

# Content Meets Delivery...

## *The Art of Capturing Attention*

By Karel Murray

Designing a new presentation always begins with a blank page - that insidious gleaming sheet of purity just waiting for those pearls of wisdom. Sometimes, if I stare hard enough, I can almost feel the screen staring back as it fluctuates in lighting intensity. Almost as if the computer is... impatient.

The burden of responsibility to write a program which is interesting as well as informative can sometimes seem too great to handle. You know your stuff. You can rattle it off in your sleep and even enlighten your close friends with bits of knowledge they would never had received unless you shared it with them. All right, they probably are just listening to be polite...but for some reason, you feel compelled to instruct.

That's why you do what you do - observing session participants gain and grasp new concepts and begin the process of assimilating information. You know you hit the mark when heads start nodding and pens are furiously flying across their notes pages. Eager hands shoot skyward, enlivened discussion fills the air and suddenly, the room is charged with an energy that crackles for the remainder of the presentation.

It's for these moments I carry Static Guard!

But here I sit...looking at my empty, expectant page still waiting to be filled. The challenge of coming up with a new way to say "old" stuff is definitely the challenge. My mother often told me there was nothing really new out in the world today, just a different way of making connections and applications. Her mantra - "Do better."

Do better... That's the rub. How do we keep improving the process, delivery and content so that what we have to offer remains something the attendees want to hear? Recently, I watched a speaker present an hour session on a rather dry continuing education topic. The threat of a test upon completion of the lecture seemed to command audience attention.

Hummm.

Numbers, dates, and background information flashed up on the overhead projector. The instructor felt speed solved participant lack of interest... Obviously he felt if he went fast enough that would keep everyone awake. There's nothing

worse than an audience who stares back at you with passive, bored eyes. You witness the tops of heads bobbing dangerously towards the white tablecloth and the water glass only to be saved by a sudden spasmodic jerk of the shoulders. The lurch to attention not only startles the offender, but causes a heart attack in the person next to them.

As I watched the presentation, an exceptional amount of content poured forth into the classroom. But the speaker continually missed opportunities for application by the participants. The instructor, instead, resorted to another commonly used technique to gain audience participation. It's called, "Move Around The Room".

I felt like I was watching a ping pong ball.

Pacing from the projector to the white board, to the side door, along the aisle and down towards the back row. Maybe it was his way of getting his exercise requirements into his busy day. Within minutes, the figure eight pattern became evident. Necks twisted awkwardly to follow the action. Finally, giving in to the pain, the attendees simply looked forward at the slide on the screen, settled back in their chairs and crossed their arms. Who said "No pain...no gain."

The participants didn't attend this lecture to try and keep track of their instructor... so they checked out. Literally.

Something definitely had turned sour, but the speaker failed to see the clues, absolutely absorbed in delivering the session materials. There was no effort to invite participation through active listening and verbal contributions. And I wonder...must presenters be masters of entertainment as well as content? Let's explore that a moment...

Over the past year, I've noticed attention spans are shortening. In formal presentations, it isn't unusual to see an audience member peruse a newspaper hidden carelessly underneath their handout. How about the palm pilot nestled in an attendee's lap and the quiet clicking effectively distracting their neighbor? Now that there is message text available on cell phone phones, I envision whole conversations (much like note passing in junior high school) to proliferate.

It's not only in a class room, during a keynote or part of a facilitated event... lack of attention is pervading many aspects of our daily lives. Try sitting quietly in a movie theatre. Observe the individual conversations conducted throughout the movie, cell phones that ring, bright lights flaring from phones as the message are read, and feel the general restlessness filling the room. Notice how loud the movies need to be projected in order to be heard over the human generated

noise. Chastising messages for “Quiet” at the beginning of a feature film are casually ignored. Even a frustrated patron glaring at a noisy attendee is not effective. The offender glares right back and proceeds with their breakdown of the situation for the benefit of their viewing partner.

As a result, Hollywood resorts to special effects that are quick, visually exciting or gross, and story lines move at a pace where the viewer feels somehow empty at the end of the movie because the characters were never fully developed. *All for the sake of keeping attention for a short while.*

Recognizing the “fast paced, keep moving, multi-tasking” mentality of the world today, presenters must rise to the challenge and bring their audience to a new level of self imposed concentration. A state of mind much like the feeling we had as children as we watched our favorite cartoon program - tunnel vision. That “must not look away because we might miss something” type of attitude.

A sense of wonder and involvement is waiting for presenters to tap into it. Are you up to the challenge?

## **5 Ways to Establish Audience Connection**

### **Know your audience**

Before designing a presentation, you should familiarize yourself with participant statistics. Identifying factors such as types of careers represented, level of management responsibility, gender, age, and other pertinent information will help you build a program which is relevant and focused. Discover industry terminology and buzz words. Have fun with them when it’s appropriate. Anything you can do to show your participants that you cared enough to learn about them will enhance your rapport building efforts.

### **Understand your delivery style.**

Recognizing your personal impact on the audience is crucial to developing a speaking style which is engaging to others. Consider hiring a speaking coach to evaluate your platform skills and determine the areas which require fine tuning. Often, only small changes are needed to dramatically transform a presentation. If a major overhaul is required, get the checkbook ready. Remember, ultimately, it’s not about you...it’s about the participant and their ability to receive the knowledge you want to share. If you’re not effective, you waste everyone’s time.

### **Be real.**

Fundamentally, successful speakers connect at an emotional level with participants. The term “authentic” comes to mind. Presenters must invite others into their world. I’ve learned that people feel privileged when they are treated like family. Give audiences an opportunity to learn about you at a level that shatters superficial banter.

### **Turn up the volume**

Is drama needed in the presentation to maintain audience attention? How about special effects and quirky mannerisms? Will mastering comedy and inserting it skillfully throughout the session make your delivery memorable? Possibly. Locate areas of your program that naturally invite interaction and energy. Remember, it’s not about shouting down the outside influences which work to disrupt attention spans. Turning up the volume is about creating a program where your content is enhanced by deliberate efforts to engage the participant. Make your delivery compelling and the audience will actively listen.

### **Focus on the details**

The search for content must be diverse and personal. The process of digging into you own experiences and understanding of a concept balanced against other points of view will culminate in a program bursting with heart, sincerity, and expertise. Provide highly detailed information in a variety of formats - visual, auditory, participatory, group discussion, town hall question and answer periods - .any manner which places details within easy reach of the majority of your attendees. Supply audiences with only the information they can easily absorb in one session by selecting your data carefully for most impact.

Speaking is what you do. Educating is what drives you. Go ahead...create memorable moments that will last a lifetime. Forget about the burden and accept the privilege you’ve been given.

Your blank page and audience are waiting...

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