

Damage Control: Tips for Dealing with Distractions

By Dianna Booher

The sky's the limit when it comes to physical distractions—planes overhead, fire alarms, messengers bringing in emergency announcements. Some you can control; others you cannot.

Like the time I addressed a gathering of straitlaced financial people of an international banking system...someone set a can of soda on my materials table when I was not looking. Ten minutes into my presentation, with one sweeping arm gesture, I knocked the can to the floor, splashing everything in its path.

The worst distraction occurred during a series of public seminars in a hotel in the Philippines. The setting was on the top floor of the hotel in a room with large windows on three sides. Twice a day a helicopter landed within 10 yards of our windows to pick up or deposit executives. The sound totally obliterated all voices for at least three to five minutes.

On another occasion, my client had a massive remodeling effort going on at corporate headquarters, with drills and buzz saws outside the door where I was conducting a training class. Did I mention that it was an oral presentation workshop, and we were trying to video record the presenters?

Even the minor distractions, such as a ringing cell phone or groups of people entering and leaving a room next door or a retirement buffet down the hallway, tempt participants to disengage. Do all that you can to select a facility where you have control of such disruptions.

Call Attention to the Distraction, Regroup, and Regain Control

The cause of various out-of-control situations may be a freak incident, as in the following scenario: At a large meeting in a university auditorium, a page needed to deliver a message to the master of ceremonies. She edged through the curtains at the side of the stage and quietly made her way to the emcee, who was seated directly behind the speaker at the lectern. When the page gently touched the emcee on the shoulder, startled, he leaped from his chair with a loud scream. The audience roared, and the speaker at the lectern stopped abruptly, clueless about why the colleague behind him would spring from his chair with a yelp.

Naturally, after such incidents, you have to let the air clear before trying to regain control of the group. Once the laughter has died down, the noise has stopped, or the problem has been corrected, begin again in one of several ways.

You might recount a personal experience related to what just happened. Or acknowledge the interruption and then begin again. Or simply recap your main points up to the interruption and continue.

Try Humor to Recapture Attention

When a cell phone—yours or someone else’s—rings try one of these lines to recapture attention:

“Uh oh, forgot to tell my parole officer/parrot/grandmother where I was going.”

“If that’s the President, tell him I don’t have time for his questions just now.”

“Tell Mom I’ll be sure to be home by nine.”

Call a Break

Trying to talk through loud noise or a commotion is like trying to cut through a T-bone steak with a toothpick. You simply will not get through the barrier. If you clearly see that the group is no longer with you, either investigate the noise yourself or ask someone else to do so.

Talk About Mental Distractions

Mental distractions can be far worse than physical distractions—things such as a merger or layoff announced an hour before you are to make your presentation.

In such situations, you may be talking, but few people will be listening—unless you go find them mentally and emotionally. That is, they are frozen in place at the point of distraction.

You will need to move to where they are psychologically. Acknowledge their situation by talking about it and giving the group a chance to air feelings and opinions. Then, once they have traded views, opinions, and emotions, they will much more readily “wind down” and give you their attention as an escape from the stress of the current situation.

Acknowledge the Body Language of Those Who Disagree

Many side conversations erupt from disagreement left to smolder under the surface. If audience members make it a point with their body language to tell you they disagree—obvious head wagging, disgusted shuffling in their seats, glancing around the room trying to catch others’ eyes—they are dangerously close to exploding verbally.

If the talker wants to express an opposing view, offer that opportunity or at least acknowledge that position: “I know that some of you have experiences and ideas to the contrary, and you’ll be welcome to express those at the end of the presentation.” Such comments remove the urge for these naysayers to begin their comments too early to those seated nearby.

Provide Incentives to Discourage Latecomers

It can be very distracting to have people wander in after your presentation begins, and it’s tempting to wait on them or offer to catch them up on what they missed. After all, you know they missed valuable information. Resist the urge to accommodate them, though. By accommodating one or two, you’ll distract the rest of the audience. In addition, those who went to the trouble of arriving on time will now think it’s okay to wander in a few minutes late at the next break. Always start on time, letting latecomers ask others what they missed later.

To discourage latecomers, try giving the audience something to look forward to immediately after a break. Examples: Promise to share “the inside scoop” on some company issue; consider taking an opinion poll right before a break and announcing and interpreting the results immediately afterward; draw for prizes—door prizes, contest prizes, or brainteaser prizes; or show funny photos of the crowd..

Remember that Audiences Will Follow Your Lead

Whatever the problem—preventable or otherwise—most audiences are forgiving and sympathetic. Goofs remind them that you are human, have weaknesses, get flustered, make mistakes, and experience frustrating circumstances and challenges—all of which make you seem more like them.

If you treat an incident as a major setback, the group may focus on it and become annoyed, to the point of minimizing your ideas and information. On the other hand, if you apologize, downplay the distraction, regain your composure, and correct the problem quickly, they will just as quickly revert to their previously attentive mode.

Distractions—both those you can and cannot control—will happen. Do everything you can to prevent and minimize their impact. Then relax and take surprises in stride. Who says speaking before a group or leading a learning session isn’t adventurous?

#

1,100 words

***Dianna Booher** works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.