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Presentation Skills

Getting an Audience to Remember Your Presentation

Designing better presentations with cognitive science. **by Art Markman**

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Lots of articles about giving good presentations focus on structure and style. Tips focus on the role of stories to get people interested in the material, the value of summaries at the end of talk, and the many facets of presentation performance – things like how you should stand and ways to use your hands and arms as you speak.

At the foundation of any presentation, though, is a fundamental goal that is often overlooked in helping speakers to design their presentation: that the presentation change the audience in some way.

To do this, you will almost always be trying to influence their memories, and so you need to be aware of how information gets into memory in order to create presentations that will have high impact.

In most talks, you are trying to affect the *explicit memory* of your audience. Explicit memory involves the aspects of your presentation that people can recall later (or perhaps at least recognize that you presented that information when they encounter it later).

Sometimes, you also want to encourage people to develop a skill. Skills are part of *procedural memory*. Procedural memory takes time and repetition to really learn. Think about the practice it takes to learn to touch type or to play a musical instrument or sport. If you want your audience to develop a new skill, then you should create exercises to help

your audience experience the kind of practice you want them to get. After that, though, you need to help your audience to develop a plan for when and where they will get enough practice to actually learn the skill.

More commonly, though, you aim to change the explicit memory of your audience.

This is the place where many presentations fall down. A general assumption behind most people's talks is that if you find a compelling way to state a message and say it clearly, articulately, and confidently, people will remember it.

In fact, decades of work on memory highlights three factors you can use to improve what people remember from your presentations.

1. Follow the right sequence. First, there is a broad *serial position effect*. The first thing presented in a sequence is best remembered. Information presented toward the end of a talk is also reasonably well remembered (though not as well as what you presented at the beginning). The middle of a talk is least well remembered. That means that you need to get the most important thing you want to tell people out right away.

One advantage of the often-used strategy, "tell people what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them" is that you provide an overview of the key points of the presentation in the two positions in which the audience is most likely to remember them. Unfortunately, many speakers open their talk with an anecdote that is engaging, but only tangentially relevant to the topic of the presentation. The audience may easily recall this anecdote later, but it won't help them to learn what they really needed to know.

2. Draw connections. Connections among elements in memory matter. The things you pull out of memory are *chunks* of information. The analogy I use for this in my book *Smart Thinking* is a bowl of peanuts. If you take peanuts out one at a time, you get three peanuts when you reach into the bowl three times. But, if you pour caramel over the peanuts, then when you pull one out, you get a whole cluster. After you draw from the bowl three times, you may have gotten almost all of the peanuts out. Memory functions similarly. Making connections among the key points in your talk helps pour caramel over the peanuts in memory and increases the amount that people remember from what you present.

3. Make the audience work. It requires effort to get information into explicit memory. The more deeply that your audience thinks about the points you make, the more likely they are to remember what you told them later. Paradoxically, if your presentation is too polished, you may reduce the amount of work that your audience has to do to understand what you are telling them, which may inadvertently make the content of your talk less memorable. Think of this as the TED-talk paradox. My experience is that colleagues will remember that they saw a particular TED talk without remembering any of the content of that talk later, because the talks are so fluently delivered.

That does not mean that you want to give a confusing talk. But, it does mean that you need to provide opportunities for your audience to think for themselves. Perhaps you can let them vote on alternatives. Ask the audience questions and get them to make bets about what they think is right before giving them an answer. At the end of the talk, repeat the main points, but encourage the audience to summarize it for themselves. When people explain key points back to themselves, they learn much better than when they just hear it.

By designing your presentations starting with the ways you want to affect your audience, you can do a better job of constructing an experience that maximizes your influence. Presentations are a fleeting opportunity to literally get inside the heads of your audience. Don't waste your time while you're in there.

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