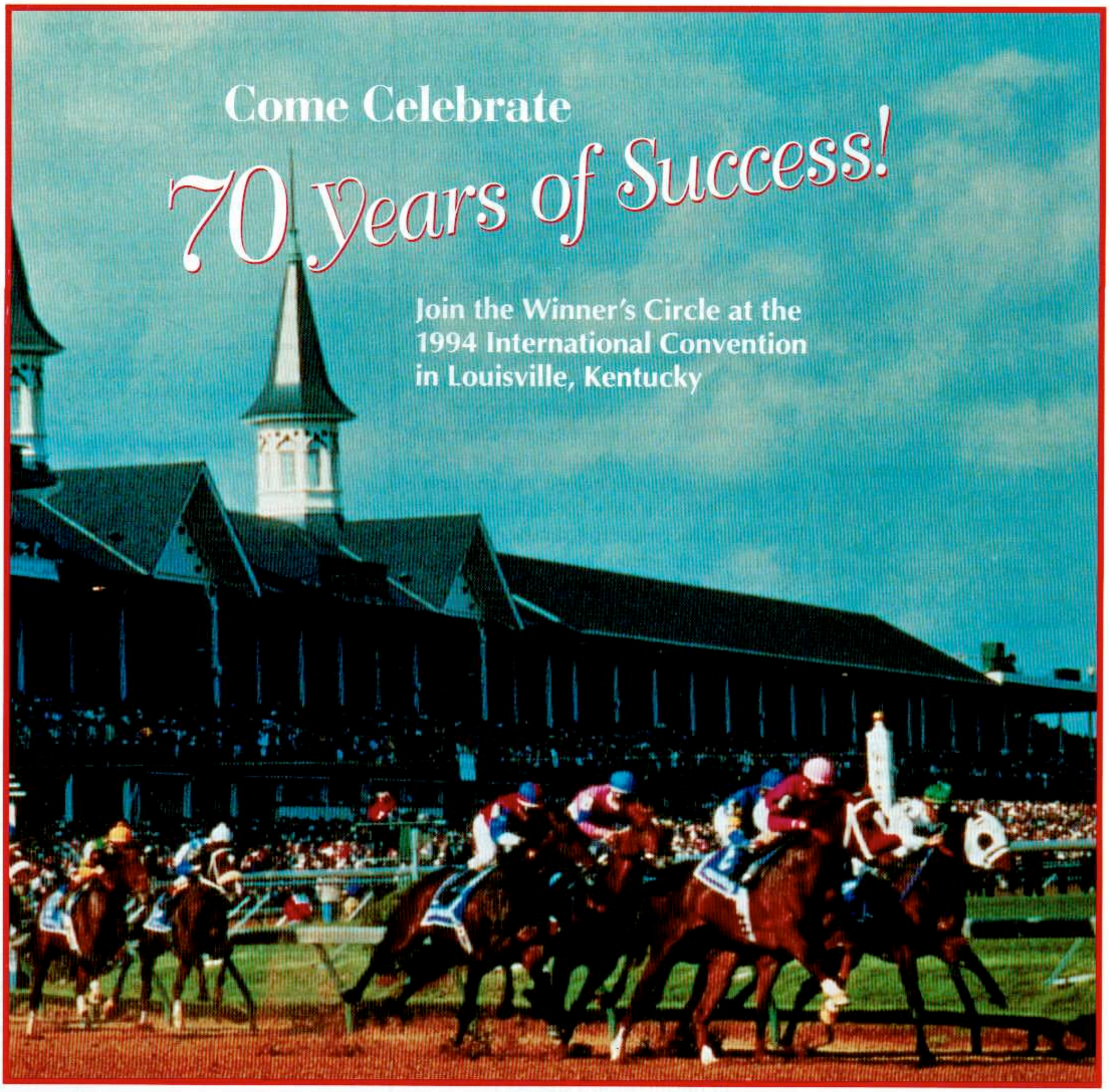
the Toastmaster

april 1994



BRING NEW MEMBERS ON BOARD WITH SPEECHCRAFT

LOUD AND CLEAR: MICROPHONE TECHNIQUE AND ETIQUETTE

PROPER MICROPHONE TECHNIQUE AND ETIQUETTE FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING

by Tom Gilson, CTM

LOUD & CLEAR!

