

MC Mastery

Tips from the Best MC's in NSAA and Australia

**National
Speakers
Association of
Australia**



Experts Who Speak

Are You Ready?

As part of the 2011 “Get More” theme for NSAA Vic, we ran a MC Mastery workshop in March 2011. Several members were already performing MC duties and wanted to take it to the next level. Others wanted to know what it takes to be an MC and also a GREAT MC.

We asked MC’s from the NSAA tribe to contribute 5 tips to being a Great MC. The response was fabulous! Some people gave us 10 tips, others gave us chunks out of their own MC eBooks, others gave detailed descriptions on their tips. It is a wealth of MC tips.

The key message coming from everyone is that everyone does it differently. You need to create your own style. But there is a definite role of an MC and you need to be clear on what that is and how you can best fill it.

As with your speaking, the role and function of an MC is not dependant on theory, it is dependent on action. If you want to improve your skills as an MC, do the work! Volunteer to MC events, work with charities, and offer it as a value add to your keynote. Only by doing it will you get better at and really understand what is required.

Huge thanks to all of the NSAA members who contributed to this eBook.

Big thanks to the NSAA Vic Senior Vice President De Backman-Hoyle who arranged the logistics and venue for the session and to Sandi Givens for her assistance facilitating and sharing her vast experience. The biggest thanks go to you – the attendees. It was a fabulous sharing of knowledge and experience. From the initial feedback, it sounds like most people got some real value out of the session.

If you have any further questions about what it takes to be a Great MC, please don’t hesitate to contact the contributor who’s MC Tips inspired you. Just another benefit of being a NSAA member!

Yours in Speaking (and MCing)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Warwick Merry". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Warwick Merry
President
NSAA Vic

Andrew Horabin CSP



50% of MC'ing is event management

Even if you're MC'ing a conference with a PCO, I think a good half of what you're doing is managing the event - talking to catering, to AV, to the speakers, moving delegates in, all that stuff. There are lots of little things that go with this but the most important thing, I think, is the attitude - that the MC work doesn't all happen behind the lectern.

Coach your speakers to be on time

When I'm MCing, I usually ask the speakers how long they're speaking to see if they even know. I ask them if they're likely to use all of that time. I ask if they have a watch. I try to get a sense of how well they track time when they're speaking and whether it will be my job to make sure they get off on time. Timing is really important and many a good speaker has blown the program because the MC didn't coach them or wasn't assertive enough to take them off.

Humour's great but don't force it

Pretty much everyone loves a funny MC. But not everyone is naturally funny and most of us prefer someone who is relaxed and cheerful to someone who is trying too hard to entertain. When we push too much to be funny or entertaining, we're actually asking the audience for something - for support, for pity, for a laugh. Don't ask your audience for anything, it's not about you. Just give. If you're not funny, be really well prepared. Or do some good and interesting research. Or just be happy and warm and positive. I reckon that's better than trying to be funny. And if you do some humour and it doesn't work, shrug it off and smile, don't make a big deal of it. That just makes people uncomfortable. What we want most from the audience is a sense of confidence. We're putting our faith you in to take care of us.

Name what's happening

I reckon another great quality in an MC is the ability to name where we're at. You're our representative on stage. Sometimes you can say, "I reckon we need some food" or "Feels like we didn't get all our questions answered" or "That sun has just started to heat up this room, hasn't it?" You're saying things that people are thinking but might not be saying. It builds rapport and - when you get it right - reinforces the connection between people in the room.

Check pronunciations

How do you pronounce their name? The business name? The topic? Don't ask them while you're introducing them.

You don't have to gush

You can say thanks without suggesting the speaker has saved a life. You can say it was great without suggesting it's the best presentation you've ever seen. You can pick out a couple of things that were useful instead of suggesting that we're all going to transform our lives from what we've heard. You don't have to gush to say thanks and sometimes we even like it if you can be a bit irreverent and casual, too. Watching an MC blow smoke up a speaker's bum is, for many of us, uncomfortable. And it's particularly embarrassing to hear the MC gush when most of the room is thinking it was just OK. So be positive, be specific, be grateful and be sincere.

Don't burn the audience

This is mostly true in comedy rooms but can happen at conferences and events, too. Some MC's start to get a few laughs and get some momentum and decide they're having such a good time, they'll just keep going. Get on, warm them up and get off. You're not the star of the show. Don't burn the audience. As soon as they're warm, hand them over to the speaker.

