

EPISODE 144: HOW TO HELP YOUR LISTENERS PAY ATTENTION

1. THE PROBLEM ISN'T WHAT YOU THINK

- “The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World” by Dr. Adam Gazzaley: Professor of Neurology, Physiology and Psychiatry at UC San Francisco, and Dr. Larry Rosen: Professor Emeritus of Psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills

Although it may seem counterintuitive, we now appreciate that focusing and ignoring are not two sides of the same coin [...] it is not necessarily true that when you focus more on something, you automatically ignore everything else better. We have shown in our lab that different [brain] networks are engaged when we focus compared to when we ignore the same thing.

- We think of focus as a single function: paying attention.
- “Paying attention” actually involves two separate activities:
 1. Enhancement: our ability to focus on the issue before us.
 2. Suppression: our ability to ignore everything else.
- *Enhancement* and *Suppression* are different processes in the brain.
- We assume that as we age, we lose our ability to focus. But according to research, our ability to pay attention peaks at age 20 and does NOT decline.
- We don't lose our ability to pay attention; we lose our ability to ignore.
- That has huge implications for communicators.

2. ANTICIPATE POTENTIAL DISTRACTIONS

- Ask yourself: “What will my listeners find hard to ignore?”
- Five sensory inputs going at the same time.
 - Sight: A painting or poster? A TV? A person? A fly?
 - Sound: A ticking clock? A vending machine? Street noise?
 - Feel: Hard chairs? Cold room?
 - Smell: Odd odor? Overpowering cologne?
 - Taste: Lunch? Snacks? Drinks?
- What can I remove to make it easier for them to pay attention to me?

3. CHOOSE YOUR SETTING CAREFULLY

- Eliminate distractions by considering the setting in advance.
- The wrong setting can doom a conversation before it begins: uncomfortable or cramped office, noisy restaurant, a single loud conversation, sports bar.

4. ALLOW YOUR LISTENERS TIME TO FOCUS

- Remember: your listeners are *shifting* their focus from something else to you
- Sometimes we suffer from what communication scholars call “Agenda Anxiety.”

- We have something we want to “get to,” so we charge ahead. But listeners need time to transition
- There’s a place for “small talk” or “warm-up.”
- Connection before content.

5. HELP YOUR LISTENERS IGNORE

- In communication, there are ALWAYS distractions. How do you handle them?
Rule of thumb: If the audience notices it, point it out.
Relieve the tension. “Does he see that? Does she notice?”
- Address the *visual* elephant in the room. Point out visual distractions that they’ll notice anyway.
- Address the *mental* elephant in the room. Identify the distractions on their minds to allow them to release them.
- Research shows that “paying attention” is two separate activities:
 1. Enhancement: Focusing on the issue before us.
 2. Suppression: Ignoring everything else.

Are there other communication-related topics you’d like to hear the Communication Guys address? Let us know on our [Facebook page](#).