

My 20/20 Outlook

Seeing my way from employee to entrepreneur.

PAULINE A. BLACHFORD, CC

When I started my Toastmasters journey two years ago, I knew *why* I wanted to practice public speaking. I had spent the previous 17 years working in customer relations for a leading optometry clinic and had developed a passion for eye health. I had watched our optometrists ensure their clients' best vision health and had even seen one optometrist detect early retinal cancer in a patient, allowing that patient to obtain early treatment.

My passion for eye health was also based on personal experience. As a girl, in my home country of Guyana, I had witnessed my grandmother go blind from cataracts because she did not have access to eye care. More recently, my granddaughter was diagnosed with a prescription of minus 6.00 at the age of 2. Her glasses enabled her to see the world clearly for the very first time. (My daughter-in-law captured this moment in a video which is on my website: paulineblachford.com/about.)

From a professional standpoint, my purpose for public speaking was also 20/20. I had recently started my own business, consulting with optometry practices on how to increase their bookings, improve eyewear sales and enhance employee engagement. Speaking at optometry conferences would give me a platform to share my unique strategies.

The question therefore was not *why*, but *how*. As in, *how* to convince audiences of optometrists to adopt my strategies? *How* to engage large audiences when I was used to communicating and coaching one-on-one? And *how* could I become comfortable promoting my own services after spending two decades promoting the optometrists for whom I worked?

I discovered the answers to all these questions after joining the White Rock Club in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. I learned that the key to giving a compelling presentation was to trust my material. I have the knowledge, experience and research findings to support my strategies. When I focus on the importance of the information I am providing—instead of how I am performing or how I am being perceived by the audience—my conviction shines through and my presentations are more convincing.

With regard to engaging large audiences, I learned that I do not have to make eye contact with every attendee. Rather, if I connect with a handful of people, through eye contact, facial expression and appropriate hand gestures, the whole audience feels



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engaged. Also, practicing Table Topics helps me give meaningful and concise responses during the Q&A session at the end of my presentations. This is another way I show my attendees that I care about the unique challenges each of them is facing.

As for becoming comfortable selling my services, the veterans in my Toastmasters club have taught me to use interesting and humorous stories from my professional experience as a way to demonstrate my expertise without feeling

like I am giving a sales pitch. It's working, as most of my clients come to me from my speaking engagements.

Since joining Toastmasters two years ago, I have given eight presentations at four optometry conferences across Canada, including the national optometry conference in New Brunswick last summer. I have also presented to Canada's future optometrists at the University of Waterloo School of Optometry and Vision Science. The speechwriting skills I gleaned from Toastmasters also allowed me to secure a regular column in the *Canadian Journal of Optometry*. I write an article on practice management for each issue.

The only question remaining now is *where*. As in, *where* will this journey take me next? I am now seeking opportunities to share my strategies with American audiences, particularly at the Vision Expos that take place in New York and Las Vegas each year and through written publications, like *Invision* magazine. I also hope to return to the Caribbean to speak at a conference of the Caribbean Optometry Association.

Meanwhile, I am working on my *Professional Speaker* manual and serving as vice president membership, using my customer relations skills to ensure new members feel as welcomed as I did. My journey in public speaking has presented me with many questions, but one thing is for sure: Joining Toastmasters is the most important decision I made in transitioning from employee to entrepreneur. **T**

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