

Nobody is Listening

“There’s an 800 pound watermelon in the room.
And it’s your presentation!”

Warwick John Fahy, author, The One Minute Presenter

This chapter's content:

- ▶ A. Nobody is listening: big red watermelons.
Page 3
- ▶ B. Falling attention spans.
Page 3
- ▶ C. Reasons for information overload.
Page 7
- ▶ D. Multitasking is not good.
Page 8

One Minute learning:

- Your audience doesn't have an unlimited amount of time, attention or energy
Page 3
- Nobody is listening because attention spans are falling
Page 3
- Technology helps us multitask more. That's not all good
Page 8
- People are so crazy busy they act like they have attention deficit disorder (ADD)
Page 8
- You need to adjust your presentation style
Page 9

Process:

- ☞ First, understand why people's attention spans are falling.
- ☞ Second, realize our modern-day preference for multi-tasking is contributing to our even shorter attention spans.
- ☞ Third, be clear when someone has a piece of technology in their hands, they are not paying much attention to you.

A. Nobody is Listening

Imagine a group of people sitting up straight in their seats. Everyone is listening to you. You could hear a pin drop. They are listening very carefully. Their full attention is on your every word. You feel honored to have such a captivated group, who care so much about your knowledge, expertise and experience that they are willing to drop everything and listen.

Get real, right?

Do you like watermelon? You know the kind that are piled up in markets, the big green ones with bright red watery flesh inside! Imagine these watermelons are like a person's complete attention span. Take one of these ripe melons. Bring it to the top of a skyscraper building and then drop it (better do this when nobody else is around- those melons can be heavy). The resulting crush of melon on the pavement below is the average person's attention span today: a mess. It's fragmented. It's in bits. People are just not able to focus like they could before. The picture above of a group full of attentive listeners sitting and doting on your every word is a lovely dream, but that's about it. Unless you're using some or all of the techniques in this book, then you're presenting to a room full of crushed watermelons (horrible image, isn't it?). A room full of people who cannot pay attention.

B. Falling Attention Spans

An **attention span** is the amount of time a person can concentrate on a single activity. It's important when you want to achieve goals, absorb knowledge or hit targets in an archery competition. The great media philosopher and writer, Marshall McLuhan, famous for coining the phrase "the medium is the message", said the average attention span for a TV viewer was four to five minutes. In 1976. Today's action movies are made with cuts every three seconds. So why have people's attention spans been falling so much?

ARE YOU A DIGITAL IMMIGRANT?

If you're a "digital immigrant" like me, then you have probably become proficient with computers the hard way. Two finger typing, looking for the user manual for your ipod and generally avoiding video games of all kinds.

But surely my initial uses of computers will make you feel better. While taking a compulsory data processing course at university, I went to the computer lab to check my paper results, which were returned on a floppy disk. I popped the disk in, thought for a moment, and then typed the only computer command I could remember, "format disk". I erased all the data from the disk! Now in my defense, this was before Windows, user interfaces and mouses were used.

Feeling better about being a digital immigrant now?

Technology contributes to low attention spans

Marc Prensky, who coined the word "digital natives", observed that the widespread use of digital technology was contributing to low attention spans. Digital natives, born after 1980, have grown up with access to the internet and know how to use technology intuitively. They think and process information differently. This is important to you because if you're a digital immigrant you need to be aware of the fundamentally different approach you need to take to get your message across.

Differences between digital natives and digital immigrants:

	Digital Natives	Digital Immigrants
Thinking speed	Fast, in bursts.	Slowly, step-by-step.
Processing ability	Multitasking. Parallel processing.	One thing at a time. Sequentially. Logically.
Type of information	Graphics before text.	Text based.
Access to information	Random access (hyperlinked).	Linear.
Learning	Networked.	Individual.
Incentives	Instant gratification. Frequent rewards.	Paying your dues.
Attitudes	Work and learning is "play".	Work and learning is "serious".
Attention span highest	During interactivity.	When left to think it through.

Other causes to low attention spans

Boring information

- According to Dr. John Medina, a brain researcher, the brain doesn't pay attention to boring things. So relating too much information, with not enough time to connect the dots results in very little digestion.

Poor interactions

- Most business information exchanges are one way with low participation so we zone out.
- We make quick judgments about people so if we perceive the topic to be of no interest, we switch our attention to something else.
- Cross cultural issues where the listener does not comprehend your message in English since the listener is converting from English to his or her native language.

New technology

- Mobile devices compete for our attention constantly. We love sending and receiving messages. Our demand for a constant supply of updated information means we are always glancing at our mobiles reducing our concentration on the task at hand.

Faster speed of information

- The information age bombards us with information, so we digest it very quickly and look for variety at speed.
- TV shows and movies with constantly changing angles.
- Television is replacing books as main source of information. Prensky estimated that in 2001 college graduates already spent four times as much time on watching TV as reading. And twice as much time on video games.

