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Making Eye Contact

The Eyes Have It!

"The Eyes Are The Window Of The Soul". Failing to use eye contact means you are throwing away one of the most basic ways of connecting with and convincing your audience about your message. Whether you are dealing with a single person, a small group or an audience of thousands, eye contact is essential to establish your authenticity.

Many inexperienced presenters completely ignore eye contact, mainly because there are so many other items to think about. Yet research (1) has demonstrated that audiences value eye contact above most other speaker attributes, and that looking away from your audience can signal avoidance and distrust.

How To Use Eye Contact To Your Advantage

1. **Avoidance.** *"He's got shifty eyes." "He couldn't look me in the eye"*. There is much folklore built up around eye contact but it is something you need to do. As a young child you may have been told not to stare at your elders (and actors are trained not to look at the audience) - so forget about what you learnt in the past.
2. **Introduction.** When introduced to someone take the opportunity to look them in the eye when shaking their hand or greeting them. I'd suggest you look at the entire face from the tip of the nose upwards to avoid the appearance of staring.
3. **Eye Colo(u)r.** Early in my career I had a problem with eye contact. An old-fashioned sales guy told me to note what eye color the person had. His theory, which I then put into practice, was that it forced you make eye contact. It works.
4. **Small Groups.** When speaking to a group of people (say 20 or less) try to make eye contact with each of them. Figure on about 3-5 seconds as an acceptable amount of

time. For Asian cultures it may be a little less, and you can look at Australians all day without them feeling uncomfortable. Don't work your way around the room by mentally saying "next, next". Try left, back, front, right without resorting to a predictable robotic pattern.

5. **Large Groups.** For larger groups, you need to apply eye contact to sections of the room. Mentally label them "left rear, front center etc.." and then select a person from that section to connect with. When you return to that section, choose another individual in that section.
6. **Really large groups.** We're talking about 500+ people and cameras and projection screens. Frequently you cannot even see your audience that well because of the lights. So use your cameras as the room. Instead of looking directly at the center of the live camera all the time, look very slightly to the left/right/top/bottom and you'll give the impression of directionality in your gaze - and you will be able to make some connection even through the medium of the camera. The same applies to higher-quality webcams and remote projection HALO or Cisco telepresence rooms.
7. **Important Points.** When making an important point, you should be connected with an important audience member. This is just another reason why you shouldn't turn your back to an audience and read your slides!
8. **Practice.** As a speaker it is extremely difficult to know if you are truly making eye contact with all parts of the room and audience. Video is a one great form of feedback. During my training sessions I often ask the audience to raise their hands if they "felt the love" from a presenter - which leads to interesting blind spots in coverage that most people never realize they had. Imagine if the decision maker was sitting in one of those blind spots.

CALL TO ACTION: Make eye contact. Force yourself to do it - both in your personal and business life. You will come across as more trustworthy, confident and authentic. As a Pre-sales engineer, what better impression can you ask for?

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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