

Ask an expert

How long should you talk?

Q *The real question is — how long will your audience pay attention?*

A Holding the attention of your listeners for the duration of a lecture or seminar can be a challenge. But the task becomes easier once you understand that there are predictable patterns in the way people pay attention. Speakers who know how to work with these attention patterns can maintain the interest of an audience, resulting in a much higher retention level and greater success at gaining commitment and prompting action.

Studies in brain research indicate that as a presentation's length increases, "prime time" (that is, the time the audience spends absorbing and retaining information) decreases. During a presentation of 20 minutes, for example, the audience is in

prime time for about 18 minutes, or 90% of the total session. A 40-minute presentation will command full attention for only 75% of that time. During an 80-minute presentation, the audience is not absorbing or retaining information for a full 30 minutes.

For people with average attention spans, 20 minutes is considered the optimum time frame for one-way delivery of information. Presentations that require a longer format should, therefore, be designed in 20-minute modules. This involves planning a major change every 20 minutes — for instance, by using technology or getting the audience to participate.

There are also "micro-cycles" of attention within these 20-minute time frames. At any time during a presenta-

tion, the audience tunes in and actively takes in information, then tunes out, or goes into downtime to process the information.

Studies have shown that



these cycles consist of 35 to 55 seconds of uptime, followed by two or three seconds of downtime. If you pace your presentation to match these cycles, you are virtually guaranteed to hold attention from start to finish.

The opening of a business presentation is one of the most important micro-

cycles to plan. As the saying goes, you don't get a second chance to make a good first impression. How many times have you attended presentations where the introductory remarks were much too long? Ideally, your opening statements should take no longer than 55 seconds to deliver. If they last more than a minute, the audience will miss out on key information because virtually everyone listening will have gone into downtime.

So the next time you're preparing for a speech, get out your stopwatch and time your material. In business, as well as in business presentations, timing is everything.

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