- TV provides non-linear communication appearing as bursts of sound, pictures and text which quickly change. This trains us to focus for short periods on many different points, but reduces our overall attention span.

Thinking patterns changed by the environment

- Faced by the information and sensory overload of our modern environment, we have evolved to juggle these incoming inputs so we quickly go from one input to another. Our evolution has caused falling attention spans.
- Younger “digital natives” are hard wired to multitask, which by definition reduces attention span.
- We allow our children to grow up in a multitasking multi-stimulus environment. From an early age, our children have so many more things competing for their attention. Doing homework while watching TV, instant messaging on the computer, texting friends by phone, playing tunes on an ipod, and reading textbooks all at the same time!

Consumer choice

- Too much choice. So we tend to change brands more frequently.
- The general public (and this may not apply to you) prefers trivia over substance. This explains the success of TV shows like Pop Idol (globally), the private life disclosures of pop stars becoming front page news and the continuing idolizing of superficial beauty (advertising).

Working style

- Push for “increased productivity” at work. We are overworked, stressed out and don’t have enough time. This anxiety means we are always thinking about what else we should be doing.

- The knowledge economy requires a different skillset to manufacturing. An information intensive working environment cultivates an aptitude for a low attention span.
- We are so focused on trivial small tasks that we spend the whole day jumping from one small task to another without regard for the big picture.

These all contribute to falling attention spans. But why is that a problem? It's a problem because we have to process more information today than ever before.

C. Reasons for Information Overload

Reasons for Information Overload	Why we like it
24-hour cable TV	Lots of choice: From CNN and BBC 24 for news, MTV for music, HBO for movies.
The Internet	Always on: Emails, surfing, researching.
Video games	Too much fun: Engaging and fully immersive virtual experiences (wow!).
Messaging	We love to stay in touch: Mobile text messages, MSN, G Talk, Twitter.
Newspapers	Stay informed: Sunday newspapers with their many supplements have more information than our grandparents read in their whole lives!
Magazines	It's about me: Every available niche and special interest catered for.
Publishing	We can all be publishers: Blogs, Wikipedia, print on demand.
Social networking	To be connected: Myspace, Facebook, YouTube.

We have too many fun distractions competing for our attention. We are too busy. We need to multitask.

D. Multitasking is Not Good

Multitasking is when we do more than one thing at the same time. Like this:

Primary Task	Multitasking
Reading a newspaper while...	...checking mobile device, chatting online.
Listening to the TV while...	...playing with a mobile device, texting, surfing.
Writing an email while...	...quickly checking messages, listening to music.
Speaking while...	...checking BlackBerry, reading messages.

Multitasking is not good. According to *Brain Rules* author and neuroscientist, Dr. John Medina, the human brain's **attentional spotlight** is incapable of multitasking. The fact that we appear to be able to adapt to simultaneous inputs doesn't actually mean that multitasking is occurring.

Multitasking doesn't help

Dr. Edward M. Hallowell, psychiatrist and author of *Crazy Busy*, observes that this state of being too busy has created “culturally induced attention deficit disorder.” One major factor according to Dr. Hallowell is technology. Our modern skills of balancing our computers, cellphones and BlackBerrys can cause us to look like we have ADD. That doesn't sound like a good thing, does it?

Just talk to someone who is “crazy busy”. Most of them love it. In Shanghai “*I'm very busy*” has almost replaced “*Hello, how are you?*” as a greeting. It's fun to play with our mobile toys. We like being connected. We feel important when we can email and surf while sitting in the car or subway. Part of the problem is that gadgets are cool and fun. Even a one-year-old baby can use an iPhone

to scroll through photographs. However, the more screen sucking we do, the more mental energy we waste. And this is causing our attention spans to drop like a melon off a skyscraper.

So what does this mean for me?

The lesson for you is “Don’t present like your audience has an unlimited amount of time, attention or energy.” They don’t. And if you try to shove a large melon into their mouths, they are going to resist (that’s quite a visual). And that’s the way most people present: they try to shove large amounts of information at their listeners and are then surprised when the audience switches off mentally, turns to their mobile devices and doesn’t get the message.

If you rely on the spoken word to get your job done, then you need to be able to overcome falling attention spans. Because if people aren’t listening to you, then you can’t be effective. If you’re not effective, then you can’t be doing your job. This means if you can’t adapt to this new way of communication, you will become redundant. The solution is here: this book is designed with busy executives in mind.

It’s created to help you prepare for any audience, quickly craft compelling messages, engage and connect with the audience during your presentation and manage every kind of interruption imaginable – including the dreaded Q&A time.

Next chapter

This book will give you the techniques you need to engage with today’s attention deficit listeners. Go get a nice juicy melon, chop it up and read on because “Help is Here”.

“When you’re always online,
you’re always distracted.”

Dr. John Medina