

## **Attention is a Gift: Make Sure You Earn It**

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Sharon Bowman, consultant to professional trainers, reminds us that television programs are interrupted every eight minutes for a commercial break. To keep your audience's attention, Bowman says, do something different every 10 minutes. (The extra two minutes make it easier to keep track).

At first sight, this is frightening information. Are things really so bad that people won't listen to more than a snippet of information? Are we becoming dumber by the day?

Dumber? I don't think so. In the course of my work, I meet brilliant people on a regular basis. If people are losing intelligence en masse, they are doing so outside my sphere of reference.

At the same time, in terms of how people expect information to be delivered, they are definitely changing.

The ten-minute rule makes sense, not only because people watch television, but because they multi-task both at work and at home. We *are* used to being interrupted, and not just by commercials.

In fact, we are entirely immersed in a lifestyle of segmentation and speed. E-mail and television are just two of the forces that push people into new perspectives on sending and receiving messages. These new perspectives have a profound effect on habits of attention.

Attention is, as it always has been, a gift that people give you. In my experience, the more intelligent or prominent the receiver, the more that person expects you to earn his or her attention. For high-ranking executives, there is nothing new here. What is new is how far down the corporate and social ladder the stringent demand has spread.

Follow these guidelines to increase your chances of receiving the gift of attention:

### **Be Clear About Time and Content Parameters**

Competent communicators provide advance notice of time parameters. For example, when successful salespeople ask a potential customer for an appointment, they specify a time limit, "May I have thirty minutes of your time?" When a person knows the appointment will be short and to-the-point, that person is less likely to permit a phone call or something else to interrupt.

The same principle applies in a presentation. For example, think of a doctor who gives presentations to groups of other doctors over dinner. She has a definite attention challenge. The doctor meets the challenge by telling audiences that she will stop talking by the time desert is served. Participants know they will have opportunities to speak with their colleagues before the evening over. The doctor's strategy minimizes distracting side conversations. It increases the amount of attention she receives.

Good communicators provide a clear overview of content as well as schedule. I think of this as giving the audience a roadmap to follow when audience members are clear about how the pieces of a presentation fit together, they are more likely to give you the gift of their attention. When confused, or when they perceive precious time is being wasted, people are becoming less and less forgiving.

### **Climb Out of Your Own Skin**

A colleague of mine, Bridget Snebold, emphasizes that communication is a receiver phenomenon. Even if you are the one assigned to give a presentation, the presentation is NOT about you. In a strange paradox, your command of attention will be highest when your presentation is least about you.

To command attention, direct your content to the strongest drive, the highest goal, or the most nagging problem your audience members face.

To focus your message effectively, investigate the priorities and problems of busy executives and/or audience members. The World Wide Web can help, but don't stop there. Practice the art of asking good questions and listening to what is being said on non-verbal as well as verbal levels.

Climbing out of your own skin will force you to move from a solution (your product or proposal) to a clear definition of a problem. It will stretch you to be as practical and application-oriented as you can possibly be.

Sharon Bowman's ten-minute rule is a good guide. The rule reflects reality, but not in the discouraging way that some people see it. Intelligent and prestigious individuals have always known that their attention is a gift. In terms of attention span, more people are becoming demanding. This does not automatically mean that our society is losing its smarts. It does mean that if you want attention for your message, you'll have to earn it.

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