

# The Attention Deficit

**AS A PRESENTER, YOU'VE COME TO EXPECT THE UNDIVIDED ATTENTION OF AN AUDIENCE WHENEVER YOU STEP UP TO THE PODIUM. BUT HAVE YOU NOTICED LATELY THAT MUCH OF THE ATTENTION YOU'RE GETTING IS DECIDEDLY DIVIDED?**

By Julie Hill

People in the audience are checking pagers, scanning through PDAs, thumbing through e-mail on Blackberries, answering phone calls, text-messaging their wives, looking up stock quotes, tapping away on laptops — all while “listening” to your presentation.

And what about you, the presenter? Has your phone ever been the ringing interruption? Have you ever had to excuse yourself in the middle of a presentation to take a call? Have you ever forgotten to include one of your main points because you were distracted by something?

The sad truth is not many of us give our full attention to anything anymore — our jobs, wives, kids, friends and presentations included. A constant barrage of interruptions masquerading as “communication” is eroding the attention spans of businesspeople, and it’s affecting many a presenter’s ability to craft and convey their message, as well as their audience’s ability to receive them.

What’s a presenter to do? If people in your audience have the attention span of a gnat, should you load your presentation with so much multimedia that they can’t possibly ignore it? Should you chuck all your visual aids and hope your own charisma is enough to keep them spellbound? Or should you just resign yourself to the idea that hardly anything you say is going to be remembered by anyone half an hour after they leave the room?

First, don’t despair. It is still possible to cut through people’s mental clutter. Many tried-and-true presentation techniques can still hold their attention better than a PDA or a beer commercial. And when you’re the one driving the bus, you have some control

over where it goes — and what people are allowed to see along the way.

## It’s a busy, busy world

What happened to our ability to pay attention? Sociologists say it’s the cumulative effect of hundreds of messages and advertisements from phones, e-mail, the Internet, TV, radio, magazines, books, memos and other human beings, all assaulting us at once, competing for ever-shrinking slivers of our time. With all these messages vying for our attention, the messages themselves have become louder, brighter, more frequent and more demanding.

In their book, *The Attention Economy* (Harvard Business School Press, 2001), authors Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck argue that this communication tsunami, combined with an economy that forces employees to do more with less, is causing businesses everywhere to suffer from “organizational attention deficit disorder,” or OADD. In organizations with OADD, distractions at all levels are leading to less focus on company goals and more bad decisions. The authors argue that businesses will eventually be forced to change from a time-based productivity model to an attention-based model. In an attention-based model, companies would track and reward employees not for their time, but for how well they pay attention and act on company goals.

While this attention-based scenario may seem far-fetched to some, leadership consultant Rand Stagen doesn’t think it is. President of the Dallas-based Stagen Leadership Institute, Stagen is preparing to release a book titled *Corporate ADD: Why American Workers Can’t Pay Attention and*

*What to Do About It*. Stagen points to a 2001 University of Michigan study on multitasking conducted by Joshua Rubinstein indicating that a worker’s productivity decreases by 20 to 40 percent every time they multitask.

Not only can this kind of productivity decline be seen from the podium, it is found behind it as well, says Karen Friedman, president of Blue Bell, Penn.-based Karen Friedman Enterprises. Friedman once had a company hire her to help polish the presentation skills of two executives. The executives were described to her as a man and a woman who were experienced in their field and good at what they did. Their presentation material needed to flow better, however, and they also needed to connect better with the people in the room. But when Friedman went to observe the executives present at a four-hour workshop, she realized the problem went much deeper.

In four hours, she recalls, “These presenters were in the room collectively for maybe an hour.” They were constantly being interrupted by “important” phone calls, people knocking on the door who needed their input on something, or one would duck out to check his e-mail while the other answered a page.

“To give these clients the ability to present better, we needed to get their attention long enough to coach them,” says Friedman. Unfortunately, when she pointed out the constant interruptions, she was told the distractions could not be avoided because these presenters were busy people working on important matters.

