

## Memorable and Engaging Presentations

Creating and delivering presentations is part of everyday life for many sales and marketing professionals and business owners. Knowing how to make them engaging will help you be more effective and improve your business. This document is a reminder of some key points from the workshop you recently attended.

### 1.0 A Key Challenge—Attention Span

Figure 1 illustrates one of the biggest presentation related challenges: that of holding audience attention. People’s initial interest can quickly wane and not recover until the presenter announces that lunch will shortly be served. There are many reasons for this, and you shouldn’t imagine that it’s all your fault. Business distractions follow us everywhere nowadays: email, text message, WhatsApp, you name it.

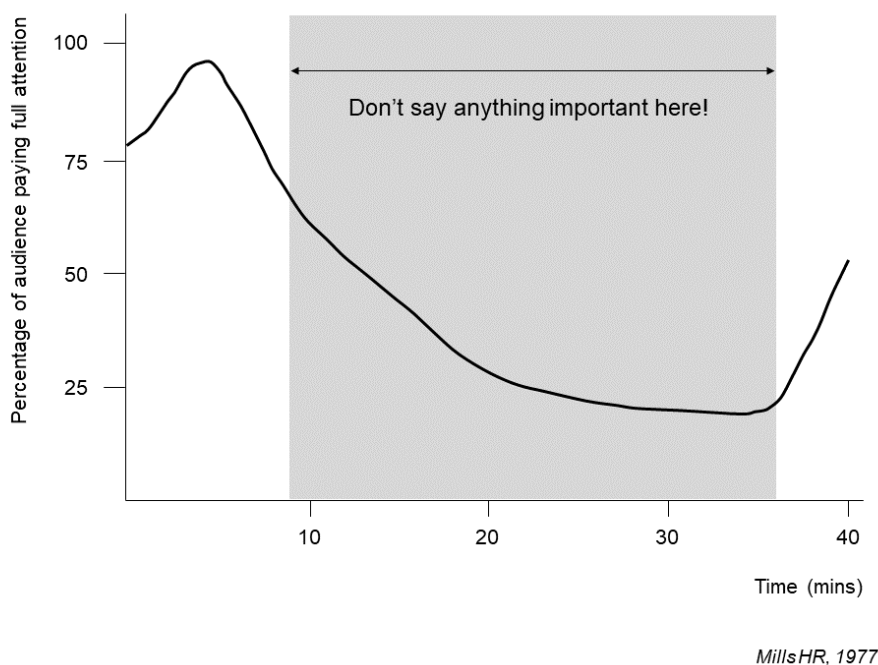


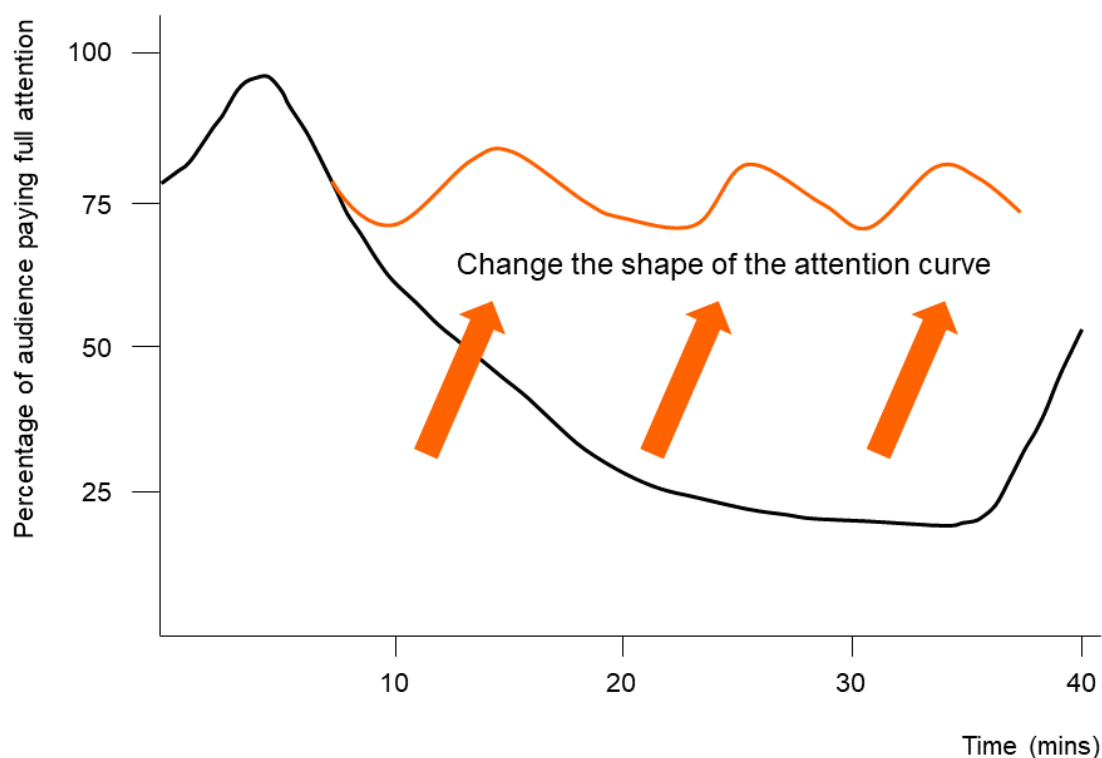
Figure 1: Attention span (*Techniques of Technical Training*, H R Mills, 1977)

