

26 Ways to Engage Your Target Audience

Ever feel that leading in the 21st century is like herding cats?

Knowledge workers in particular remind me of our two cats, Maple and Jack. The other evening, I saw Maple walking by and felt the rare (for me) desire to pet her. I called her to me, but her attention was focused elsewhere. Switching tactics, I crouched down and called “Here, kitty kitty” in that annoyingly high-pitched cat-lover voice that universally means “If you come here, I will either pet you or give you a treat.” Maple was instantly engaged and came directly to me.

Like cats, most people have their own agenda. They are focused on their wants, needs, and goals. They are distracted by email, Facebook, and text messages. And like pop-up windows on a computer, thoughts and worries about problems they face are constantly popping up in their mind.

It’s not all bad, of course. You don’t want to lead a herd of sheep or cows, blindly awaiting your next command. You want a team of critical thinkers, bold creatives, adept collaborators.

But you don’t want them scattering in unrelated directions as cats do, either. As a leader, you need to help them stay focused and aligned in the right direction.

That starts with engaging and constantly re-engaging their attention. Yet many leaders act like I did when I first called to Maple.

Think about all the lousy Powerpoint presentations you’ve sat through in the last few months. A subject-matter expert reads a bullets from her slide, talks about that bullet, and repeats the process with the remaining bullets on the slide. Then she does it all over again for the next 51 slides.

Shoot. Me. Now.

Does she honestly think her audience is keeping their attention on her for the whole slide, much less all 51 slides?

Don’t tell. Don’t lead. Engage.

When we have an opportunity to influence or lead people, we can't assume that sharing information is enough. That's simply table stakes. Once you know what you want to communicate, you need to think about how to engage your audience and keep them engaged for the duration of the event.

Many people believe their positional authority, or the importance of the material, should be enough to hold everyone's attention. This is rarely the case. Even Steve Jobs, telling already-passionate followers about Apple gadgets they craved to know about, was very deliberate about engaging and keeping their attention.

Other people feel tired after compiling all the information, and they don't want to think about how to "get creative" in the way they present it. But without this extra 10% of effort, the entire presentation will be a waste of time.

It doesn't have to be that hard. Many leaders simply need to think about the variety of ways they could engage the particular audience, and pick what seems like a good fit.

Tactics for Engaging a Target Audience

Here are 21 tricks that have worked for me to engage an audience. Use one or more (but not all of them) in any given presentation, written piece, or other type of communication.

Tell a story. Anybody can do this, and it works. I've shared before about how to use storytelling effectively.

Make it visual. Visual always gets more attention than written or verbal alone. Think about how your information could be presented in or enhanced by a diagram or other type of visual.

Show a picture. The easiest way to make it visual is to use a large, eye-catching photo. Even this blog post uses a photo to attract eyeballs.

Create an infographic. This requires more effort to create, but people just can't help stopping to look at a poster or online piece with a puzzle-like visual that uses data to tell a story.

Ask a question. This could be a rhetorical question, but it's more effective to ask a question and solicit some responses from the audience. Not only will you fully engage those who respond, but everyone else will be paying attention too. The most engaging use of a question is when you use it shape the rest of the conversation for example, "What are you hoping to learn from me about this topic?"

Conduct a poll. Take your question further by making it multiple choice or True/False, and count up the answers (or just make an observation based on raised hands).

Quiz them. As school kids, most of us were afraid of pop quizzes. But adults love a quiz that's just for fun. Rather than telling the audience a fact, ask them to raise their hand for the multiple-choice or true/false answer they think is correct, and then reveal the right answer.

Use an audience-response system. To make a quiz or poll easier and more interactive, give your audience (or just a panel of people selected from the audience) a keypad to select their answers. Then provide a graph of the answers, show the correct answer, and display a leaderboard showing the participants who have the most correct answers so far. These systems used to be ridiculously expensive, but today they can be rented fairly inexpensively from vendors such as Turning Events and ARS Rental.

Ask them to fill in a __. This tactic is similar to a quiz, but you use it to introduce each of your main points. This invites the audience to subconsciously make the information their own.

