

20 Tips for Engaging Your Audience

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Without the interest and attention of your audience, you cannot accomplish your objective. Your challenge is not only to make the audience want to listen but to help them understand, remember, and act on the information or ideas you share.

Nothing is more powerful in persuading your audience than your own commitment and enthusiasm for your topic. But, in addition to your own conviction, there are several techniques for ensuring the IMPACT you make is a positive one and you hold their attention and interest throughout your presentation.

Most presenters have given very little, if any thought, to how their audience members learn. The ability to deliver presentations in which true learning takes place is more critical now than ever before. With recent discoveries in the fields of biology, physics, neuro-linguistic programming, cognitive science, neurology, genetics and others, it is also easier than it has ever been before.

It is the job of the presenter to make learning easy for the audience members. With many things going on in their busy lives, being a passive participant, rather than an active learner in meetings is often the choice made by meeting attendees. There are many things the presenter can and should do to improve the learning and ultimately the effectiveness of presentations.

Audience attention and interest naturally drops during a presentation. It is greatest at the beginning and end of a presentation. How far the attention drops depends on the skills of the presenter. The challenge for presenters is to continue to engage and re-engage attention and interest throughout the presentation.

Following are twenty techniques skillful presenters use to engage the emotions and learning state of their audience members:

1. Learner Prep

Preparing the learner for the learning experience has been shown in study after study to enhance learning readiness. By exposing learners to the material prior to the learning event, assimilation, thinking and recall time are all dramatically increased.

2. Posture and Movement

On average, standing increases heartbeats by 10 extra times per minute. That sends more blood to the brain, which activates the central nervous system to increase neural firing. When learners find their energy level dropping, get them to stand up for 2 - 3 minutes as an energizer.

3. Repetition

We learn through repetition. Habits, beliefs, values and self-image have been learned through repetition. Skillful presenters use the technique of repeating key points throughout their presentation. Naturally, a skillful presenter looks for creative ways to revisit the same point - simply saying the same thing over and over again can be frustrating for audience members.

4. Use Threes

People remember the points in your presentation better if you speak in threes.

Consider such well-known phrases:

- Duty, God and Country
- Faith, Hope and Love
- Up, Up and Away

What happens when we do this?

- Duty, God, Country and Friends
- Faith, Hope, Love and Kindness
- Up, Up, Away and Gone

Something is lost in the rhythm, meter and power.

5. Alliteration

A sequence of words beginning with the same sound seems to register with us. What you say does not have to be big, bold and beautiful for it to be as attractive as a warm welcome on a winter's night.

6. Inside Scoop

You've got their immediate attention if you can give them the inside scoop on something, particularly when it hits close-to-home. Know your audience!! Show them that they are receiving the most recent, relevant information available on the subject.

7. Personal Experience

Support the point you're making with first-hand experience. This not only enhances your credibility with the audience but proves your knowledge on the subject.

8. Questioning Techniques

Your audience will remember less than 30 percent of the sentences they hear during your presentation. But they will remember more than 85 percent of the questions you ask. By asking questions, you deepen audience understanding and conviction. The best questions are ones that get your audience thinking, shock them to attention or get their agreement.

Rhetorical questions work as well as questions that require a response. Simply by turning your audience members' brains from passive to active you are encouraging engagement in your presentation.

9. Analogies and Metaphors

Analogies and metaphors permeate our lives. Advertising uses analogies and metaphors to get attention and further understanding. Analogies and metaphors can be single words or expressions. The more complex your subject, the more important it is to use analogies and metaphors. Know your audience!!! Using a complex analogy to support complex material is frustrating for your audience.

For years, physicists discussed an important phenomenon: the gravitationally completely collapsed object. The physicists knew these objects had profound implications - they might answer the question about how the universe began and how it might end. However, no one cared much about this until a creative physicist called the gravitationally completely collapsed object a Black Hole. Suddenly everyone was interested. They made movies about it. Your words matter. If you are presenting something complex - simplify it with a metaphor.

10. Storytelling

You can get your point across in less time, with better understanding and with longer retention if you use stories. Stories are so effective that people will sometimes remember them forever. Stories give people an emotional frame of reference on which to relate personally. Stories are effective because everyone has their own story and can imagine or envision themselves participating in the story to which they are listening.

