How to Keep Your Audience's Attention

"It was impossible to get a conversation going; everyone was talking too much" - Yogi Berra

On the Powerful Business Presentations Programme we talk at length about how to grab your audience’s attention with a great opening. Having achieved that how do you keep their attention?

You probably assume you'll keep their attention because you're the boss, their boss had told them to listen to you, or you think your subject matter's riveting.

But unless they are really, really, really interested in what you're going to say, or there's an incredible Compelling Audience Benefit (C.A.B.), you will lose some of your audience for most of presentation and most of them for some of it. Why? Because that's just the way it is. Listening to someone deliver a monologue for 15/20/30 minutes is not a natural thing to do.

Think about it. Most of us are experts at conversation. We can all listen, digest information instantaneously, query, respond and contribute, all in a fraction of a second. And we can do this because conversation is the first type of verbal communication we learn, and we then spend most of our lives practicing, perfecting and refining it.

In fact, it's only very occasionally that we have to communicate in any other way. So much so that when we find ourselves having to listen to a monologue, speech or presentation for any length of time, it's difficult. We're just not used to it!

A presentation is usually a monologue while a conversation is a dialogue, in which we take turns to contribute. In fact when we're not allowed to take our turn, we get annoyed and people who don't follow this 'rule' are regarded as being pushy, domineering and controlling.

We're programmed to only have to concentrate for a few sentences before it's our 'turn'. But a typical presentation is many hundreds of times longer than anything we have to listen to in a conversation. So imagine what a strain it is to have to concentrate attentively without speaking for 20 or 30 minutes! Just think how easily you lose concentration when listening to other people's presentations.

So here are FIVE things you can do to help your audience to concentrate and pay attention.

1. Make sure your presentation is structured logically

During a conversation, we can ask for clarification about anything we don't understand and get an immediate response. Not so during a presentation. Even if the presenter encourages us to ask questions if we don't understand, most people won't because they worry about looking ignorant.

Instead, we reflect on what's been said to try and get our minds around it, and while we're doing that, we have to stop listening to what comes next. And when we miss the next point, we get even more confused. So we stop listening altogether.

So it's your responsibility to make sure your presentation is structured logically and is easy-to-follow. After your powerful opening to get their attention, tell them exactly why they should give you the next 15/20/30 minutes of their life and then outline what you're going to cover so they have an idea of the structure of the presentation. Have a sense of the presentation's structure and sequence makes it a lot easier to make sense of its content.
2. If you insist on using power-point, make sure your slides are easy to understand

Most people have far too much information on their slides, which makes them complex and difficult to follow.

Think very carefully about what you want to say, and then think: "What do I want to put on a slide that will help me get that point over?" The slide should contain enough information to make that point, and no more. Anything else is not only superfluous; it actually damages your chances of achieving your objectives. So take out anything that isn't necessary to make your point. It makes the slide simpler and easier to read.

Because if a slide is too 'busy', the audience's brains will get a sensory overload and can easily switch off, placing what is in front of them in the mental 'too difficult' file.

3. Look them in the eyes

In a conversation, our reactions are visible to the person we're conversing with, which enables them to monitor our attentiveness and reactions. Knowing we won't have to speak for 15/20/30 minutes takes away one of our biggest incentives to pay attention.

So the more you can keep everyone under 'surveillance' the more likely it is your audience will at least simulate paying attention. If you look at someone for more than a couple of seconds, they'll almost feel obliged to nod, smile, frown or give some kind of non-verbal sign that they're listening.

Low levels of eye contact release the audience from the natural 'pressure' they feel to pay attention. Although one of the main things people often say they dislike about speaking in public is being 'in the spotlight' and being looked at by so many people, you need to realise that the audience isn't made up of dozens of eyes wired together to form one mega 'super-viewer', but a number of separate individuals, each looking at you in their own personal way.

4. Encourage audience participation

With political speeches, audiences have the opportunity to participate via applause, but this will very rarely happen during a business presentation. But there are two other types of response we can encourage.

The first is laughter, which is why humour is such a powerful weapon for a presenter when used properly. It's a very powerful incentive to listen. We all enjoy laughing, and once we've laughed once, we start looking for more opportunities to do it again. So we pay attention.

The second is getting them to say or do something, such as asking for a show of hands, asking questions or inviting suggestions. We all know from school how effective our teachers' asking questions was in keeping us attentive!

However . . . don't overdo it. Individual questions are OK, but telling the audience to ask questions whenever they want to is to be avoided, especially if you have a specific time slot. It's too easy for you to lose control and run out of time.

5. Speak with intonation and enthusiasm

One of the most common criticisms of a presenter is that he/she 'droned on and on', and to say that someone speaks in a monotone is widely accepted as a criticism. The only time a flat, monotonic delivery of something is acceptable when speaking in public is when the speaker is deliberately conveying neutrality about what is being said, for example when an official statement is being read out on behalf of someone else.

For anything else, you need to add intonation to your speech. If you just attempt to speak conversationally, you'll probably sound monotonic and 'flat', which is one of the most common traits we pick up on in our video reviews.
In each sentence there's probably one word which needs to be emphasised more than the others. Go through your notes and underline them.

At first it will seem slightly false speaking like this, and you'll worry about sounding like a 3rd rate TV newsreaders. You may even feel embarrassed. But you need to do it. One of the big differences between a presentation and a conversation is that the latter usually takes place with only a few feet between the speakers. At such a distance, slight 'normal' changes in tone and emphasis can be easily picked up.

But to a larger audience, over a distance of several yards, this won't happen. So what sounds conversational and normal to you might come over as flat and robotic to the audience. How many times have you heard someone say something like, 'I'm really excited to be here today' or 'I'm really excited about this new addition to our range' in dull, monotonic tones which indicate exactly the opposite?

So you need to exaggerate your normal intonation and enthusiasm. But don't worry; what sounds exaggerated in your head will flatten out over a distance and sound normal to the audience. Watch and listen to good TV newsreaders to see how they do it.