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Timothy Hyde



One point of contact

This is a tip I picked up many years ago and it really is a great one that can potentially save you a lot of embarrassment and many tricky situations.

In many assignments where you are MC at an event, there are many people who feel that they can give you instructions. There is the CEO, the Committee and other prominent people at the event.

I always establish early on with my client, that I will only take instructions from ONE person. If anyone else comes up to me and asks “can I have 5 minutes onstage” or “can you read out this notice” etc. I tell them they must clear it with my point of contact first.

This chain of command can and will save you from all sorts of tricky situations that have the possibility of making you look bad.

Don't leave your Notes on the Lectern

There's nothing worse than bounding back up to the lectern to introduce the next speaker or event and finding your sheet of notes is gone! They can blow away, get gathered up by the previous speaker, tidied up by AV people, used to scribble down a note etc. Either take them with you in a folio / clipboard or TAPE a copy of them to the Lectern.

Keep the AV People onside!

Keeping the Audio Visual people onside with you will certainly smooth your job and help get through the inevitable emergencies. I technique I learnt from Ron Tacchi is this. When you first meet the AV guys, make sure you write down their names. Then as you progress through your setup and familiarisation of the room, write down anything that needs to be changed or adjusted. Then, at the appropriate time, you can give them a list of everything you need done all at once, rather than interrupting them time after time. You can also do this with hotel and the banquet staff, who deal with such things as tables, chairs, jugs of water etc.

Timing

One of your roles as the MC is to watch and control the timing. Here are some tips to help you do this. Firstly, make sure you subtly remind any speaker how important it is to keep the event on track. Secondly, make sure you double check with the speaker how long they have been allotted. In most cases you are not the person who has negotiated with the speaker to be there, so you need to check that you are all aware of how long there is available. Thirdly, make sure you discuss with the speaker how you are going to signal the time remaining to them and the fact that you would like them to acknowledge this signal. Fourthly, how are you going to deal with the situation if things are running late? Do they cut short to finish on the allotted finishing time or do they stick to their allocated time. Most speakers should work with you here to get the event back on track. Discussing these points early on can go a long way towards solving potential timing problems.

Introductions

A Biography is not an Introduction! Once you start running events on a regular basis, you will learn the difference. Good speakers and presenters will know the difference too. If they give you an introduction, it's a great sign that they know what they are doing. It's surprising though, how few actually do it! The introduction by the MC can often set up the speech, preparing the audience for the message.

If you have to write an introduction for a guest speaker, one very easy structure that I use is this.

Why this Speaker? Why this Subject? Why this Audience? Why Now?

If you answer these 4 points in your introduction, it gives a nice flow to the introduction. You establish the credibility of the Speaker, the importance of the subject, the link between the topic and the audience and finish with excitement.

If the Speaker insists on you reading out a long bio/introduction make sure of two things.

1/ Frame it by informing the audience that you have been asked to share the following information.
2/ Make the Speaker aware that their time starts from when you start the introduction. A current trend these days is for speakers to often have their own Video introductions. These can be 4 or 5 minutes long. Make sure this time is included as part of their allocated time or you can get 5 minutes behind straight away.

People Moving

Another danger spot in running any event is getting people back in the room on time. The 20 minute coffee breaks that drifts on to 30 minutes etc. Here are a few tips to keep things moving.

1. Be punctual yourself. If you say you are starting at 1pm, start then. If people see that you are always 5 minutes late they start to factor this in to their behaviour.
2. Have some fun prizes or awards that you give out to the first people back in the room.
3. Have a piece of music that you always play loudly that signals times up.
4. There are various PowerPoint Countdown timers that you can display on screen.
5. People Movers.

Bring this up early at your briefing session.

If possible, have some designated people to act as "People Movers." I always try and get word to a Conference Committee that their help is also absolutely essential for the smooth running of any event. If these people are on the ball and on your side, they can be helping you get people in and out of the room as well as the designated people movers. If they are not on the ball, they can often be the worst offenders, out there chatting to groups of people delaying your start times.

A pre-emptive strike is the best approach here.

Themes

This is an area where just a little time and thought can have a great impact. What is the theme of the event? What Words or Slogans are being used? What is the colour theme? Once you have asked these questions, often ideas will come to you that will add to the theme.

