

4. SPEAKER AND AUDIENCE

4.1 TECHNIQUES OF CATCHING THE AUDIENCES ATTENTION:

Nothing can frustrate an audience more than listening to a boring or ‘bad’ public speaker.

One of the things that you should remember when delivering a presentation is that it is very easy to divert the audience’s attention. Once they find your presentation uninteresting, they will cease to pay attention to you. They will just let their mind wander or pay attention to something else.

It is your responsibility as a public speaker to avoid this.

Here are some tips on how you can grab the public’s attention when delivering your speech:

Keeping audience attention is more important and more difficult than grabbing audience attention.

A one-way presentation is one of the worst possible ways of transferring information from person to person. It requires discipline and effort to simply sit and listen passively to someone speak for any length of time. Make it easier for your audience by following these seven guidelines:

[Warning: The first three guidelines require that you know your audience - do the work to find out what your audience is interested in, their background knowledge, level of experience etc.]

1. Talk about something your audience is interested in

You may think this is obvious and that you’d never make this mistake. But I see many otherwise intelligent people talk about what they’re interested in rather than what the audience is interested in.

A business banking specialist started designing a presentation he was planning to deliver to accountancy firms in his city. Most of his talk was about the internal organizational changes they had made in their team which would allow the team to service their clients better. But did his audience care about the internal

organizational changes? No. His talk should have been focused on the services they offered to clients.

If you're speaking at a conference, people come to your session because of the synopsis – that's what they're interested in. Don't change it just because it suits you. Many years ago, I saw one of New Zealand's most successful professional speakers make this mistake. Her session was advertised as being on email marketing. But, she'd just got entranced by Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for websites. She announced at the start that she didn't want to talk about email marketing, but about SEO. Then she asked how many people in the audience had a website. About 5 people out of 100 put their hands up. You'd think she'd change tack – but no. 95 people were subjected to a talk on a subject they had no interest in.

2. Tell them why they should listen

Before each of the presentations skills courses we run, we ask each participant to fill in an online questionnaire. The most critical question is this:

“How important are presentation skills to you?”

They answer by clicking on range of multichoice answers from “It's vitally important” to “It's not that important”. If a number of participants click on “It's not that important” then we know we have to start the course by demonstrating the benefits of developing presentation skills. I start by telling my story of how developing presentation skills has enriched my career. Then Tony tells of speaking at his father's funeral and the feeling of completion that that gave him. Now they've got a reason to listen.

So if your audience doesn't have an obvious reason to be interested, tell them why they should bother listening to you. This can be challenging. I've had email discussions with a number of readers who present on topics such as health and safety issues or environmental regulations. The audience have to be there, but they have no intrinsic interest in the topic. The solution is to tell them why they should care. If you're speaking on health and safety, tell them stories of people injured in

your workplace and the consequences it had for them. I still remember being an audience member in a presentation on Occupational Overuse Syndrome. The speaker had suffered from it herself and described how she'd been unable to brush her own hair.

And if you can't find a reason why they should listen – don't give the presentation!

3. Don't make it too easy or too hard

You've probably heard of the concept of “flow” developed by Csikszentmihalyi. Flow is a state of being where you are fully engaged and fulfilled in what you're doing. You lose track of time, your mind never wanders. When you describe a speaker as “compelling” that's probably because you were in a state of flow. The ultimate goal is to have your audience in a state of flow (h/t to Chris Atherton and her post When giving presentations, the only rule that matters is the rule is attention.)

There are many factors to achieve that nirvana, but one of the prerequisites for flow to occur is for the task to be not too easy and not too hard. When listening to a presentation, the main task is thinking. The thinking task you set has to have just the right level of challenge for the particular audience you're speaking to. The level of challenge required will differ for different audiences – their confidence in the topic and their background knowledge being critical factors.

Listening to somebody talk through a series of bullet points does not require challenging thinking. So it gets boring very quickly.

Conversely, if the speaker puts up a complicated flow chart and dives right into the detail without explaining what it's about, the thinking task will be too challenging. Daniel Willingham, in his book “Why students don't like school” describes doing just this (as an experiment):

After about 15 seconds I stopped and said to the audience, “Anyone who is still listening to me, please raise your hand.” One person did.

So audit every minute of your presentation in terms of what is the thinking task that you're asking your audience to engage in. Is it too easy or too hard?

4. “Change grabs attention”

The heading comes from Daniel Willingham’s book that I’ve quoted above (yes, it’s what I’m reading at the moment).

We notice change. You notice the hum of the air-conditioner when it comes on and when it goes off – but not in between. You can use this natural human propensity to retrieve your audience’s attention.