Thankfully, it is possible to change the shape of the graph, so becomes more like Figure 2. Both you and your audience will be better off. Here’s how you do this.

### 1.1 Awaken interest

The first step is to commit your first 200 words or so to memory. This will take you approximately 90s to deliver (and is less than the Shakespeare you had to memorise at school). Make this opening as interesting as possible. Here’re some suggestions:

- **Quoting a news headline / something topical**  
This shows the audience that you’re up to date, but needs to dovetail with your main content, so it doesn’t look like you’ve just glued a headline to a standard presentation.



MillsHR, 1977

Figure 2: Holding audience attention can be done via several methods throughout the course of your presentation

- Ask a question**

This is used by quite a few people, but it isn't a favourite of mine. If you're the presenter, I think the audience is entitled to see you perform first, prior to deciding whether to give you any more of their precious time. (Big band or rock concerts don't start with sing along numbers. They start with their strongest material and invite the audience to join in later on.)
- Quote surprising statistics**

This can be powerful. It's a good way of illustrating that you've done your research, and it can be a great way to engage everyone and 'level set' the audience and your material.
- Personal experience / story**

Another powerful technique. However, you need to be prepared to invest time and effort in getting your story 'just right', in the same way a comedian will spend time perfecting new material. Stories should relate to the audience's needs and experiences. You'll need several stories, to avoid becoming a one trick pony.
- Make a dramatic claim**

If you can back up your claim with solid information and illustrate this in your presentation, then go for it. Inexperienced people will be interested and experienced audience members will want to know how you're going to substantiate your claim.

A couple of closing notes for this section. Starting with an agenda is not an attention grabber. Commit to your start. Too many presentations *waffle their way into existence* with beginnings akin to, "Good morning, everyone. Can you hear me at the back? As Mary said, I'm Joe Waffler and I'm Vice President of Sales at Widget Holdings. It's a great pleasure to be here today..."

## 1.2. Holding attention

Now you have their attention, how do you hold it? How do you change the shape of the attention curve, to be similar to Figure 2?

You can use some of the unused techniques from Step 1 (Awaken Interest). Every 20 minutes or so, make the audience do something. It doesn't have to be a huge exercise—you simply want to trigger a 'mental reset', so they're ready to go again. At key points, summarise, ask for questions. Regroup and carry on.

If you're delivering a long presentation (a workshop or training programme of some description), then the third 'reset' will occur about an hour into your material. This should be a break of some description—you want the audience out of their seats, taking a break and having a mental and physical rest.

## 2. How to End

Just as starting with an agenda is common but poor practice, so too is ending with questions. It's your presentation and the last voice the audience hears should be yours. As your opening is rehearsed (and practiced), so too should be your close.

So, how do you deal with questions? Like this...

*"I do have some concluding remarks, but now would be a good time to take any remaining questions, if there are any. We've probably got time for three or four."*

This tells the audience:

- You've not finished yet
- This is their last chance for questions
- It's time bound (...time for 3-4...)

Once the final Q&A is done, you go straight into your close. This should be well under a minute, aim for 30-40s. The audience knows the end is coming and they'll already be thinking about lunch, who's picking up the kids after school and where did they file away the dry cleaning ticket.

## 3. How the Brain Records Information

Figure 3 illustrates the concepts of how the brain records information and creates memories. Knowing these concepts will help you avoid the worst of all presentation errors: *overloading working memory*.

