired by metroConnections to help build their event decor fabrication shop and to manage their growing event rental inventory. He also quickly branched into a technology role, building the company's first website as well as designing interactive game shows for teambuilding events within the next couple years. His role has continued to evolve over the years and now he's “the man on the headset” for most of metroConnections' large scale meetings and events, helping to produce hundreds of meetings and technical productions.