

July/August 2001

# Timing is everything

By Christina Kaya

Ever wonder why your six-year-old can remember almost every line from a two-hour Disney film but adults have difficulty remembering key points from a 20-minute presentation? Look no further than the mastery of timing.

Good content is important, but without good timing, it's all for naught. In presentations, timing can mean the difference between being engaging and successful, or dull and boring. One of the world's best storytellers—Disney—has successfully applied this secret to its presentations for decades, and some of the principles used for story development in animation can also give you the professional edge when designing presentations.

If you pay attention to the plot advancement of an animated film, there is usually a change in scene—say the introduction of a different character or new event—about every 30 to 50 seconds in the first five to ten minutes of the film. This advances the plot at a pace that holds your attention. Timing your presentation in this way will capture and hold the attention of your audience from start to finish.

The beginning of a presentation is crucial in establishing the momentum of your talk and can make or break the entire session. The first few minutes

should be designed with 30- to 50-second information bites, with a pause between each bite, or cycle. This timing matches the natural attention pattern of most audience members and holds their interest.

Attention and retention are further enhanced when these first few cycles vary in content and volume, and the speaker moves to a different location to deliver each bite or cycle.

Why does this enhance retention? Because our neurology is specifically designed to pay attention to changes in our environment or new information.

Ever had the experience where a fan is switched on and initially you notice the noise but as your attention is drawn to other new events or stimuli, you stop noticing the constant, unchanging hum of the fan? Audiences react in that same way to presentations—tuning out when the tempo becomes stagnant.

Effective use of timing can also be observed in television programs and other types of entertainment. I used a stopwatch to time episodes of the popular TV program 'The West Wing' and found that the plot was advanced with similar 30- to 50-second cycles. Scene changes occurred at regular, tight intervals at the beginning and end of the show, with longer scenes in the middle of the program. Of course, television programs give viewers regular breaks by way

of commercials—a luxury trainers and presenters don't usually have.

As your presentation advances into the main body of content of a section or module, the timing of the cycles, or information sound bites, should be longer. The scenes in the middle of 'The West Wing' last up to three minutes. In planning the last five minutes of your presentation, again revert to 30- to 50-second cycles of information. Your audience will instinctively know you are coming to the end of your presentation.

It may seem like a lot of work to plan a presentation with such carefully timed content and delivery. However, meticulous timing guarantees your audience will stay with you, and after the first few practice runs of designing a presentation in this way, effective use of timing will become instinctive.

So the next time you have to prepare a presentation, get out your stopwatch and make sure you advance the plot with these timing tips in mind. In entertainment—and in presentations—timing truly is everything.

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