Friedman’s tale is by no means unusual. Frazzled executives everywhere get caught in the same trap on a daily basis. The ques-

tion is, what can be done about it?

As a presenter, the first thing you need to do to avoid falling into the same trap is be aware of the many directions in which your attention is being pulled. Then, take back some control.

### Where's your head?

It's the day before your presentation and you've finally buckled down, opened up PowerPoint and are trying to get your thoughts in order. "You've got mail" pops up on your screen. Out of habit, you check your e-mail and end up answering another two or three messages. Next, the phone rings and another 15 minutes slip away. Then someone pops into your office asking if you've got a minute. "Every time this happens," warns Rand Stagen, "when you switch from one task to another, there's a small cost associated with that switch, and that's the time it takes to mentally re-engage and focus on preparing your presentation."

Rule No. 1 for giving an attention-getting presentation, says Stagen, is to give your presentation preparation your full attention. Too often, he says, presenters worry about the audience's attention habits and don't examine their own. Plus, "if you're in a reactive work environment, it's easy to procrastinate."

Stagen suggests making an appointment with yourself to begin preparing for your presentation, preferably well ahead of your deadline. Also, cut out distractions during this time with yourself: forward the phone, turn off e-mail notification, post a "do not disturb" sign on your door, or leave the office altogether. "If you work on taking away these distractions, you'll find that your preparation will go much faster and the quality will be better," Stagen says.

### Stay focused

At the podium, one surefire way to lose people's attention is to wander off on endless tangents, says Karen Friedman. The best way to keep people's attention is to stay focused on what you are trying to say, have a clear message, and don't travel down too many topical side roads.

"You can't (and shouldn't) tell people everything you know because no one

cares," Friedman says. Too often, presenters lose the audience with content clutter, with so many bulleted slides and rambling asides that audience members need a map to find the main point.

Friedman suggests thinking of your core points as short chapters that must be covered in a limited amount of time, and from which you cannot stray. "Take 10 pounds of what you know and find a way to make it fit into a 2-pound bag," she advises. Otherwise, the moment you drift, so will your audience's attention.

### The rest of the story

Good stories — tied to your message, of course — are another surefire attention-getter.

"A memorable story gets an audience engaged and emotionally connected. When this happens, it cuts through the flood of information, and stuff sticks," says Ken Christian. An organizational psychologist, trainer and speaker from New York City, Christian has studied the connections between work culture and attention span for 25 years.

Leadership communication consultant John Baldoni, of Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Baldoni Consulting, regularly coaches executives to use stories when they present, because they're a powerful tool. "Audiences will sit and listen to a compelling story," says Baldoni. Talented speakers weave stories throughout their presentations and can keep audiences engaged for an hour or a whole day. Why? "Storytelling is teaching, but it's also superbly engaging," he says.

### The multimedia monkey

Technology also offers a few ways to cut through the clutter, or at least out-shout it. Video, music, animations, graphics and PowerPoint slides can all be used to get people's attention. There are even those who argue that the only way to get the attention of people who are bombarded with various media all day long is to bombard them with even more media — and, preferably, make it look like a video game.

But Rand Stagen believes multimedia mania is a paradoxical trap. "The louder the presentation is in volume or visual

effects, the more you'll get the attention of your audience," he says, but "you won't necessarily hold their attention."

Microsoft's PowerPoint presentation-slideshow software in particular receives harsh criticism from time to time as a tool that can easily turn against presenters and turn off audiences. In the September 2003 issue of Wired magazine, graphic-design guru Edward Tufte wrote an essay accusing PowerPoint slides of releasing a scourge of stupidity on corporate America by not providing enough context for bullet-pointed information. In an accompanying article, Tufte's invective is countered by artist and musician David Byrne, who argues that the presenter's message can get across regardless of the medium, and, if used creatively, PowerPoint has more than enough power to provide thought-provoking visuals.

### So who's right?

Ken Christian believes presenters should reconsider their dependence on electronic slides, or at least how the slides are used. "In business, there's a tremendous amount of 'monkey see, monkey do' behavior," he says. It's accepted that if you are doing a presentation, "you need to have a projector and your slides."

