Chapter 10
Getting and Keeping the Audience’s Attention

You will learn how to

- attract and retain your audience’s attention throughout your presentation
- understand when audience attention is at its highest and lowest

Why is this important?

According to the presentations expert Shay McConnon, *Juries typically remember only 60% of what they are told. Why? The case is not about them. No matter how hard they try, people have difficulty paying attention to presentations that aren’t about them.*
10.1 Gain and keep your audience’s attention

Below is a summary of the first nine chapters of this book in terms of how you can attract and hold your audience’s attention:

1. have a clear idea who your audience are, don’t assume that they are naturally going to be interested in your topic
2. have an agenda and a clear structure with clear transitions so that the audience know where you are going
3. make it easy for the audience to follow you and your slides
4. help the audience to understand why you are showing them a particular slide
5. involve your audience and give them lots of examples
6. make frequent eye contact
7. avoid too much text on your slides
8. use simple graphs and tables
9. make your text and visuals big enough for everyone in the audience to see clearly
10. avoid entering into too much detail (i.e., just select those things that the audience really need to know about the topic)
11. avoid spending more than a couple of minutes on one specific detail
12. have a variety of types of slides (not just all bullets, or all text, or all photos)
13. speak reasonably slowly and move from slide to slide at a speed that the audience will feel comfortable with
14. sound interested and enthusiastic about your topic
15. vary your tone of voice
16. inject some humor
17. move around occasionally rather than being static

10.2 Exploit moments of high audience attention

Audiences tend to remember things that are said at the beginning and end of a presentation, because their attention is generally high at these points.

They also remember things that they hear more than once.

And finally they remember curious facts, things that stand out.

Ideally you need to state your key points both at the beginning and ending. In the middle go through each key point more in detail. If possible, include an unexpected/counterintuitive/interesting fact for each key point. Try juxtaposing data with quotations, and serious issues with a humorous anecdote.

The point of your presentation is to disseminate information and engage interest for your project. If your audience do not listen, then there is no point in you doing the presentation. So, most ways of getting and maintaining their attention are legitimate provided that they

• are relevant, or in any case interesting and memorable
• do not offend anyone
10.3 Don’t spend too long on one slide

Our attention span is affected by how long we look at something that does not change. Research has shown that we can only look at something static for 30 seconds and then we start thinking about something else. So if possible, reduce the amount of time you spend showing the same slide. For example, you could show the slide, explain what you need to explain with the aid of the slide, and then blank it (see Section 10.7) and carry on talking.

10.4 Maintain eye contact with the audience

If you don’t make eye contact with all your audience throughout the duration of your presentation, they will quickly start thinking about other things.

You can only maintain eye contact with the audience if

- you know exactly what you are saying—if you are not sure what you are going to say next, you will probably start looking up at the ceiling or down at the floor
- your slides are simple—if they are complex you will be very tempted to turn your back to the audience to remember the information on the slide

10.5 Be aware of the implications of the time when your presentation is scheduled

There are clearly good times and bad times in the conference schedule for presenters to give their talks. What are known as the “graveyard slots” (i.e., the worst/dead times) take place

- when attendees would probably rather be having lunch (attendees may focus more on their stomach than on you)
- at the end of the day (the audience have probably assimilated all the information they are capable of assimilating in 1 day)
- at the end of the last day (the worst possible slot, when attendance is always low)

If you have been allocated one of the above slots, you will need to make a special effort to gain and keep the audience’s attention. You can do this by

- being a little more informal
- understanding that the audience will be unable to assimilate much new information—therefore consider reducing the number of points you intend to cover and the amount of detail you give
- finishing early and on a high note—the audience will thus go away with a positive impression of you
ADVANCED TIPS

10.6 Quickly establish your credibility

How the audience judge your credibility will determine the success of your presentation. Even if your slides are fantastic, and your results seem good, the audience will not give you their full attention if they do not feel you are credible i.e., if they cannot fully believe or agree with what you are saying.

How do you establish your credibility? It is helpful if you tell the audience something about your knowledge and experience with the topic, and also why you are interested in it.

