Elon Musk Is An Awful Speaker. But Keep Listening.

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Love him or not, respect him or not, there's little argument that Elon Musk is not a genius. But with all of his enormous talents, and his remarkable intelligence, there's one thing that he doesn't do very well. He's not a very good public speaker.

Don't believe me? Then take 12 minutes out of your life and watch this YouTube video of Musk's 2015 presentation to a climate change conference in Paris. As a professional speaker myself, I found his presentation style to be pretty awful.

Musk breaks almost every presentation rule and violates almost every platform skill. He mumbles and he stutters. He doesn't engage his audience. He brings very little humor, energy or liveliness to his presentation. He stands still throughout most of his speech. His slides are small, boring and too dense. He doesn't leverage technologies like video and graphics to enhance his points. Musk sometimes loses his train of thought and then returns to it. He seems at times as if he's only speaking to himself and not to a roomful of people. He appears to look more at his monitors than the audience. He puts his hands in his pockets.

Professional speakers — like me — don't do this.

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We're trained to give a show. A happening. A performance. An experience. We strut around the stage, gesticulating, pantomiming, waving and acting. We use words like "Boom!"

“Pow! “Yes!” and “Nailed it!” The great speakers I know don’t even use PowerPoint slides because they tell stories, weave tales and share lessons with humor and personal insights. And if they do lean on technology it’s not with boring charts and graphs like Musk uses, but funny videos, striking images and pithy quotes from iconic historical figures. They jump and dance and sweat and yell and bring dynamism to an event. They make their audiences shout responses, embrace each other and walk over hot coals.

Musk doesn’t do that. So by comparison to the pros, he’s a pretty awful speaker. And yet I couldn’t stop watching his speech. In fact, I’ve watched it a few times. Why is that? Am I climate change advocate? An environmentalist? An oil industry supporter? Is it because I’m an Elon Musk fanboy? Well, OK, a little.

The reason why his presentation was so compelling had nothing to do with his presentation skills. It was because of him. And his content.

I wanted to hear what Elon Musk had to say about this issue because I’m interested in him. I think he’s extremely smart, and his point of view interests me. I know he does his research. I know that when he talks about a topic near and dear to his heart (and his business, which is selling electric vehicles) he’s going to have something relevant to say. And I want to hear that, regardless of whether he’s talking from behind a podium or sitting on the back of a horse.

And his content didn’t disappoint. Musk broke down an enormous issue (climate change) into a simple, 12-minute explanation along with how he would go about solving it (a carbon tax). It doesn’t matter whether you agree with him or not. What matters is that he was able to deliver his message succinctly. No hot coals. No sweat. No jumping, screaming or yelling. Too many speakers focus on these theatrics. Not enough pay attention to their message. They know they’ve got little new to say. So

they cover up their lack of content with bells and whistles.

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Of course, a minimum level of communication skills is important when speaking to a group. But in the end, it’s not about the speaker at all. It’s about the content. That’s what people came to hear. If the information you’re going to provide to an audience is really important for them, then they’ll listen to you regardless of how bad a speaker you are. Elon Musk is a pretty awful speaker. But I listened.

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