

## HOW TO GAIN AND HOLD ATTENTION

The key to success in speaking and/or preaching is to be consistently good—to tune your audience/congregation in and to turn them on every time you deliver a message. Yes, every time! There is little room, if any, for failure. Though some may turn out to be excellent, every message/presentation should be, at least, good.

What makes a message/presentation good? What makes some messages/presentations better than others? What magical formula does a preacher/speaker use to tune his audience in and turn them on?

In this introduction, I'll share with you ten tested and proven-to-be-effective techniques in getting and holding the attention of your congregation/audience. Some of the techniques I've used successfully, before many different types of congregations/audiences.

### 1. Be Natural

Speaking rules and pointers vary with different speakers. One rule, however, applies to everyone: Be natural. I cannot emphasize this point enough. Be natural. Be yourself. Be the genuine and real YOU.

Congregations/Audiences today are sophisticated and alert. They can spot a “put on” in an instant. And, once they spot him, they tune him out and turn him off. I've heard so many speakers, especially beginners, who do things while speaking before an audience which are not really natural for them to do.

But, being natural while giving a talk is something one has to learn. For example, in a one-to-one conversation, we look the other person in the eye and we tend to use our hands quite a bit. In front of a group, however, most beginners will avoid looking at their audience and there's a good chance they won't even lift a finger!

It is also an amazing phenomenon to hear some preachers who in conversation sound so normal, but when they get up to speak talk through their adenoids in stained glass tones. This is a mistake if you want to get and maintain attention.

Therefore, what I'm really saying is this: We want our performance before an audience or congregation to be similar to the way we usually act in conversation. That's being natural.

### 2. Set a Conducive Atmosphere

Every speaker who has been around for any length of time has undoubtedly spoken in the most ghastly of settings. What a disaster this can be! You walk in the room and there they are...1,000 seats for an audience not expected to exceed 200 persons. The result is an empty looking auditorium, vacant front rows, and a

distance of twenty feet between the speaker and his audience. How can a minister/speaker be an enabler of learning in such a setting?

Here are some suggestions about setting an atmosphere. It is understood that a guest speaker would not have as much control over the situation as a pastor.

(1) The speaker should be as close as possible to the audience five to ten feet from the first row maximum. This enables him to have eye contact with the group and that's essential for a good delivery.

(b) Please allow as many seats in the auditorium as there are persons in attendance. You may need to rope off the back pews or seats. An excess of chairs simply separates people and takes away from the feeling of a total community.

(c) Check the room temperature. A cold room is better than a hot room anytime.

(d) Please have all house lights on as high as possible. A speaker needs to observe the audience's reaction to the presentation.

(e) Please provide a good cordless microphone; preferably the clip-on type.

Even the best and the most experienced speakers who, through necessity, have learned to speak well in any environment, will still admit that getting and holding the attention of an audience is affected by how conducive the setting.

### 3. Look Your Best

The first impression the audience receives of the speaker plays a large role in what they will think of his presentation as a whole. I cannot stress this too much! Successful speakers know how to look their best. They are well groomed and pleasant looking. A good self-image is vital for a speaker. And, this is reflected in the way a speaker looks.

### 4. Establish Authority Early

You and I have watched some speakers poison the well to which they are leading their audience by opening up their presentation with apologies. You've heard them all: "I don't know why they asked me to speak..." "I am really the fifth choice for a speaker today; they couldn't get anybody else..." "I won't take too much of your time..." "I'll try hard not to bore you today..." On and On. How terrible it must be for a group to sit there and hear such an unprepared, unconfident, and unorganized speaker. The introduction to any message/talk, I believe, should be powerful and should establish very early the authority of the presenter. It should motivate the audience to attentively listen to the speaker.

When you are introduced, if you are the guest, thank the ones who invited you, make any personal comments about them that are appropriate, then make personal

comments about yourself. It is good to use humor, and even self-deprecating humor, but only gently and in such a way that people know that it is only for the sake of humor. Then it is good to very, very briefly tell some things about yourself—your calling—your background—why you are there speaking. If you are the pastor, you need to make comments about people you want to recognize—how thankful you are to be a part of this group.

## 5. Organize Your Speech

There is an interesting passage in “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.” Alice meets a cat and asks, “Can you please tell me which way to go from here?” To this the cat replies, “That depends on where you want to go!” And so it is with speaking. Unless we are speaking with a definite purpose, we are not likely to get anywhere. As the old cliché goes, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any old road will take you there.” Therefore, it is very important that a message or talk or lesson be carefully organized.

