

Finding a Topic: Serendipity

Introduction: Sometimes to find a good speech topic you just have to start digging around where good topics hang out. If your audience will be people who are college educated, then you'd probably look at the media which educated people use. By and large, that means you'd not look at the "popular" media - or at least most of it: no USA Today, no People magazine, no WWE Wrestling, and so on. You'd probably look at the more serious-minded media (such as New Yorker, news weeklies, and online sources such as Arts and Letters Daily) and at scholarly publications.

But as you start tracking down leads on a topic, you might find that you get side-tracked by new discoveries. A printed article might suggest an idea, and then when you start researching it you might get led to another. And then, while you're interviewing an expert about that topic, the expert might point you in still another direction. So, the search for a good topic that's well focused and narrowed, and which will resonate well with your audience and gives you lots to work with in terms of stories, and examples, and illustrations, and so on, is something of an adventure. Adventures take time - they can't be rushed. So you'd better get on it right away.

Watch how this topic changed and evolved through the process of narrowing and research:

Gee, what'll I talk about? I just helped a friend sell something on Ebay. Humm. Online commerce. That's a good topic. I know something about it, too. And I know you should have the little lock down in the corner of the screen locked, and that credit card companies will insure your card. I've bought clothes online, had photos finished online, and I know a couple of people who run ISP businesses (Internet Service Providers) who could give me expert help. Off to the internet to check it out.

[Time passes]

Okay, so I found articles on how EBay works, including its IRS 10-k and a bunch of press releases at Ebay's website and lots of articles in Salon and CNet. But I also ran into horror stories of people getting ripped off from having their credit cards stolen or from buying things that never arrive. Okay, so I'll spin this off into how to buy and sell online safely. Back to the internet.

[Time passes]

Lots and lots of really trustworthy "tips and tricks." I call the local Better Business Bureau, [Time passes] and they give me a phone interview and send me stuff in the mail. Okay, so I have the "do's and don't's," but I don't have the good statistics about how many transactions there are, how many dollars are involved, how many of them are "fraud," how many people get scammed, how many credit card loss claims are filed each day, and so on. So I still need to get the factual basis.

I make an appointment to talk to someone at cboss.com. [Time passes] While waiting in the lobby, I chat with the receptionist. Chris is a computer science major and tells me that if I really want to know about safe use of the internet I should talk to the computer club at Boardman High School.

Oops. I could either do a speech about what these kids are doing at a local high school ... that'd be unusual and interesting, I bet, or I could re-think my direction. Can I really tell a college audience that I'm going to inform them about internet commerce and that I got my information mainly from students at Boardman High? Nah. Don't want to do that. They would feel that they are being talked down to, insulted.

So I call the professor in Marketing at YSU who teaches the internet commerce course. [Time passes] He gives me some journal titles, and I head off to look them up in the library. There, I do a card catalog search and I find that internet fraud is really close to multi-level marketing fraud. I go back to the marketing prof and ask him about multi-level marketing. "Oh, yes. That's the Tupperware, Amway and Fuller Brush model!" Yep, good business model, been around for a long time. Lots of trouble there, too. How so, I ask? Look up "pyramid scheme," he advised me.

Off to the library and internet again. {Time passes} I find the <http://www.vandruff.com/mlm.html> site. Don't know who wrote it, don't know if it's true, but lots of background. Humm. Pyramid schemes and scams. Okay, now it's back to the library to find better definitions and materials that are in the mainstream press. Business Index will do that. Oh, and I'll want to find a bunch of case histories, too. What are some examples of people who've tried to bilk people by using pyramid schemes? What are some downright outrageous ones that

people in class would laugh at, that are a bit theatrical?

Now I know I'm onto something. Pyramid schemes - get rich quick schemes - appeal to us. Why is the Ohio lottery so popular? It's a legal get-rich-quick scam! Yep, this will touch people, get their interest.

[Time passes]

Got 'em! Lots of articles. Back to Better Business Bureau: what do you have on Pyramid scams? [Time passes] More articles. Back home to dig through this stuff.... Huh? What's this? Charles Borelli involved in a Florida pyramid land scheme? Humm. He was purchasing land at \$16 an acre, subdividing it into twenty-three lots, and selling each lot off at \$10 a piece. He promised all investors that their initial \$10 investment would translate into \$5,300,000 in just two years! Wow! Who was this guy? Hummm. Real name, Carlo "Charles" Ponzi. Born in Parma, Italy, in 1882. The Ponzi Scheme is named after him! Wow! The real deal! Even the US government has a website on him (<http://www.sec.gov/answers/ponzi.htm>)!

Now I'm there! A colorful character (like a Trafficant!!), a scheme, lots of greedy but dumb investors wow, this is terrific! Off to the library/internet to find Ponzi stories!! [Time passes] So what kind of speech?

INTRO

Give me \$1 and I'll give you \$10 tomorrow!
Pyramid scheme Ponzi variant

BODY

1. Who was Ponzi?
2. What's the Ponzi scheme? (How it works, examples)
3. Are there Ponzi schemes around today'?

CONCLUSION

No, don't give me a buck - unless you think of it as a contribution!! :)

So ... I started off with "EBay" and ended up with something else. I started off

with an idea of how I'd organize, but the materials I found required a completely different pattern. I started off with something rather dull, abstract and forgettable, but ended up with something much more lively and interesting.

Point is, you can't plan the speech without first starting your research. And the research keeps expanding until your Moment of Zen (The Daily Show) or your Epiphany (the moment of understanding - the Eureka! moment).