Figure 3 lays out the from the basic concepts. The explanation below moves from left to right across the diagram:

1. A presentation is (mostly) processed as *words and pictures*.
2. The pictures are processed by the eyes, while the words are processed by the ears and eyes.
3. The ears and eyes are part of *sensory memory*. This runs a selection process and decides what images and sounds deserve further processing.
4. *Working memory* receives sounds and images from sensory memory and creates models for easy processing.

5. A hugely important step is the accessing of *prior knowledge* from *long-term memory*. Essentially, the brain is asking itself, “*Have I seen something like this before?*”
6. If the brain can link the new information to *prior knowledge*, the chances of the new information being remembered increases dramatically.

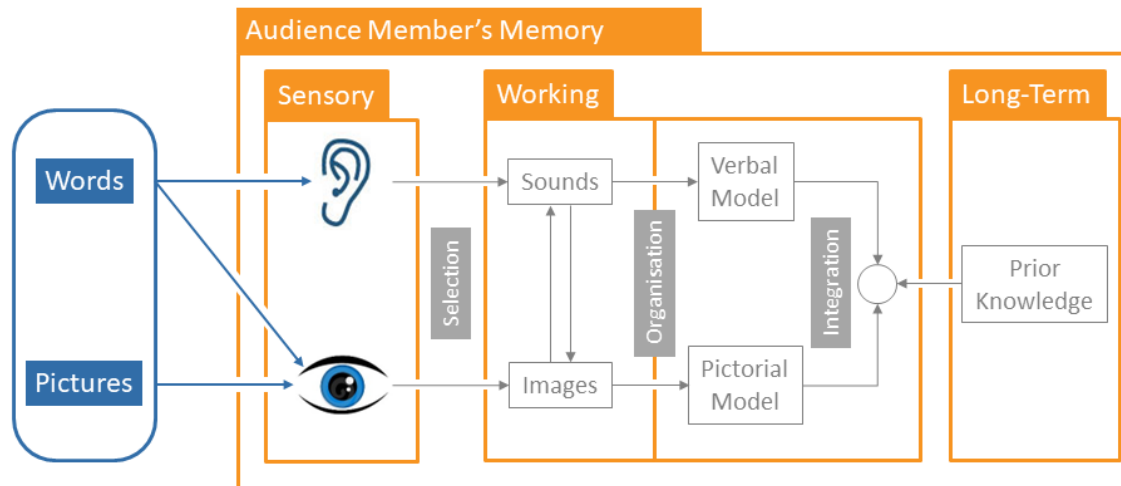


Figure 3: The connections between sensory, working and long-term memory

### 3.1 Applying how the brain works to presentations

Follow these principles and your audience will thank you. They'll burn fewer 'brain calories', will be less stressed and will remember more.

1. **No big tracts of text**

Sometimes you might want to show a testimonial comprising a few sentences. This will work fine if you allow the audience to read the text in silence. Your audience can't read and listen at the same time. Use a style like this, “Here's what one of our customers said.” Click to show the testimonial and turn to study the screen yourself. Read the text to yourself silently and slowly. When you've read it, the chances are they will have too. Turn to face the audience and re-engage. The rule is no speaking while the audience is trying to read.

2. **No more bullet points**

Same reason as above—the audience cannot simultaneously read and listen. Given the choice, they'll scan your bullet points quicker than you can speak them—at which point, they disengage (because their view is they've already got your message).

3. **No laser pointers**

If you find yourself using a laser pointer, the chances are you've too much information on the screen. Use the capability of your graphics package to find a way of highlighting the material on which you want to focus.

4. **Tell stories/use analogies**

Stories and analogies are a shortcut to prior knowledge. This makes it super-easy for the audience to remember your message.

## The BORRING Model

I created the BORRING<sup>1</sup> model as a vehicle for verifying the configuration of your presentation. Here it is explained letter-by-letter.

# B O R R I N G

### **B – Bite Size Chunks**

We all chunk data. It's part of what working memory does when you're processing new information and trying to remember it. Examples can be found everywhere, including car registrations and telephone numbers.

If you live in the UK, you expect my office telephone number to be written as 0151 625 4655.

We chunk information in different ways, according to social norms. My home telephone number when I lived in France was 93 73 12 60—a different chunking scheme.

Your presentation should deliver information in easily digestible chunks.

### **O – Objective**

Please have one. We've all sat through presentations that wander aimlessly. Know your message *before* opening PowerPoint.

“Giving the audience a general introduction to our company” isn't a good enough objective. All that information is available online, either via your website, social media, or review sites. If you want the audience to give you their time, have something for them that's worth listening to (and can't be found elsewhere).

