

## DEALING WITH A DISTRACTED AUDIENCE

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Don't be put off by those who text or tweet when you speak.

It's not easy speaking to an audience of people who appear to be distracted by their cell phones, or are clattering away on their laptops or burying their heads in their iPads. We have all been to conferences where people seemed to pay more attention to their electronic devices than to the live person on the podium. As smartphones connect people to their busy lives, this phenomenon will only become more common.

It is tempting to address this issue by trying to ban cell phones at presentations and imposing what author and speaker Scott Berkun calls "a fantasy of obedience" on an audience. But this rarely works.

"Fundamentally, this problem is ageless," Berkun writes on his website, [scottberkun.com](http://scottberkun.com). "It has always been very hard to keep the attention of any group of people — at any age, at any time."

The distraction epidemic calls for a different type of approach — one that can engage people, not just force them to stare silently. Here is what you can do to capture the attention of a distracted audience.

### Let Down Your Guard

What's the first thing you normally hear when someone is giving a speech? "Please turn off all cell phones." The last thing you want is to have your cutesy ringtone interrupt the speaker. Author and social media expert Chris Brogan turns this decree on its head during his speaking appearances. "Why is it so quiet in here?" he asked the audience at a presentation I attended in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. "This isn't church. Go ahead and turn on your cell phones. Send tweets. Post to Facebook. Do what you have to do."

This accomplished two things. First, it established a rapport between the speaker and the audience by creating an informal, friendly setting. Given the choice, most people would rather chat informally with a friend than be required to sit at attention during a speech. People tend to remember interactions with friends, so turn your speech into something that resembles that situation.

The second thing Brogan achieved was the creation of another potentially vast audience. By encouraging people to tweet and post on Facebook, he was expanding his reach far beyond the room. Additionally, audience members who participate this way during presentations become more engaged and attentive; they focus on conveying the speaker's main points for the digital sound bites they post for social media users.

Another benefit: By reading these posts later, the speaker gets instant feedback and sees what was most memorable to the audience or what may have fallen flat.

Public speaking coach and trainer Lisa Braithwaite says some people learn best by doing something else while listening, whether it's doodling or using a phone. She assumes the best intentions when she spots someone on his or her phone while she's speaking.

"I tend to take a positive view that this is a person who's taking notes, [or] tweeting what a great speaker I am, or is someone who needs to do something with their hands to pay attention," she says.

Sometimes she has been surprised by what registered with people who seemed to be distracted during her speech. "The same people who didn't make eye contact or looked down would come up to me afterward and tell me they learned a lot from the presentation."

### Encourage Participation

When I began researching this article, I gave a speech to my Toastmasters club and instructed audience members to act distracted — or to actually distract themselves. They excelled at this, surfing the Web and holding conversations with each other. Some even took photographs with a flash. At one point, I took a break and invited the group to discuss how a speaker might engage a distracted audience. Members were then able to focus on the topic of distraction. Requesting audience participation had helped.

"I like that you asked us to answer a question," one club member said. "It kept us engaged and comfortable."

It's a good thing to remember: When audiences are involved, they are more engaged. You want audience members to become companions as you lead them to the final destination or purpose of your speech. When I was a college freshman, one of my English professors insisted on a regular two-minute "talk break" during every 50-minute class period, no matter how busy we were. At first it seemed a little forced to stop discussing *Macbeth* or *Beowulf* to talk about our weekends with the person next to us. But over time it helped us bond, and ultimately the classroom became a better environment for learning.

Braithwaite, who is based in Santa Barbara, California, does the same thing with her audiences if she notices that something resonates with them and they start talking among themselves. She'll encourage audience members to turn to their neighbor to share a story or an example related to that particular topic. Braithwaite calls that a positive distraction.

"Make use of their distraction and include it in the presentation," she says of audience members who are chatting with each other about what you're saying. "You don't want to punish them for being interested and wanting to engage more."

### Be the Guide

A few years ago I attended a speech by someone involved in education reform. What I remember was a phrase she used: "The teacher needs to become less of the sage on the stage and more of the guide on the side." Braithwaite reinforces that idea, saying a relaxed speaking environment is more productive and enjoyable for the audience.

“When I was in school, you got in trouble if you did anything but face forward and look at the teacher,” she says, “and that’s just ridiculous. It’s not human.”

For speakers, too, it is best to relax and not judge the appearance of an audience — or more precisely, the appearance of electronic devices in an audience. When you speak to a group of people, it is about making a connection and giving the audience something tangible to take away.

You can find a connection, even amid the clattering of laptops and flashes of iPhone screens.