11. Startling Statistics

Numbers and statistics can lose your audience quicker than anything else. By handling them carefully you can not only prove your point, but also surprise your audience. Present only the numbers and statistics that are necessary to make your point. Where possible, round to the nearest whole number. Graphs and charts should be simple. Detailed calculations should be provided on a handout.

12. Humor

Humor can be one of the most effective attention-getting techniques when used naturally and appropriately. Humor keeps the audience alert and awake. Laughter triggers the release of adrenaline and increases long-term retention of information. Humor makes audiences more relaxed, responsive and creative. The body reacts biochemically to laughing. Laughter increases the white blood cell activity and changes the chemical balance of the blood which may boost the body's production of neurotransmitters needed for alertness and memory. A good laugh can lower stress and low stress makes for better learning. Dr. Norman Cousins in his book *Anatomy of an Illness*, reveals his laughter therapy which he claims was instrumental in his battle with cancer.

It is important not to confuse humor with comedy. Nothing is more uncomfortable for an audience than a long, awkward, drawn-out, unnatural joke. Some of the funniest people never tell jokes. Many of them merely comment on how they see what's going on around them. It's their unique perspective that's humor. Stay away from sexist, ethnic, religious, political or racist jokes. The only person you should make fun of is yourself.

13. Games and Activities

If people sit too long, their brains start to operate in a passive mode, not in an active mode conducive to learning, understanding and retention. Get them involved in activities that help them get to know one another or help gather information.

14. Note-taking

Encouraging your listeners to take notes will also help increase their attention. Encourage audience members to be creative in their note-taking - rather than simply writing sentences on a page from left to right. Key words, pictures and color all help to stimulate the brain.

15. Handouts

Handouts are a tool to supply your audience with complex or additional information to support your talk. They can also be a tool for getting your audience involved. You'll likely create a heads-down audience by distributing handouts at the beginning of your presentation. If not too disruptive, distribute them as your audience will use them.

16. Be Brief and Finish Early

Our fast-food, TV, information society has set new standards for all presenters - we must be concise and brief. People were once willing to listen to a speaker for an hour. Today, even the clergy has to limit its messages to about 20 minutes or less. Interviews on talk shows ran 15 minutes at one time. Now they rarely last more than 7 minutes. TV interviewers used to allow a guest the luxury of a one-minute response. Today that has diminished to less than 25 seconds.

How many presentations have you attended that finished early? Compliment your audience by finishing five minutes early. Be aware of time management from the very beginning of your presentation. Plan how long each stage of your talk should take and stick to it.

17. Brand Your Presentation

Treat your presentation like a product you are selling. How can you brand your presentation so audience members will see greater value in it? What title can you give your presentation that you can repeat several times throughout the presentation?

18. Show Your Flaws

In the mid-1980s, researchers at Cleveland State University made a startling discovery. The researchers created two fictitious job candidates - Dave and John - two identical resumes and two almost identical letters of reference. The only difference was the John's letter included the sentence "sometimes John can be difficult to get along with". Who did managers want to interview? John - apparently the criticism made the praise more believable. Enhance your credibility by disclosing something (a flaw) about yourself that makes you seem more believable to the audience.

19. Halo Effects

People naturally associate. We tend to think that attractive people are smarter, friendlier, more honest and more reliable than less attractive people. We associate on positive thing - attractiveness - with many other good things

Similarly, we assume that poor people lack initiative and intelligence, are less trustworthy, and are less concerned with cleanliness and appearance, when few if any of these characteristics are displayed by one poor person we may see. We associate. We automatically link one negative thing - poverty - with others.

The next time you think, "but I have to say this, and this, and this, and this in my presentation - it's all important", remember the halo effect.

20. Each One Teach One

Learners are people with whole lives. They will relate to you on an emotional level if you convey caring for them as individuals. They will also appreciate the opportunity to relate to each other. Give them time to talk with one another about what they are learning/experiencing.

A word of caution. When preparing a meal, chefs know that some spice and herbs will make the difference between an average meal and a great one. They also know that too many herbs or too much spice will turn an average meal into a horrible one. It is the same with these twenty techniques. Overuse them and your presentation will likely not achieve the results you hope for. Use them sparingly and your presentation will be powerful.