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES CAS

A microphone and sound system can be a speaker's best friend. It allows you to share intimately with a large audience – without getting a sore throat! Misused, though, it can become distracting and annoying both to you and your audience. The world of microphones and sound systems is a mystery to many speakers. How can you master microphone techniques to allow you to communicate your best?

THREE TYPES OF MICROPHONES

It is helpful, first, to know the three basic types of microphones, according to how they pick up sound. The most common type is a "cardioid" or "unidirectional" (*one-directional*) microphone. (Both terms mean the same thing.) This is the typical lectern microphone, with a straight cylinder shape. It picks up sounds in front of it much more strongly than sounds coming from the side or from behind.

Another type of microphone, called "omnidirectional" (*all-directional*), looks almost the same but has a much different effect. It picks up sounds equally well from all directions. The easiest way to tell the two apart is to check the microphone's label, where you will usually find the description. You can remember the difference by recalling that "uni" means "one" (one direction only); "omni" means "all" (directions). You'll just have to keep in mind that cardioid and unidirectional are the same.

The third type, the "lavaliere" (or "lapel") microphone, may be either a cardioid or omnidirectional. In this case that distinction doesn't matter very much. Lavalieres are clipped to one's clothing on the lapel or collar.

There are other categories of microphones, according to how they work electronically, but most of us need not be concerned with those distinctions. If you see a barrel type microphone, just look on it for the word "cardioid," "unidirectional" or "omnidirectional," and that will tell you what you need to know. If you have a lavaliere microphone, just put it on!

WHAT ABOUT REACH AND PLACEMENT?

What kind of technique has the greatest "reach?" Actually, microphones do not "reach" out and pick sounds; they respond only to the sounds that come to them. Unidirectionals have a narrower range than omnis – they respond best to the sounds aimed at them, and they reject sounds from other directions. Because of that, it's possible to turn up their volume higher without feedback (discussed below). If you look at it that way, it might be fair to say unidirectionals have greater reach.

The first important question of microphone technique is, "Where should I place the microphone?" Your microphone placement should accomplish two things: It should provide good sound and look as inconspicuous as possible.

Lavalieres are easy to place: pin them on your lapel or collar, about three inches below your chin, pointing toward your mouth. For the best appearance, run the wire inside your clothing. The microphone will follow you wherever you go, which is the beauty of the lavaliere.

Uni- and omnidirectional mikes are usually mounted on a microphone stand, either free-standing or connected to the podium. Unidirectionals must aim directly at your mouth for best results. Omnis sound fine aimed anywhere, although the audience will expect the mike to be facing toward your mouth.

Stand-mounted microphones should be placed a few inches from your mouth to get the best sound. From the audience's point of view, it's best to have the microphone just below your chin. If you place your microphone too close or too high, you may look like you have an unnatural beard – or else like you are eating a chocolate fudge ice cream cone! As a speaker, you know the importance of good facial expression, and you would never want the mike to hide any part of your face.

Once you have placed the microphone properly, leave it alone. You want the audience to forget it is there, and to pay attention only to you. Avoid fidgeting with the microphone; this is distracting and betrays nervousness.

"Actually, microphones do not 'reach out' and pick sounds; they respond only to the sounds that come to them."

With a hand-held microphone, keep it just below the chin. It is okay, and it may actually be helpful, to let it touch your chin. Singers usually hold their microphones very close to their lips, and that's fine for them, but it is not a good idea for speakers. Again, you want to avoid hiding the communication that comes from your face. Use a relaxed grip, holding the bottom to middle portion of the barrel, keeping your fingers away from the ball of the microphone. You should feel comfortable switching the microphone from one hand to the other to allow you to gesture, but gesturing with your microphone hand looks awkward and causes obvious problems with the sound.

