

Interview with Nancy Duarte, Opening Keynote Speaker at the 2015 Summit



BY NICKY BLEIEL | *Senior Member*

Nicky: I'm speaking with Nancy Duarte, who's the opening keynote at the STC Summit in June, in Columbus, Ohio. I would like to thank you so much for joining me to talk about your work, and also, about your keynote.

Nancy Duarte: Thank you. It's great to meet you, and I'm excited about the STC event.

Nicky: That's awesome, we're excited, too. Now, before we dive in, I want to take a quick tour through your resume so that everyone who is attending the Summit will know a little bit more about you.

First of all, you're the author of three popular books about how to make presentations more effective:

- ▶ *Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences*

- ▶ *Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations*, and
- ▶ *The Harvard Business Review Guide to Persuasive Presentations*

Three great books there, and I understand you're working right now on a new book that's going to come out soon. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

Nancy: Yeah, we're working hard on it. This time, I have a coauthor, which is totally fun.

The smart, smart gal on my team where we've come up with a pattern of transformation. As a leader, it's our job to transform our organization, so we are ready in the future, and there's really no way to transform without persuading.

We found a pattern of transformation, and the types of stories, speeches and ceremonies you need to do to create these galvanizing moments that push people toward the future you are trying to create.

It's really a lovely piece. I'm excited about it, writing it changed me and really bonded me with my coauthor in a way I didn't know was possible; we are having a good time.

Nicky: That's great. I think that the audience at STC is going to find this book very interesting, because we're always talking about it (transformation).

Nancy: Yeah, I can sneak some of the models in my presentation.

Nicky: It's awesome, because we're always talking about how important change and transformation is, that sounds really great.

I have to jump back to your resume again, because you have so many

great things. You gave a TED talk, and you also work with the TED team to improve the quality of TED talks, you're TED "squared."

You worked with Al Gore to create the presentation that is at the core of "An Inconvenient Truth," and you're the CEO of Duarte Design, the largest design firm in Silicon Valley, which you started in 1988, so it's been around for a while. You were leaning in before it was trendy.

Nancy: Yeah. I leaned in so far, I think I've fallen over. An ancient leaner, I guess I am.

Nicky: You set the standard.

Nancy: I hope so.

Nicky: Jumping back to talks,

You've done many types of conferences—you've done marketing conferences, tech conferences, probably some other kinds. Are you looking forward to addressing an audience of fellow communicators?

Nancy: Oh, I love having conversations with communicators, because I feel like we have walked in each other shoes.

I know what it's like, I know what they go through on a daily basis, I know how hard it is to craft a piece of communication that brings the kind of transformation you are trying to bring.

I can talk in shorthand, and if I can talk in shorthand with other communicators, I can get through our material, and then, they can get more value out of our talk. I'll be talking super fast, which is talking in shorthand, and see if I can get through as much as you guys pull out of me, I'm happy to give.

Nicky: That sounds fantastic. Now, I was looking at your website and you have a project called the Slidedoc project. I guess you could say #Slidedoc that's really interesting, and I think anyone interested in learning more about communication should take a look at it.

In it, one of the things you mentioned is that shorter communication is the new norm. I was wondering if you could elaborate on why you found that that's the truth?

Nancy: Yeah, we coined the term Slidedoc, and the only reason I'm protecting it with a trademark is so I can put it in the public domain, and eventually, try to get it to be a dictionary term. We've just changed so much, how we process and consume information. We're consuming them in smaller bites.

It's really rare, when you are making a really big technical decision you may sit for two hours and really read through some technical documentation, but probably not.

You usually go and find the exact answer you need for the exact question you have, and it's not very often you can see someone with their feet propped up on their desk reading for two hours. We just don't do that anymore. We get access to bites of information that set us up to be successful.

One of the reasons people hate presentations is because they have really made Slidedocs. They've created documents they can travel around email, or travel around anywhere and are self-explanatory.

Everything you need to know, you can read it on the slide, and so, what happens is your presenter will turn their back to the audience and read a Slidedoc, whereas, a Slidedoc can live and spread on its own. The first content marketing, slides were, they could spread everywhere.

What we did was we named the enemy, this is a really bad, dense slide. I think around 85 percent of all slides are dense, rich information, it's meeting a communication need. Clearly, it's a very nice, brief form. What we're saying is pour a little bit more on those really dense slides and call it a document.

It's really nice, because it's modular, collateral. We don't even hear the word collateral anymore in marketing or communication,

it's just gone from our vernacular. That's because slides have replaced collateral. Go into these really dense slides and make them beautiful, make them have visual hierarchy.

Make it so they can find things quickly as they click, click, click, click through your slides. It's really turned out that people have been thrilled to get that body of work, because it really took the pressure off the communicators who really did know how to use it well.

Nicky: As I said, I think anyone interested in making more effective communications should just go to your website and check those out.

Nancy: Yeah, Slidedocs.com, and you can also get to it off of duarte.com (www.duarte.com/slidedocs). But it's faster to just go to Slidedocs.com.

