



Presentation Skills



3 Ways to Keep Your Audience Focused During a Presentation

Fight back against their tendency to zone out or multitask.

by **Matt Abrahams**

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Attention is our most precious commodity. In today's fast-paced world of always-on digital devices and round-the-clock media cycles, getting our audience's attention is critical to our communication success. With so many distractions vying for our time, we must actively seek and gain our audience's attention first.

Unfortunately, capturing ears and eyes isn't enough. Getting attention is only the first battle; keeping it is another challenge entirely. That's why smart communicators not only actively deploy ways to capture attention, but they work to sustain it. Sustained attention is what I call *engagement*. If you can engage your audience, they will stay focused and be less distracted. Plus, you will have a better shot at demonstrating the relevance and significance of your topic to them. To that end, here are three approaches to engaging your audience.

Three Ways to Engage Your Audience

Physical Engagement

Where the body goes, the brain will follow. Anything that gets your audience doing something with their bodies will create engagement. Whether you are giving an in-person pitch or presentation, or conducting a virtual meeting, think about how you can include physical engagement in your activities.

For example, you can have people watch a video, read a handout, click on something on their screens, raise their hands, or use virtual reactions. All of these require your audience to become participants in your communication, not just observers. A simple invitation to "Turn to the person next to you and greet them" or "Read what is on the slide and share your thoughts" can get them involved.

Mental Engagement

Fight back against your audience's tendency to zone out or multitask by fostering cognitive engagement. There are three simple ways to do this: ask questions throughout your presentation; incorporate provocative statements, data, and stats; and introduce smart analogies.

When you ask a question, people almost automatically start to consider their answer, thereby moving them from passive listening to active participation.

Provocative statements or compelling data ignite curiosity and encourage your audience to internally ask their own questions. For example, if you're trying to justify headcount for your training department, you could say: "30% of our customer service tickets could be eliminated by training users better."

Analogies are where we compare what we know to what we don't know; in other words, we use the familiar to explain the unfamiliar. Invoking analogies invites involvement by making us actively think. One caveat: When you use analogies, make sure they're ones people can readily relate to. Over-reliance on sports metaphors or on complex comparisons people cannot follow or understand will work against your goal of engagement and greater understanding.

Linguistic Engagement

Linguistic engagement refers to the use of inclusive words, time-traveling language, and references to shared perspectives or experiences. Inclusive wording means inviting people into your communication. For instance, we're hardwired to perk up when we hear our own name, as well as when we hear the word "you." Mention participants' names, and use phrases like "As you know..." or "You may be wondering..." or "Today, you will learn..."

Time-traveling language takes people from the present into the future or the past. You can use phrases like "Imagine..." or "What if you could..." or "Picture this..." to take people into the future. "Remember when..." or "Think back to when..." will take people into the past. Connect people through shared experiences or beliefs to create common ground. For instance, highlighting your company's mission and values or referencing a previous shared experience can draw people in, much like when you and your friends or family share old stories and jokes.

Combining Engagement Techniques

You don't need to rely on only one engagement technique at a time. Instead, combine them to increase and enhance their effect. For example, polling is a great way to get both brains and bodies involved with a triple-whammy of activity. It works with a poll question as simple as, "By show of hands, which of the following do *you* believe is the most important element of XYZ?" The synergy of the physical, mental, and linguistic engagement techniques deployed in this one question get attendees out of neutral and in the flow with you.

Note that when polling, you must first tell your audience how to respond (e.g., "By show of hands..." or "Type into the chat..."). It's also imperative that you comment on the response you get (e.g., "That's what I expected...about half of you," or "Wow, that is everyone"). If you fail to comment, your audience might feel tricked into complying, or worse, that you did not care about the answer and were just using the poll as a gimmick.

Of course, these suggestions might not be appropriate for your situation (for example, if you're polling the three executives in the room), so choose options that fit the occasion and group size.

While engagement techniques can be used any time in a communication situation, they're especially critical when starting meetings, presentations, or pitches. Think about how an action movie opens. You're thrown into the midst of action with the actor doing something impressive, interesting, and curiosity provoking right away. Only after your attention is engaged and your interest piqued do the title and credits appear. If you start out with the traditional "Hi, my name is..," you've missed a prime opportunity to engage your audience immediately. Similarly, engaging your audience by asking a question,

taking a poll, showing a video, or using an analogy before introducing yourself sets an energetic tone.

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Grabbing and keeping your audience's focus is critical to communication success. If you think about any communication and communicator that you find compelling, they're likely leveraging some of the physical, mental, or linguistic engagement techniques discussed above. What you have to say is important, so give yourself the best chance to convey your message to your audience by first gaining attention, but then, more importantly, sustaining it.

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