But it's not the slides themselves that matter; it's the content of the slides and how well the presenter uses them.

Karen Friedman cautions that the more complex the slideshow, the more likely presenters themselves can be upstaged. "These presenters are talking to their slides, not their audience," she says. "I see this every day, and I always tell my clients the same thing: 'Nobody came to see a slideshow, they came to see you.'"

### The art of visual attention

Used effectively, visuals do help hold an audience's attention as well as reinforce key messages. However, many presentation coaches say the trick to maximizing the impact of multimedia is timing. "There is a time for heavy media and a time for not using it," says John Baldoni.

Baldoni cites a recent automotive show in Detroit. Daimler-Chrysler was to introduce a concept vehicle, and the company knew it had to be done with some pizzazz.



The company didn't bore attendees with facts and figures, Baldoni says. "Rather, the head of design told a story about his boss's enthusiastic reaction upon seeing the vehicle for the first time."

Since most presenters are faced with talking about more mundane initiatives, Ken Christian suggests using visuals more judiciously to make them stand out in a presentation. "If you have a cartoon that hasn't been used, and it really illustrates your moment with humor, it would be absurd not to put that up on the screen," he says. But don't use too many slides. "Think of your slides as spices in a recipe," he says. "It's possible to overdo it."

### Fighting MEGO

Beyond producing a well-prepared presentation with visual support, the main arena in which presenters must battle waning attention is in front of an audience. That means taking control from the very beginning.

It's now standard practice to begin with a request that audience members turn off all pagers and cell phones. But many speakers still neglect this important step. According to speaker and corporate trainer Andrea Nierenberg, most people don't mind being asked to turn off their phone, and when you make an effort to ask, it sends a message that you as the presenter are insisting on a certain amount of respect from the audience.

Attention, however, "is a two-way

street," Nierenberg warns. By asking for an audience's time and full attention, presenters need to give the audience their energy and full attention as well.

Another key to keeping an audience from drifting is to keep them moving, says Nierenberg. "You can't just let people sit there," otherwise they will start to fidget with whatever they have on hand: their PDA, phone, paper and pencil, whatever. Nierenberg uses several techniques, quizzes and open-ended questions, all of which she regularly adds to her speeches to keep people on their toes. She includes regular stretch breaks during workshops, and throws in such tactics as asking them to look under their chairs for a \$5 bill (which she places under one chair beforehand). She walks around the room to keep their eyes moving, and asks nearby participants open-ended questions at key intervals — all of which helps fight what she terms MEGO, for "my eyes glazed over."

John Baldoni uses a similar strategy he has dubbed "the four I's": to inform, to invite participation, to involve the audience, and to ignite them into action. Beyond keeping the audience involved, says Baldoni, presenters need to repeat their key message early and often throughout their speech. "Repeatedly I need to remind clients this. You can't just say it once. You need to say it 100 times."

### The fruits of passion

A presenter's emotional pitch is also

crucial. When a presenter is genuinely excited about their topic, people pay attention — it's that simple. It doesn't matter how many video games or mass-media messages someone has digested, says Karen Friedman,

"Enthusiasm still catches people's eyes and ears, and passion holds their attention. If you can show you are human, they'll like you. And if they like you, there's a greater chance they will listen."

Ken Christian agrees with Friedman, and says that enthusiasm and inspiration are not things people expect to find in corporate boardrooms these days, so it tends to catch their attention. "There is a desperate hunger among people for inspiration and vision, not just a mission statement that means nothing," he says.

### Last call

While many of the best techniques for cutting through today's communication clutter may seem mundane, being aware of what works in front of an audience — and has always worked — is the first step to taking your presentations to the next level. And although you can't control what makes individual audience members pay attention, you can make a sincere effort to block out unwanted distractions and provide compelling stories, visuals and interaction. When people's attention wanders, it is usually because they are bored. But nobody wants to be bored, and that realization is a presenter's best, not-so-secret weapon.



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