Unidirectional microphones have an interesting quality, called the "proximity effect," which you might want to experiment with. If you hold one very close to your mouth, it will accentuate the bass tones, like turning up the bass dial on your stereo. It can give you a greater richness and depth of voice, which you may prefer – if you are a man.

This characteristic does not usually work well for women, however, since women's voice tones are generally higher than what the proximity effect will affect.

Speaking of microphone placement, this is a good time to warn you not to use double microphones. We have all seen the president of the United States speak; he *always* has two or three mikes on the lectern. You might think this is the recommended way to set up microphones. Not so. Whenever you see two microphones on one lectern, only one is turned on at a time! The other is a spare, in case the first one fails. Two microphones near each other can conflict to produce an effect called "comb filtering," which sounds a bit like the wind in a haunted house. It's subtle but distracting.

If you use a stand-mounted microphone, you might as well resign yourself to staying right there with it. In a small-to-medium-sized room, you may be able to walk away from the microphone if you project your voice with greater force, but if your speech is being recorded, that portion of your message will be lost. In a large room, people in the back may not be able to hear you at all.

YOUR MICROPHONE VOICE

The first thing you notice when you speak into a microphone is how different it sounds! Your voice booms back at you from the room in a most unaccustomed manner. If you are not used to speaking with a microphone, try it out beforehand so you won't be caught off guard when you begin your speech.

Your use of vocal variety with a microphone should be very much the same as it is without one. You will want to energize your voice just as if you didn't have a mike, to provide it with life and excitement even though you do not need the extra volume.

Be careful not to overload the microphone's circuitry, however, by speaking too loud or too close, with the volume turned up too high. An overloaded sound system produces an unpleasant, distorted sound. If you experience overload, back away from the microphone or turn down the volume.

A microphone provides flexibility you otherwise would not have. Do you want to grab your listeners' attention for a critical point? Try whispering very closely into the microphone. You don't need to be skilled at "stage whispering" for that to work.

ADJUSTING AND TESTING THE MIKE

In most cases, you will not need to set up your microphone. The meeting host should be familiar with the system and set it up for you. If the host asks you to help, however, here are some things to keep in mind.

First, when you test a microphone, do as professional engineers do and *speak* into it or *scratch* on it. These techniques are much gentler on the delicate components of a microphone than other common methods, like tapping the microphone or blowing in it.

If you are helping to set volume levels for the microphone, make sure to test with the same voice volume you intend to use in your talk and place the microphone at a normal distance. To check a lavaliere microphone's level, don't hold it right up to your mouth – that's not where it belongs. Clip it on, or hold it against your clothes at the same position you would clip it on.

AVOIDING FEEDBACK

Occasionally, a sound system will produce "feedback," a ringing or howling sound. Feedback comes when a microphone can "hear" its own amplified sound coming out of the loudspeaker – the sound gets recycled through the sound system over and over, so that it practically takes on a life of its own. Speakers often wonder if they are to blame for feedback: "Did I cause that?" Maybe or maybe not – the point is, what can a speaker do to correct feedback?

"Whenever you see two microphones on one lectern, only one is turned on at a time. The other is a spare, in case the first one fails."

There are three basic solutions to feedback (barring fancy technical approaches). One is to move the loudspeakers so they are not delivering sound back to the microphone. The second is to aim the microphone away from the loudspeakers. If you are using a unidirectional microphone, you may be able to solve the problem by moving it.

The third solution is to turn down the microphone volume. You may want to speak louder or moving the microphone closer to you so the audience can hear you with the volume turned down.

It does not help to cover the microphone with your hand, as many speakers do. The result of this action is the same as cupping your hands behind your ears: you will increase the microphone's sensitivity, which will increase the feedback. The best you can do it re-aim the microphone, or speak louder or closer so it can be turned down.

The best sound system is one that nobody notices – it sounds and looks so natural that both speaker and audience forget it is there. With good microphone techniques, you can help the audience ignore the sound system and concentrate on the message you want to share. T

Tom Gilson, CTM, is a member of Big Bear Lake Club 929-12 in Big Bear City, California.