### **R – Relevance**

Be relevant to your audience and their needs. This is about them, not you. The reason goes deeper than just showing your audience respect. Information that's directly relevant is more likely to be remembered. So, plenty of analogies and stories that link make your message relevant to your audience.

### **R – Repetition**

Learning by rote works but can be pretty mind numbing. Subtly including repetition into the structure of your presentation can help achieve the same aim, without conscious effort. Create a central model (like BORRING, for example) and keep replaying it piece by piece throughout the main body of your presentation.

### **I – Influence**

Here I refer to the *Six Methods of Influence*, according to Dr. Robert Cialdini. In my view, this book is essential reading and I'm sure many of you have a copy in your library. Of course, not all of the six methods may be appropriate, but they are worthy of review and consideration. Here's a quick summary:

---

<sup>1</sup> BORRING is a Registered Trademark of Active Presence Limited.

*Scarcity:* You cannot go into a supermarket without seeing a '2 for 1 offer'. There's always the rider of, 'while stocks last', which builds up a sense of scarcity, a fear of missing out. How can you apply this to your marketing? How would you represent it in your presentation?

*Social Proof:* Having one's work validated by others. Collect testimonials and use them but remember the point about not speaking while words are on the screen. Let the words do the talking.

*Authority:* This is bestowed by the target market, as demonstrated by celebrity endorsement. For example, a famous tennis player endorsing a particular make of racquet.

*Liking / likeability:* This is particularly evident in Search Engine Optimisation. Firm's that invest time and effort on their 'About Us' page show improved conversion rates.

*Reciprocity:* We're hard wired to return favours. Do you offer enough for free that your target market would find genuinely valuable? How well is this communicated in your presentation?

*Consistency:* Does your firm portray an external image consistent with its values? Is this clearly—and consistently—communicated?

(Dr. Cialdini has since updated his original list to include a seventh principle, called 'Unity'. This relates to 'shared identities'.)

### **N – Narrative**


A reminder to make your presentation about *them* and not *you*. Put your client at the centre of the presentation and have them be the hero or heroine. Your role is simply that of being a guide to their success.

### **G – Graphics**

A reminder to design your presentation to drive key messages into long-term memory—see previous section. (Bullet point lists don't cut the mustard.)

In summary, boring is bad but borrowing is good.

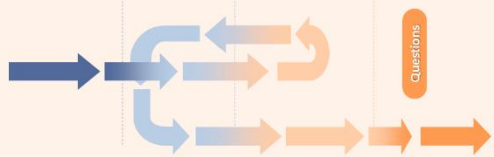
Overleaf is an infographic that pulls the key principles into a single image.



# HOW TO STRUCTURE BUSINESS POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS

FOLLOW THIS SIMPLE MODEL TO CREATE EFFECTIVE AND ENGAGING POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS THAT YOUR AUDIENCE WILL LONG REMEMBER

Awaken Interest
Guide Understanding
Create Impact
Call to Action



Source: Davidson C. S. (2016)

AWAKEN INTEREST

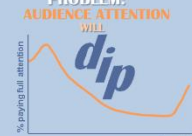
**★ YOU ONLY GET ONE CHANCE TO MAKE A FIRST IMPRESSION**

COMMIT YOUR OPENING

## 200 WORDS TO MEMORY

STARTING WITH **THE AGENDA IS BORING**

**PROBLEM: AUDIENCE ATTENTION WILL DIP**



Source: Mills, H.R. (1977)

**RESPONSE: REDUCE THE LOAD ON WORKING MEMORY**

Working Memory → Long Term Memory


- BULLET-POINT
- LISTS (like this one)
- MUST GO!

**PEOPLE LOVE STORIES**

THEY ARE A GREAT WAY TO BE REMEMBERED

**ALWAYS LINK STORIES TO KEY MESSAGES**

Repeat Repeat Repeat Repeat **YOUR KEY SALES MESSAGES**




**TO RE-ENGAGE THE AUDIENCE**

**QUESTIONS DEAL WITH THEM BEFORE YOU CLOSE**

**THE ACTION SHOULD SEEM NATURAL**

**MAKE SURE YOUR VOICE IS THE LAST THING TO BE HEARD**



Sources:  
 Mills, H.R. (1977) Techniques of Structural Training, 3rd Ed. Macmillan, London.  
 Davidson, C. S. (2016) Successful Speaking: Secrets, Quips, References, 1st Ed. Active Presence Limited, UK