10.7 Learn ways to regain audience attention after you have lost it

When you are doing your presentation you may be competing for the audience’s attention with one or more of the following:

- their mobile phone or laptop—they may be text messaging or emailing
- the person sitting next to them may want to chat
- things happening outside the window
- their hunger (particularly at the end of the morning session)
- their boredom—yours may be the sixth, seventh, or even eighth presentation that they have seen that day

These kinds of distractions do not always depend on the level of interest of your presentation. In any case, you have to try and regain their attention. You can do this by

- blanking the screen (on PowerPoint you can do this using the B key)
- using the whiteboard—inevitably the audience will want to know what you are going to write. Make sure you write large enough for all the audience to see—this generally means writing very little or only drawing simple diagrams. Make sure you move to the side of the whiteboard so that the audience can see what you are writing/have written
- asking the audience a rhetorical question. Try and predict what kind of questions the audience might be asking themselves at this point of your presentation. Pause. Ask the question. Pause again. Then answer it
- giving the audience a statistic. People are fascinated by numbers and they help the audience see the dimension of the situation. See 10.8 on how to present statistics
• saying “here’s something you might be interested in seeing” or “I’ve brought along something to show you . . .” and producing an object from your pocket, bag, etc. Your audience will be immediately curious to see what the object is. Again it has to be big enough for everyone to see, or you have to have lots of them to distribute among the audience—but be careful as they may turn into an even bigger distraction! Objects can also be a good substitute for explanations

• showing an unusual slide—this could simply be a slide that breaks with the normal pattern of your other slides. It could be an interesting photo, a clear and effective diagram, or contain a number, a short quotation, or a question

10.8 Present statistics in a way that the audience can relate to them

Compare these ways of stating the same statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORIGINAL</th>
<th>REVISED</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A bird’s eye and a human’s eye take up about 50 and 5% of their heads, respectively. In our study of the importance of vision in birds of prey, we found that this factor was . . .</td>
<td>A bird’s eye is huge. It takes up about 50% of its head. Half its head. That’s 10 times more space than a human’s eye takes up. In fact, to be comparable to the eyes of a bird of prey, such as an eagle, our eyes would have to be the size of a tennis ball. When we studied eagles, vultures, and buzzards, we realized that . . .</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note how in the revised version, the speaker gives the same information twice—50% and half. This is useful because it is very difficult to distinguish between the sound of fifteen and fifty (likewise between 13 and 30, 14 and 40, etc). By using the analogy of a tennis ball, the audience gets a much clearer idea of the proportions. Clearly, to be effective it would be helpful to have slides of an eagle’s head and a tennis ball, and maybe a cartoon of a person with tennis ball eyes. Also, you would be guaranteed attention if you pulled two tennis balls out of your pockets!

For more on statistics, see Sections 11.2, 11.3, and 11.4

10.9 Be aware of cultural differences

In his book Outliers, Malcolm Gladwell, a writer at The New Yorker magazine and named as one of Time magazine’s 100 Most Influential People, talks about cultural
differences in the way we communicate and receive information. In Chapter 8 he makes three very interesting points:

1. many Asian countries are “receiver oriented,” this means it is the listener’s task to interpret what the speaker is saying
2. the Japanese have much higher levels of “persistence” than Americans. This means that the Japanese can stick to a task for much longer than their American counterparts—they have higher levels of concentration
3. our memory span is correlated to the time it takes in our language to pronounce numbers. Because the words for numbers in Asian languages are quicker to pronounce and are more logical (ten-one rather than eleven), Asians tend to be able to absorb numbers and make calculations generally far more quickly than those in the West

What he writes has huge implications for presentations. It means that if you are talking to an audience that includes a good number of people from the West (particularly the United States and Great Britain), you should try to

1. work very hard yourself to make it absolutely clear what you are saying, so that it is effortless for the audience to understand
2. be aware that your audience may not be used to concentrating for long periods and may thus have a short attention span
3. give the audience time to absorb and understand any numbers and statistics that you give them

10.10 Be serious and have fun

Attendees at my courses are often skeptical when I say that audiences are more receptive if they enjoy themselves—my students don’t doubt the truth of this, but they think that it is not professional and that their professors would not approve. However, many of the world’s top professors do approve.

Professor Chandler Davis, the mathematician and well-seasoned conference attendee, told me,

Some of us can’t help expressing our joy in knowing the facts, particularly those WE discovered; presenters who don’t naturally impart the joy should be roused to doing so.

And Nobel Prize Winner in Chemistry in 2008, Professor Martin Chalfie, confirmed that

A professional presentation can be both serious AND fun.

Another professor, psychologist Thomas Gilovich from Cornell University, states that
Our appetite for entertainment is enormous... If the listener comes away from the communication either informed or entertained, the interaction has been worthy of his or her time and attention, and the speaker has met one of his or her most basic requirements.

Being entertaining doesn’t necessarily mean making people laugh. It means

- occasionally providing standard information in a novel or unusual way
- using examples that your audience can easily relate to
- finding interesting and surprising statistics
- using very simple but unusual graphs and pictures that underline important points in a new way

In any case you may decide to provide a few humorous slides or anecdotes. You can then try one and see what reaction you get from your audience. If it works well you can use the others. If not, skip them.

Be careful about telling jokes. They may be dangerous, as the joke may

- not be understood
- be offensive or inappropriate for the culture of your audience
- be completely irrelevant to the topic of the presentation