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What to Do When You're Losing Your Audience During a Presentation

Four tips for when the phones come out. *by Dorie Clark*

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You can tell when an audience has stopped listening to you during a presentation. Phones come out, and attendees surreptitiously text underneath the table. Instead of leaning forward and nodding along with your points, they begin slouching or tapping their feet. The more brazen may even start whispering to one another.

As a speaker, it's dispiriting when you feel you're trying to convey important information and your audience has obviously lost interest.

But your only chance at being heard is finding a way —somehow — to re-engage them.

As a professional speaker who has given more than 300 talks over the past half-decade, I've addressed plenty of audiences under adverse conditions, from the serious (employees smarting from news of an impending reorg) to the banal (fighting to be heard over the clank of silverware during a lunchtime speaking slot). Here are four strategies that have helped me regain control of the room.

First, one of my favorite techniques for reclaiming attention is to **move to a different part of the stage**. Many presenters — hemmed in by the standard stage setup — default to delivering their remarks from behind a podium. This often feels safer to novice speakers because they have a place to stash their notes and don't feel as exposed. But it means missing out on a huge opportunity to leverage your physical presence.

If you've been planted in one spot, in front of one part of the audience, you can reengage the rest of the group by moving to the opposite side of the stage. (Whether out of surprise or politeness, your sudden proximity will force attendees to focus on you.) If you're not on a stage, you can take this even further and walk around the room. You don't want to overdo this maneuver, but used judiciously it keeps audience members guessing where you'll go next, which means their eyes are trained on you.

Another strategy is to **speed up — or slow down — the pace of your remarks**. Everyone knows that speaking in a monotone voice is deadly. But a corollary mistake is that, even if your voice has plenty of range, speakers often use the same *rate* of speech all the time.

Fast speakers barrage their audiences, slow speakers keep drawling, and audience members — confident they know what to expect — starts to fidget. But when you deliberately change speed, they take note: *What's different here? Why does this part sound distinct?* And they'll once again focus on your content.

Lowering your voice or pausing can have the same effect. When I want an audience to focus on a key point, I'll deliberately lower my voice to a near-whisper, so they need to focus intently in order to understand what's going on. I may even pause in silence for several beats, to the point where they're itching to hear the conclusion. This is especially effective if you stop after a rhetorical question. "Winning 40% market share might sound unattainable," you could say. "So how do we do it?" A well-timed pause adds just enough suspense that your listeners can't help but anticipate your answer.

So far, we've discussed physical techniques for snapping the audience back to attention. But these will only have a limited effect if they're zoning out because your material is too dry or technical. The same presentation that's perfect for the engineering department may be way too detailed for the broader leadership team, for instance. Thus, a final technique is to reconnect with the crowd by **introducing a story or analogy that illustrates your point**.

Even if your audience isn't versed in particular technical specifications, they can still understand the difference between, say, a regional Amtrak versus a high-speed train. Citing a real-world parallel will help you make your point in a way everyone grasps (if investing an additional \$1 million in R&D will get you "high-speed" performance, that may well be a compelling proposition).

Effective speakers ensure that audiences are actually paying attention to their remarks. If you truly want to inform, educate, or inspire people, you must learn how to capture their attention and re-engage it when necessary. By following these strategies, you can recover more quickly from interruptions or distractions and ensure your message is far more likely to be heard.

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