Nicky: A thread throughout your work including your TED talk is the word resonate. Messages must resonate with your audience. Why do you think resonance is so important?

Nancy: I love it for the physics phenomenon of resonating. If you're communicating, and you are sending signals out all day, when you communicate in a way where that signal hits the resonant frequency of the receiving object, it'll vibrate, it'll move, it'll shake, it'll be touched.

And so, when someone says, "What you said resonates with me," what they're saying is, "You said something that hits me as true. It rang inside of me as true."

You can send out communications all day, but if you don't empathetically understand who you are talking to and communicate with them where they're at, and from their vantage point walk in their shoes, and really, understand what they need from you to be successful, then, you're not resonating.

The empathy is the core concept of resonating. I'm going to communicate to you in a way, and give you what you need to make you successful in your

journey. So often, as communicators, it's like, "I've got these 12 things I had to communicate, and my boss says they all have to be communicated."

We forget, we need to really think not about what we are trying to blast out there, but think about who is on the receiving end and what they need for us to be successful.

Nicky: Right, knowing your audience.

Nancy: Right.

Nicky: I know I keep going back to your TED talk, it was just so interesting. The name of it was, "The Secret Structure of Great Talks," and I thought it was very interesting that you give a talk about giving great talks. That must have been a lot of pressure.

Nancy: When the presentation lady gives a presentation, you have to nail it. I can't be a terrible presenter and be the presentation lady.

I knew the stakes were high, and it was a TEDx talk. It was a TEDx talk out of New York, and I knew that, if I really nailed it, a small percent of TEDx talks get picked up and put on TED.com.

I did the talk in 2011, and it got a lot of pickup when they put it on YouTube. I tweeted, "Oh, my TEDx talk has this many hits," and I copied TED.com, and they picked it up and put it on the main site, which I was happy about. But that was actually a year and a half after the talk that they picked it up.

I spent 35 hours just rehearsing. I'm a professional speaker, so I trimmed it, and had a coach, and she's like, "You know, you're spending a minute on this, and I think that's only worth about 15 seconds in the context of the talk, so you can take this other 45 seconds and move it here."

It was just wow, to really dial it in to make sure I was creating the right emphasis on the material. When you rehearse, you naturally can get it to a certain place, but you sound like you are rehearsed. You sound like you memorized it, or sometimes, you look

up, and try to remember what you are about to say.

And then there's this moment where you just forget what is in your head, you forget that you've memorized it, and you come across more naturally and conversational, and breaking through that barrier takes a long time. But for me, the stakes were high. I wouldn't say every executive should rehearse for 35 hours.

The talks had over a million hits. They reset the counter, I don't know why, but it's had about a million and a half views. If you take YouTube, Vimeo and add it all up, it had like a million and three quarter views. That's a lot, and it drove my business.

You can see, actually right when the TED talk hit, my business spiked and grew by about 30 percent, which was just a basket full of blessings and curses to grow that fast. It really made a difference that I put that much work into it.

Nicky: Preparation is always important, and as you noted, you prepared, but then, you reached a point where it wasn't memorization, it was just part of you.

Nancy: It was authenticity, yeah.

Nicky: It really comes through, by the way. I really enjoy it.

Nancy: Thanks.

Nicky: Now, technical communicators pride themselves on two things that you mentioned are two of your three keys to a great presentation.

Now, I won't tell people what the third one is, they're going to have to come to your talk and hear about it, but one thing is being audience-centric, and the other is understanding our roles as communicators. I wanted to mention that I believe the audience will be very friendly.

Nancy: I hope so.

Nicky: We're on team Nancy, so we totally get where you're coming from.

That being said, could you tell me a little bit about the talk you are planning for the Summit in June? You don't have to give it all away, but I just want to hear what the takeaways for the audience would be.

Nancy: In June, I'm going to do a longer form talk, go a lot deeper into some insights. I share insights into Steve Jobs and Dr. King that I don't share in the TED talk, and then, I bring in an analytical presenter, which I think everybody would really enjoy, a very technical presenter, and international examples.

I bring a female to the table, too, to analyze that. I do feel like my body of work is around empathy, and as communicators, we are empathy architects. That's a title that I try to embody. I don't naturally have empathy.

I feel like I'm a heartfelt communicator, but I don't take the time to really process how you may receive what I'm saying, and so, I've built an infrastructure around myself and around my own heart to see empathy structurally so I can eventually be a person who walks in empathy.

Hopefully, maybe I'll be able to put a couple of models in there from my next book, too, which would be fun.

Nicky: That sounds really interesting.

Nancy: It's another model for empathy, of course.

Nicky: That sounds fantastic. I am really looking forward to your talk, and I know that everyone there is going to look forward to it after hearing all of this.

I know you're on a deadline to your book, so I want to say thanks so much for chatting with me, Nancy. I'm looking forward to meeting you in person, not just on Skype, and attending your keynote at the Society for Technical Communication Summit in Columbus, Ohio this June.

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