Consider the way you dress. The colour of the Tie or Jacket. Would a hat add to the theme? Consider your MC Notes. Do you use a Black Folio? Perhaps a Clipboard is more appropriate. Is there a Prop you can have on the lectern – Oil Can, Pumpkin, Steering wheel? A few minutes Brainstorming can pay off in big returns and shows the audience and your client that you have done your homework.

If you need to learn some techniques for idea generation, we have two publications available on our website. One is on Brainstorming and the other on a range of Creative Techniques for Idea Generation. <http://www.timothyhyde.com/resources.html>

Scripts

There is a danger in being “Over Scripted.” By this I mean an MC who is just up there reading everything out OR being up there and reciting a script they have memorised. Both of these can come across as too rigid and the audience will have trouble “connecting” with you. Now, I don’t mean that you shouldn’t be very well prepared about what you are going to say, who you are going to introduce etc. Just try and be a little more relaxed and flexible and you will come across as a better MC.

MC’s Resource Toolkit

I wish I’d started mine a lot earlier than I did, so if there is just one Tip you take on board from this little publication, it’s this one.

Start keeping a book of IDEAS.

Use this to record - Jokes, Ice Breakers, Stories, Introductions, Quotations, Thank You’s etc. In the Creative Thinking book mentioned above, I suggest you carry around a small note book or index cards with you at all time anyway. When you read or hear anything that could be usable in the future, write it down. This might be on TV, reading a magazine, on the radio etc.

Then once a week, gather all the fragments and record them in a Master Document.

I do this on my computer, in a Word Document. Then, every now and then I print it out and it becomes my Resource Book. I bind this with a Comb Binder and leave it sitting on my desk.

If I’m preparing for a job or actually at a job, I can flick through the book and spot quotes, phrases and bits that may be useful. Often you don’t know exactly what a speaker is going to be talking about and you can suddenly find an appropriate bit to add into the thank you.

I also use the printed document to record what I’ve done, To DO lists etc, while at the job. This then gets updated on returning to the office. I also jot down things that I may have said spontaneously that worked well. The Resources book becomes a central point for all this information and ensures that ideas don’t get lost.

Your Role

The last concept that I think is important for all MC’s to understand is this. It’s not about you. It’s about the event. Being the MC is not about showcasing your own talents, but about running the event smoothly. The attendees should be remarking “what a great event” and not “what a great MC.”

Often they will not even know how hard you worked in the preparation and planning, in the on the spot adjustments and tweaking to make things fabulous. Often, you will even not get thanked or acknowledged for the contribution you made!

Once you understand this you have made an important step towards being a successful and dynamic MC.

You will know yourself after any event how well you did! If things didn’t go as planned, you will know what you have to do to improve and prepare for next time. If things did go well, you will be storing the information away to use again.

Further Resources

The MC Resource page on our Website contains a list of Resources that I highly recommend for further study. <http://www.timothyhyde.com/resources.html>

Click through to the MC Section for specific suggestions including books by Rachel Green & Peter Miller

<http://www.timothyhyde.com>

<http://www.timothyhyde.typepad.com/>

Yvonne Adele CSP



Always have something up your sleeve

When a speaker is running late or there are technical difficulties, you'll be the one keeping the audience happy while they wait. Having an Icebreaker activity ready can save the day. For example, ask people to partner up with someone and find out 1 thing they've got in common plus 1 thing about them that is unique to their partner. OR ask people to imagine they were someone else for a day. Then get them to partner up and introduce themselves to each other, in character – as that person: 'Hi I'm an airline pilot' or 'Hi, I'm Oprah' and have a short conversation together.

Do your research.

Speak to each of the speakers at least a few weeks before the event. If you are not able to contact them directly, ask the conference organiser to pass on a list of questions from you. I find it really effective to get the speakers to answer a series of similar questions but ones that are unrelated to the conference, like:

- a) When you were little, you wanted to be....
- b) The first album you bought was...
- c) If you could have one super power, what would it be?

You might not use all of these answers, but as you are introducing the speaker, (or in your outro) it will be effective if you tied one of them in. It is always a good idea to Google each speaker too – you can find out some great up-to-date stuff about them that they might not have in their bio/intro. (keep it professional!)

Check on the Social Media activity

If you're up to speed with Twitter, ask your conference organiser whether there is a hashtag in use for the Conference. If there is: get into the backchannel by adding your (relevant) comments using the hashtag. If there is not : ask them if it's ok that you create one and have them let the conference audience know what it is at regular intervals through the conference.