Lead them in a game. If you can teach or reinforce a concept through a game or other activity, more people will get it and remember it. Kent Julian uses a game with children's building blocks to demonstrate the DISC personality profiles, and people love it.

Use a game-inspired tactic. As gamification has shown, you don't have to create a full-blown game to engage people. Incorporating simple aspects of games (especially video games) can be very effective. For example, boost your quiz by keeping score and providing a leaderboard. Or pump up your brainstorming exercise by letting people vote on their favorite three ideas.

Summarize in a short sentence or slogan. This doesn't have to be cheesy. Many world-class speakers like Andy Stanley discipline themselves to always reduce their message down to one sticky statement that they'll repeat a few times throughout their speech. And sometimes it doesn't hurt to be cheesy: for example, "If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit."

Show a short video. Motion pictures were first produced in the late 19th century, and people have been addicted to movies ever since. A 1-3-minute video to illustrate a point does wonders for sucking everyone in.

Use repetition. When you say something again, it's unusual so people take notice. When you say something again, people realize it must be important. This works whether the repetition occurs immediately or at intervals throughout the communication.

Surprise them. The unexpected always draws attention. You can share a startling fact or show an unusual photo. Or you can set up the audience to expect one thing, but then surprise them with something else: "Many people assume most video game players are young boys. But the average age is actually 35, and 47% are women."

Use humor. A sub-set of surprise is humor. Unless you know from experience that you are an effective joke-teller, canned jokes are risky. However, everyone loves a person who doesn't take himself or his topic too seriously. If there is an opportunity to poke fun at yourself, to show a funny picture or cartoon that's relevant and appropriate for your topic, or to otherwise give your audience a chance to laugh, you'll earn some of their attention and make an emotional connection.

Pause. Communication coach Stacey Hanke says adding pauses is the number-one habit she helps communicators develop. “The power of the pause is phenomenal,” she says.

Make eye contact. This is another tip from Stacey Hanke. “Only speak when you see eyes,” she says. “All other times pause.” I have found this to be hugely helpful in both keeping my audience focused on my message, and in gauging their attention so I can pace my message appropriately.

Listen. “When people talk, listen completely,” said Ernest Hemingway. “Most people never listen.” So if you listen, you will stand out. Whether you are communicating one-on-one, in a small group, or with a large audience, look for opportunities to hear from people -- and then truly listen to the meaning of what they say.

Use a numbered list or a countdown. Channel your inner David Letterman, and organize your communication in a way that lets people count the progression.

Use an acrostic. It seems silly, but it’s the way our brains work. If your presentation or written people can be summarized as the “R.E.A.L. principle” or the “6Ds of effective gamification,” it holds people’s attention better and is easier to remember.

Share someone’s testimony. Whether you tell an individual’s story, or invite them to share it, or play of video of their story, you are tapping into the power of a special kind of story. People don’t contribute money to solve world hunger; they sponsor Carmen from Bolivia.

Use a metaphor or symbol. Symbols and metaphors are mental shorthand. They help you communicate clearly, succinctly, and memorably. They also take an abstract concept and make it real. My cat Maple is much simpler to grasp than “audience engagement.”

Provide an example. You may not need to go all Shakespeare-like with symbols and metaphors. Often just a real-life example will do. An executive at a large automotive company always spoke in broad philosophical principles, such as “harnessing efficiency.” I coached him to follow up with a concrete example, such as “changing the

way we provide sales quotes for customers, so we can respond to them faster and more consistently.”

Challenge them with a puzzle. Pose a visual or mental puzzle, and allow several seconds for your audience to solve it. I recall Steven Covey using this approach to illustrate gestalt switch (“Do you see an old woman in this image? A young woman?”) when he taught about the concept of paradigm shift.

Be human. Always looks for ways to reveal you are a real, authentic person. This may mean revealing some of your quirks. Or it may mean providing ways for people to see that you have a life outside the fish tank. When I discover a new author, one of the first things I do is see if they are active on Twitter or provide regular blog posts. And more than that, I check to see if their tweets and posts are human and authentic – not robotic or delegated.

Don’t tell people. Engage them. And keep re-engaging them until you’ve achieved your targeted outcome.

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