

*let's talk* ... with Chakisse Newton

## The art of public speaking

By ADAM BEAM  
abeam@thestate.com

**C**hakisse Newton competed Saturday in the World Championship of Public Speaking in Mashantucket, Conn.

Newton was one of the 10 world finalists in the competition. We talked with Newton Friday as she was preparing for Saturday's big speech:

Newton, who owns Cardinal Consulting, lives in Columbia and is a professional speech coach. She made it to the world championships by winning July's Regional contest with her speech, "Butterfly Moments," in which she asked, "If a butterfly flutters in Africa in the spring, will it create a hurricane in South Carolina come fall?"

### How do you make it to the World Championships of Public Speaking?

**Newton:** Well, Toastmasters is the largest communication and leadership organization in the world. Members are eligible to participate in speech contests.

Every year, (30,000) people or so compete in speech contests. It moves through a process of elimination. The final level is the World Championship of Public Speaking, with 10 contestants from around the world.

This speech contest tends to be more in the line of motivational speaking or inspirational speaking.

### How many categories of public speaking are there?

**Newton:** Toastmasters has four contests a year. There is a humorous speech contest, which is very different. You don't really have to make a profound point since the purpose is humor.

The international speech, part of the judging criteria is you must say something of substance.

Toastmasters also does an evaluation contest, where you have a target speaker and evaluators get up and practice offering helpful and motivating feedback.

And Toastmasters does a table topics contest, which is impromptu speaking. You get a completely random question and they answer those.

### That table topic contest sounds interesting. What have you had to talk about?

**Newton:** The year that I won the table topics contest at the district level, the question was to define communication. And I talked about my son and his unfortunate love of women at 2 years old. Everyone else took a serious approach.

### So your son is a ladies' man?

**Newton:** He's very cute, and he's got skills. I've seen grown men who aren't as adept as my son is with women.

### How do you prepare for a speech?

**Newton:** A lot of people try to tell you everything they know. They ramble and they stammer, and people walk away and they don't remember anything. Before I give a speech, I ask myself, 'What is the one main thing I want to communicate expressed in a sentence? What are the stories, what are the examples, what are the illustrations that I can use that support that point?'

### Do you memorize or use notes?

**Newton:** You never want to monologue like you're an actor.

You want to have a conversation with the audience, or the appearance of a conversation. You're not going to connect as a speaker if it seems like it wouldn't matter if (the audience) was there or not.

You want to memorize your opening and your conclusion. You want to know it word for word.



**Chakisse Newton**  
Competed Saturday in the World Championship of Public Speaking in Mashantucket, Conn.

Does that mean you deliver it like a robot? No. You live in the moment, and you deliver it with feeling.

### Public speaking is, in a way, a battle to keep someone's attention. How do you do that?

**Newton:** I think a lot of people really fail to take the needs of their audience into account. And I'll give you an example. Once I was asked to give a keynote presentation that was very content-heavy at a conference. The conference started on Tuesday, and they asked me to speak on a Friday at the last session. I was the only speaker standing between these people and cocktail hour of a very long week.

So you want to make sure you match it. Look at the elements of your speech - it's a tool box. If you need to put a nail in a wall, you are not going to use a screwdriver. And yet, a lot of speakers when they don't pay attention to their audience, that's exactly what they try to do.

### How do you avoid the dreaded "uhs" and "ums" in a speech?

**Newton:** One of the most powerful speaking tools that you can use is ...

### What?

**Newton:** The pause. And because I paused so long, you wanted to hear what I was going to tell you. People feel that when they are on the platform that they have to consume every second with sound.

And when you do that, a lot of filler words come out because you are not pausing and you are not stopping to collect your thoughts.

You don't look tense. You look deep when that happens.

### Do you watch what you eat or drink before a speech, to avoid burping or having dry mouth?

**Newton:** You may or may not have friends that will tell you if you have spinach in your teeth, so you always want to watch for that. But people underestimate the importance of being hydrated. Drinking right before your speech doesn't help you. You certainly need to hydrate before.

### What about nerves? Does the underwear trick really work?

**Newton:** Personally, and maybe it's because of the audiences that I speak to, I'm just not that interested in trying that trick.

When you are speaking, whether you're at a conference or a business meeting, no one ever says, 'Gosh, I hope this speaker is terrible. I want them to waste my time.' People go into every presentation because they want it to be a success. They want to learn something. Their time is valuable, and they want a gift from you.

No matter who you are, when you are prepared and you are confident, you feel better. That's more relaxing than imagining people in their undies.

Reach Beam  
at (803) 771-8405.