Give extra value

Sometimes the conference could use some extra material they could use to promote the conference and sell more tickets. Offer to interview some of the speakers over Skype and record it for the Conference website. It's a great way to give potential delegates a taste of what they'll get at the Conference.

Be calm, nice, kind, helpful and resourceful

The most common comments I get in my MC testimonials are that I was an extra pair of hands for the Conference organiser. That I helped the event to run smoothly. That I was unflappable. These things are often more important to the organiser than the work you do on stage as an MC. Even if you are freaking out about timing or AV issues it is your job to SLOW down and LOWER your voice when conversing with the conference organiser.

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Michael Neaylon

Introductions

Have a killer intro that's energized, succinct, confident, engaging and welcoming. First impressions count so drill, drill, drill this, and you'll have the audience on side right from the outset

Sell

You're a charming, time efficient diplomat and salesperson. Sell the content and other speakers with your own inimitable style and keep the show running smoothly



Breathe

Remember to breathe. I was at an event last night and without exception the MC and every speaker went too fast. Practice by getting a pencil and put a forward slash (/) to slow down, use a judicious pause, contact the audience and breathe

Host

Be gracious with speakers and audience alike. Create a relationship between the two. You're the connector

Own the Place

You're in da house. Your house. Get there early, scope out the venue, and rehearse walking up to stage with the type of microphone you'll be using (in the shoes you'll be wearing). You'll feel more confident in taking complete ownership of the space. Audiences love it when they're in safe hands.

www.mcme.com.au

PADDY SPRUCE CSP

Flexibility

The ability to speak impromptu. This includes dialogue with the audience, filling in when there is a delay etc

Humour

Ability to deliver humorous responses similar to a comedian when someone interrupts or interjects.

Vocal Technique

An authoritative voice that can work without a mike.



Research

Willingness to become familiar with the culture of the organisation for whom you are working before the event.

Get Engaged

Ability to engage the audience emotionally and verbally.

Control

Strong assertiveness to maintain the timing of an event even to the extent of intervening when a speaker is going over time.

Clarity

Ability to read well from the platform when introducing speakers.

Refreshing

Lift the energy of an audience in the short breaks in between speakers.

Plan for Disaster

Fill in for a speaker at the last minute with exercises, quizzes, leading group discussions and even taking the place of the speaker.

Energizing

The ability to maintain high energy to lift the audience after a flat presentation.

www.paddyspruce.com.au

Camille Valvo



Work with a run sheet.

Whether 10 or 10,000, with all the key players on the same page with you, your programme will run smoothly and to time. Be flexible, try not to cram too much in and include all relevant contact details (venue, speakers, and other team members).

Intros on Top Half of A4 Sheet

Intros on top half of A4 sheet only, so if it's longer (god help us with the bios!), then have another A4 1/2 stapled to it and turn as you read. This way you are only a short distance from eye contact with the audience and they are not looking at the top of your head as you read down an A4 sheet.

Put a professional in the drivers' seat.

As an organiser, not only are you juggling multiple roles and a myriad of jobs, but your credibility is on the line. A professional host or MC can bring your event to life and they have the skill set to engage your group, keep the programme on time and leave you, the CEO and other staff to do what you do best. (Whether that's networking, handing out awards or just enjoying the festivities).

Check all audio visual equipment (and recheck!)

Yes, a microphone is essential, especially if the numbers are over 20. Even if there are just a few announcements or speeches to be made, a microphone gives control, confidence and clarity. A pre-event check is critical, to ensure the sound reaches everyone in the room and you are comfortable using it (like an ice cream cone!). Background music is great as long it is consistent with the theme and of course turned off when anyone is speaking.

Deliver the important and heavy information up front.

Your group can relax, eat, drink and be merry and you will have delivered your key messages. You may also want to eat before you go-chances are you won't get time and that one glass of bubbly will undo you!

Do not give the floor or microphone to anyone who has been drinking!

Unless karaoke, off colour jokes and droning monologue is what you planned, a professional MC or one competent person up front will ensure continuity and professionalism.

In case the speaker/entertainment is delayed or does a no-show, have a backup plan.

This is rare, but can happen so if your programme is flexible you may be able to swap things around while you wait. A quick trivia or team building activity can keep attendees involved and entertained. (Or perhaps you can sing and dance?)

Thank those who donated anything towards the occasion (or supported you in any way).

These people are the lifeblood of your event, and future events, so make sure you publicly thank them. And don't forget the venue staff, audio and visual who are key to making your event a great experience.

Relax and enjoy your event.