



10 Ways Great Speakers Capture People's Attention

First you must grab your listeners' attention-- then you need to hold it more than their phone, email, social media, etc. Check out these simple ways to do both!

By: Sims Wyeth, President, Sims Wyeth & Co.

1. Start with the unexpected.

Start with a bang, not a whimper. Smokers like matches that light with the first strike, and listeners like presentations that ignite interest with the first sentence. For instance: "We stand today at a place of battle, one that 40 years ago saw and felt the worst of war."--President Ronald Reagan. An opening line like this makes us lean in, lend an ear, and wonder where the speaker will take us. They jump right into the subject and create suspense, intrigue, and curiosity.

2. Make it about them. (What's in it for me?)

Now that you've gotten listeners' attention with your magnetic opening, make the story about them. They want to know right away what value your session will bring to them personally. Increase your You-to-Me-Ratio. Talk about their goals, their aspirations, and their anxieties. Cicero, a Roman statesman and orator, and one of the greatest speakers in the history of the world said, "Tickling and soothing anxieties is the test of a speaker's impact and technique". He meant that you can capture attention if you remind an audience of a felt need, a pain point, or a threat to their well-being. Many speaker consultants use something called FUD to sell their projects: Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt. A smattering of FUD gets our attention.

3. Keep it concrete at the start.

Show a prop. Ask the audience to complete a simple task (draw or list something). Use language that appeals to the senses. Don't tax the audience right away with abstract reasoning or academic concepts. Storytelling is a powerful way to get into a topic because we are hard-wired to absorb information through storytelling. Robert Kennedy, Jr. once spoke about a conservation on a boat on the Hudson River. He began by pointing south. "If you look in that direction," he said, "You will see the channel that for millions of years has been the largest spawning ground for sturgeon in the world." Of course, when I looked where he was pointing, I saw nothing but gray polluted water, not a sturgeon in sight, but I had the image of millions of large fish teeming so densely on the surface of the river that I could have walked across their backs to New Jersey. Only then did he dive into the data about the poor, languishing Hudson.

4. Keep it moving.

Not just in terms of pace, but in terms of development. Make sure that every new bit of information you provide builds on what came before. We lose interest in movies when nothing is happening, or novels that stop while the author describes a bucolic setting for two pages. Our brains are saying, "I want action! Drama. Suspense." The same holds true for your listeners. They are time-pressed, content-driven, and results oriented. Think of the difference between a river and a canal. A canal is plodding while a river is dynamic and constantly changing. To please your listeners' insatiable desire for variety, make your presentations like rivers, not canals. Make sure there's always something happening, most especially when delivering webinars, where your audience is likely to be highly distracted.

5. Get to the point.

One of the great pleasures the audience has is quickly grasping what you're getting at. They resent you when you rob them of this pleasure. Give them only one point, make it early and often, and they'll carry you out on their shoulders.

6. Arouse emotion.

Humor is inherently persuasive. It gives the speaker an unfair advantage because it literally changes the chemistry in the room, and in the brain of everyone present. But don't try to tell jokes if you're not a comedian.

Simply allow your natural sense of humor to be present in the moment, and when something comes to mind, allow your humor to reveal itself. Confessing something personal about yourself can also make the audience feel connected with you. I had a client recently--a senior person in her company--who confessed to her colleagues at a major company meeting that she had been a bartender, a taxi driver, and short-order cook in order to pay her college tuition. The audience was amazed and thrilled as she drove home her point that we can all do more than we realize if we have the will to do whatever it takes. One definition of courage, she said, is acting out of character.

7. Keep it interactive.

Social scientists have demonstrated that an interactive audience is more easily persuaded than a passive one. In many circumstances, the give and take between speaker and audience breaks through the reticence and reserve of listeners, encouraging them to engage with the speaker and play a part in the proceedings. We see this in certain churches using the call and response tradition of worship. We see it in schools and universities, where an effective teacher, by asking questions, can get monosyllabic students to open up and participate.

8. Write clear headlines.

Write headlines for your slides that express a point of view. The audience will get the big idea and look at the body of the slide for evidence that supports your point. For instance, ""We Can Dominate the Market"" is a better headline than, ""Market Share."" It's better because it implies action, it's brimming with intellectual and emotional content, and it captures the physicality of neck-down attention much more than the inert phrase "Market Share."

9. Keep it short.

Stop talking before they stop listening. The mind cannot absorb what the behind cannot endure.

10. Let there be you.

The presence of a human being alone on a stage of any kind, whether it's the floor of a small meeting room or the elevated platform of a vast ballroom, is profound. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What you are speaks so loudly that [nobody] can hear what you're saying." Listeners interpret everything a speaker does: they read your face, your inner rhythm, your posture, voice, and stance. In fact, the human mind ascribes moral intention to physical cues having the slightest hint of emotional expression.

The problem is the mind does this in a matter of seconds, and you have to speak longer than that. Plus, you may be nervous, not at your scintillating best, so your technical skill at capturing and holding attention could be the difference between success and failure. Every business presentation will have plenty of moments when the audience will have to work hard and pay attention to grasp the material. I am suggesting that your results, and your reputation, will improve when your audience finds you and your content fascinating.