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9 Ways to Improve Your Presentation

Know when to stop talking!

Worried about holding your audience's attention? Want to improve your presentation skills? Here's a very simple method practiced by professional speakers: STOP TALKING!

It sounds counterintuitive but it's highly effective. It does require you to adjust how you think about your presentation. Contrary to what you believe, a good presentation is *not* a monologue. According to professional speech coach Patricia Fripp, a good presentation is a dialogue between the speaker's words and the audience member's inner dialogue. A pause in speaking helps build an intellectual and emotional connection with your audience by allowing them time to process what you have just said. It increases audience engagement and prepares them for what comes next.

Not only professional speakers make effective use of pauses. Actors, comedians, and musicians also make use of pauses to increase emotional connections with their audiences.

Incorporating Pauses

Fripp suggests using the pause as you would punctuation like a comma, a period, or a paragraph. Using

punctuation as a guide is a good starting point as you build pauses into your presentation.

The second consideration is to understand *why* you are pausing. Just as punctuation can be misplaced or misused, unnecessary pauses can make you appear uncertain or dilute your message. The key to successfully using the pause is to keep in mind that it is not just empty airtime; it is a strategic tool intended to heighten audience engagement.

Types of Pauses

Once you understand why you want to pause, you will want to select the appropriate tool. Fripp suggests that there are nine different types of pauses:

1. **The Sense Pause** – as I mentioned earlier, it's important to give you audience time to process what you've said. This is particularly true for someone like me who tends to speak rapidly and cover a lot of material in a short time. Breaking the information into small parcels separated by short pauses makes it more accessible. Think of the sense pause as a comma. It lasts about a second.

2. **The Transition Pause** – is used like a period; it is used when you change subjects or thoughts, allowing your audience time to process your previous thought before moving on. It lasts from 1 and 2 seconds.
3. **The Dramatic Pause** – this is used to build tension and heighten anticipation for what comes next. It can last from 3 to 7 seconds. It's followed by something that provokes a reaction in the audience.
4. **The Reflective Pause** – this pause is used to give your audience time to think about your last statement. It's particularly useful after complex or controversial statements. It can last from 3 to 7 seconds.
5. **Pause for Effect** – the pause for effect is like the dramatic pause but is shorter, about 1 to 2 seconds. It is used to create the feeling in the audience that something is going to happen and build anticipation, although not to the degree seen in the dramatic pause.
6. **The Spontaneity Pause** – this is an advanced technique used to create the impression that you are not on automatic pilot; that you are invested in your presentation. I have seen it used very effectively to acknowledge audience reaction (e.g. applause, laughter) and incorporate it into the presentation.
7. **The Pause to Relinquish Control** – This a pause that hands control back to the audience, one that is quite useful in question and answer questions. You repond to the question and then pause to signal that you are finished.
8. **The Sensory Pause** – The sensory pause is used when you're describing something that appeals to the senses, such as a location, weather, or taste. It's used to allow the audience to visual the experience you are describing.

9. **The Pause for Emphasis** – Pauses can help you avoid sounding monotonous by helping to highlight your key points. Pause briefly to allow your audience to absorb your point before moving on to the next.

Pauses Are A Subtle Strategy

In reviewing the list above, you'll note two key points:

1. There are only subtle differences among the various types of pauses. That's because the pause itself varies only in duration; the emphasis comes from how you use it. The positioning of the pause within your presentation, the length of the pause, your body language: these are the elements that create the emotional connection with your audience.
2. Pauses are short. The dramatic pause can be up to 7 seconds, but most are between 1 or 2 seconds. If you were reading your speech, you would not come to a full stop at each comma; you'd pause briefly before moving on. You will pause longer at a period and even longer when you move to a new paragraph that contains a new idea.

Learning to effectively use pauses has a side benefit: you get used to pausing when you have finished a key point rather than looking vacant and dropping the fatal "um" that peppers so many speeches. Constantly repeating "um" after every sentence or key point soon begins to grate on your audience. A pause is much more effective.

The use of the pause is a subtle strategy; don't overthink it. It is best used as part of a natural speech pattern. When used well, it increases audience engagement by making you sound more natural and connected. 