One thing I’ve learned: the more natural the presentation seems to be; the more organized it really is. A good method to use in preparing a natural but organized message—talk—lesson is to let it take shape gradually...keeping ideas that work best and dropping ideas that don’t work.

A balanced message—talk—lesson is one with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The introduction is very important. If it is poor, the congregation/audience may turn the speaker off before he has made his point. The body is the heart of the speech. And, how well a speaker handles the conclusion indicates his level of skill. Remember: The last impression is a lasting impression. And it better be good!

## 6. Speak to Needs

The most important question I ask myself before addressing any group is this: “Why should this particular audience listen to me today?” In other words, what do I have to offer them? Can I satisfy some of their needs? How can I show this group that my message fits their needs—not only needs which are not now being satisfied; but needs that are now being satisfied and that can be improved upon. These questions must be analyzed before every message—talk—lesson. The cardinal rule of speaking, “Know thy audience,” must be followed if one is to capture the audience’s undivided attention.

## 7. Involve Your Audience

Someone once said that people remember 10 percent of what they hear, 25 percent of what they hear and see, and 90 percent of what they actually do. This simply tells us that the audience should be involved in what you’re doing. Their

involvement may be limited to listening to you attentively. Or having individuals act out some part of the message, Or having them repeat a key word in the message.

Here, more than anywhere else, the speaker must be natural. Whichever way you choose to involve your audience must be consistent with your own personality. If you have fun, the audience will too.

#### 8. Keep Your Voice Lively

Great speakers articulate well. They change their pitch, tone, and pace constantly during a presentation. Their voice tone is, also, always lively. But when they speak louder, they don't shout! When they speak softer, they avoid the pitfall of dropping the endings of sentences. A good speaker speaks higher or lower, faster or slower, and are always pleasant to listen to and easy to understand. One of the best ways to control the effectiveness of your voice is to tape your speech on several different occasions. Then, listen and analyze.

#### 9. Be Humorous

By all means, be funny if you can. But avoid humor if you don't feel comfortable with it. And avoid humor if it is not pertinent to your message. Audiences love to laugh. They enjoy a humorous speaker. Someone once said, "Humor helps to overlook the unbecoming, understand the unconventional, tolerate the unpleasant, overcome the unexpected, and outlast the unbearable."

Genuine humor is good for all of us. It is always kind and gracious. It points out and pictures the weaknesses of humanity, but feels no contempt and leaves no sting. I saw this little poem once: "It was funny so he thought; he told the story and ill will it brought." Herein is the most common mistake in the use of humor. Some speakers try to be "funny" at any price—using slightly off-color or poor taste stories, making ethnic jokes and the like. Disastrous! If in doubt about any story, it is better not to use it at all. If it will offend one person in a group, it really isn't worth it. Humor, used well, can do more to make a meeting enjoyable than any other single thing. Humor, used indiscriminately, can destroy a meeting.

#### 10. Use Illustrations

Illustrations are to the listeners what a recess is to a school child—It rests the mind. It also comes as close as you can come in speaking to making something visual. Illustrations are words that also appeal to the eye-gate, but the eye-gate of the mind.

To sum up, every speaker can get and hold the attention of his congregation/audience. One should learn ways in which to accomplish this skill.

This introduction presented ten suggestions that will help you tune your audience in to what you are saying and to turn them on to listen to you all the way through. Here are the suggestions again:

1. Be Natural
2. Set a Conducive Atmosphere
3. Look Your Best
4. Establish Authority Early
5. Organize Your Speech
6. Speak to Needs
7. Involve Your Audience
8. Keep Your Voice Lively
9. Be Humorous
10. Use Illustrations

You can be as effective a public speaker as you want to be. Want power is will power. Your attitude is what really counts; mustering and keeping positive attitudes is oftentimes the difference between success and failure. As a speaker, refuse to be discouraged. Remember that the greatest people in history failed time and again, but they refused to become discouraged; they persevered. If one scheme doesn't work, try something else. When things get tough, don't quit, shift gears instead. On the platform, practice makes perfect. Keep trying and you will become a master at this great and wonderful field we call preaching/public speaking.

Before we launch into the subject at hand let's look at desire.