

8 Tactics for Gaining and Holding Learner Attention

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Before you can share information and facilitate learning, you must first capture and hold learner attention. Recognizing the importance of this point is a key to better understanding what brain researchers know about how the brain best processes information. You do not have to be a neuroscientist to know that learning and retention can only occur when people are interested and engaged in the learning process. This is central to the concept of learner-centered training.

Getting learners focused is no small feat in today's world of fast-paced action and shortened attention spans. Because many learners are constantly exposed to high speed technology and conditioned by an expectation that they can get anything when and how they want it, your challenge as a trainer, educator or facilitator is a complex one.

The following strategies are some ways in which you can grab your participant's attention and begin the journey of learning.

1. Assess Content Engagement Factor. You can trace many instances of lost learner interest back to your design and delivery format. To ensure that you do not fall prey to bad content and presentation errors, consider the following questions:

- Have you created a novel way to inform learners of session objectives and expectations?
- Does the program design incorporate the needs of learners that you discovered through a needs assessment?
- Does your design format require active learner engagement at regular intervals (approximately every 15-20 minutes)?
- Do the planned activities and support materials appeal to all three learning modalities (visual, auditory and kinesthetic)?
- Are learners required to be creative in their thinking and opinions during the session?
- Are interim review points built in throughout the session to gauge comprehension and learning?
- Are support materials and verbal messages congruent and stimulating?
- Is the program content flexible, relevant and appealing to learners?
- Is the learning environment stimulating to the senses?
- Does what you are delivering mirror or tie to real-world needs?

2. Give Learners a Reason to Listen to What You Have to Say. Do this by answering a common learner question --- "What is the Added Value And Results For Me (AVARFM)?" By sharing what they are going to get from the session and how it can immediately be used in the real world, you set up learner expectations of receiving something of value. A helpful part of this is to share your credentials and help them understand why they should listen to you, based on your expertise. You might facilitate this by sharing a personal experience and lessons you have learned related to the session topic. You could then ask some of them what experiences they have had.

3. Make Learning Fun. Most participants love an opportunity to have fun when they learn. Look for ways to incorporate variations of games that children play to keep the energy level high in your sessions. For example, you can incorporate scarf juggling as an energizer and to teach one-on-one coaching, teambuilding and interpersonal communication skills. Give each person three brightly colored silk scarves, show them how to juggle them by having them toss one at a time into the air and continue to catch and toss again. It is a fun, highly active workout that allows people to learn new skills while interacting with others. It takes no special skills and can be learned and practiced in minutes. You can get scarves at magic supply stores and on the internet.

4. Follow the Lead of Advertisers. People are so used to technology and a fast rate of information delivery that trainers and educators must mirror what learners see elsewhere in order to keep them interested. An example of this is the rate at which television advertisers show commercials. In the middle to late part of the twentieth century commercials ran on the half hour. Eventually they came closer together until now they are seen every eight to fifteen (8 to 15 minutes) or in some cases more often. This translates to a psychological expectation from learners that something will change during a similar period in the classroom. For that reason, you should plan to change your delivery format (e.g. from lecture to discussion, activity, or demonstration) at least every fifteen minutes or so. This helps maintain learner interest and keeps them mentally engaged.

5. Use an Opinion Activity. At the beginning of your session, create a list of key topics that will be covered in the session and generate statements based on them. For example, “Most learners will lose attention in a training session after approximately fifteen minutes.” In using such statements, you introduce session content and start the process of memorization early. This will help because the more times someone experiences information, the more likely they will gain, retain, recall and use it. As you make each statement, have learners write it down on a sheet of paper and next to it write either “Agree” or “Disagree.” Once you have read all statements, get a tally of their opinions and flip chart the total. Explain that, as the session progresses, you will cover each item and will refer to their responses at those points. Through a simple activity such as this, you have introduced key concepts and engaged learners early in the session.

6. Incorporate Sound. If you need to attract learner attention following a group activity or in order to start your session, try using creative noisemaker, such as, a screaming chicken, traditional teacher’s classroom bell, bicycle horn or other creative tool or music. When learners hear the sounds, they typically stop what they are doing to look to see what is going on. You can then ask them to assemble or prepare to get started.

7. Use Non-Verbal Cues. Silence and gestures are great ways to attract attention. If you are speaking and others are holding side conversations, simply stop talking and stand in front of the group. Eventually, they will note the silence and look to the front of the room. You can also regain attention by informing learners at the beginning of the session that you will be using various signals when you need their attention. For example, you might stop talking and raise your hand. As learners see your gesture, they mirror it until everyone has focused and raised their hand. You can also clap your hands in a rhythmic fashion to which learners respond in a like manner. Once everyone has joined the clapping, stop, and proceed with your session.

8. Have a Memorable Conclusion. Restate key concepts that were covered, hit the highlights of discussion brought out related to them, provide an opportunity for final questions and close with a powerful statement, summarizing quote, or other memorable message that relates to the session content. Whatever you do, make it fun and engage learners rather than just reviewing a list off of slides.

There are literally hundreds of books and thousands of activities available online and in book stores that you can use to help focus learner attention. The key is to be innovative, use a variety of tools and not get into a habit of using the same techniques regularly. If you do, you make become bored with them and that complacency will show in your facilitation. The end result will be that your learners do not get enthused and drift away mentally. Build a toolbox of ideas, tools, techniques and strategies and pull from it on a regular basis. The result will be a more interactive and challenging learning experience for your participants.

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