There are macro changes and there are micro changes:

Macro-changes

1. Change the visual medium eg: from slides to flipchart and back again
2. Change the physical state of the audience eg: from sitting around a table to standing around a flipchart
3. Change the location of the room that you present from eg: from the front to the back
4. Change the activity your audience is engaged in eg: from listening to you to discussing a problem with their neighbour
5. Change presenters
6. Change topics.

Micro-changes

1. Make the edges between subtopics in your presentation clear eg: “So that’s the problem we’re trying to fix, let’s look now at what some of the options are.” If somebody has mentally checked out this gives them a cue to check back in again.
2. Show a short video
3. Use silence before and after critical statements
4. Change your style of delivery according to the content. For instance when you’re making statements of fact, use a measured deliberate tone and stand still. When you tell a story, speed up, get chatty and move around.

As a guide, I use a macro-change at least every 10 minutes, and micro-changes continuously.

5. Tell stories

Every presentation expert extolls the power of stories. There's evidence that people are hard-wired to listen to stories (see my post [Are our brains wired to enjoy stories](#)). When you say "I'll tell you a story about..." your audience will perk up. Your stories should of course reinforce the point you're making. Take a look at your presentation from the point of view of stories. Are they sprinkled throughout your presentation – or bunched together? Sprinkle them out for best effect. For more strategic insights into when and where to tell stories see [When to tell a story and what story to tell](#).

You can also exploit the power of story to keep attention by structuring your whole presentation using a story structure – I'll write more on this later (meanwhile if you know of any good links to this concept please do post them in the comments).

6. Have frequent breaks

Build in frequent breaks, but if you see people starting to flag in their attention suggest a "microbreak" for 1-2 minutes where people can refresh their drinks and have a walk around. Moving is the most effective way of reviving people at risk of dozing off.

7. Make it short

The most effective way of keeping your audience's attention is not to go on for too long.

4.2 Use of the microphone: Public speakers often use microphones. What are the various public speaking microphones and podcasting microphones that you will come into contact with? Is there any use of microphone need to know information? Since podcasting may be in your public speaking future, is there anything to know about podcast microphones?

Proper use of public speaking microphones is essential for the success of your presentation. The following information will provide understanding of the craft of public speaking.

Basics of Public Speaking Microphones

As a public speaker you will be called upon to use a microphone as your career advances. This is included in the speaker skills as it is a skill that needs to be learned.

Like a pro ball player, actor, or any other high paid professional, mastering the microphone is essential to being on top of the public speaking game.

Do not use this information to try to impress the sound staff. Don't share this knowledge to make yourself look better. It can only get you in trouble. Rather, take this knowledge and put it to use as you grow in you skill.

Take notes of the brand of mic you speak with, the kind of problems you noticed or problems your coaches may note. Then armed with this you can talk to the AV staff and make requests that will help you have your best sound given the microphones you will have to speak into.

Mic Problem Need to Know

Some mic's will have a tendency to pick up the popping P's. Awareness of this can help you be mindful to master the use of the microphone. Another challenge in proper mic use is the pickup pattern. The mic you use can help or hinder your ability to communicate to the audience.

Speaking to an audience in a wide seating arrangement creates the biggest challenge. As you look to the right and left, depending on the mic and if it is mounted, your voice could be picked up when facing the mic and not picked up as you look to the right and left.

Shotgun

Care of Public Speaking Microphones

There is one thing you can do that will set you apart from a hack and possibly keep you in the good graces of your sound professional. Never, ever blow into a mic to see if it works.

I think people do this because they see others doing this. It can it directly damage the mic from the trauma of the human created micro cyclone entering the sensitive equipment. Secondary damage can come from spittle that comes out of your mouth.

Both can ultimately damage the equipment.

Just Don't do it.

If your asked to do a mic check, start talking. Quote a famous line or speech. Ad lib a famous speech. Read an appropriate magazine page. Just say testing, one, two, three and so on.

This allows the sound personnel to make adjustments to get the sound starting out at a reasonable level for an actual voice, which is what the mic is designed for. Regardless of what you see on TV, never throw, drop or swing the mic if corded. All of these can damage the mic.

How Close

Depending on the mic, most fixed mics can work adequately up to a foot away from your mouth. You will have better control if it is closer. Often times the speakers who dislike the mic in their face will be found looking down to read their speech rather than deliver it as if their own words.

If you have to read, pick up your notes and hold them to one side of the mic while not hiding your face from the audience. If you want to improve, start counting how many words a poor speaker actually says looking at the audience.

Truly skilled speakers can give a manuscript as though it were their own. This is the high hurdle of public speaking. So learn to give your speech without being tied to your notes and thus be able to use the microphone better.

There is probably a book worth of information on the use of public speaking microphones. This is only covering the basics. Include proper use of microphones in your quest to become a better public speaker and you will be well on your way to speech mastery.