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Speaking Too Quickly

Don't be a Motor Mouth

50%. Whenever I ask the audience at one of my workshops if they are regularly told that they speak too quickly in a customer-facing situation - half the participants raise their hands.

Just think about the impact that has upon your audience's understanding of your sales message. Reverse the roles. If someone is presenting to you, and speaking rapidly, how long do you mentally try to "keep up the pace" before your mind starts wandering towards other subjects? In sports, coaches say that "*speed kills*" - it is a devastating weapon to have on your side, and a tough skill to coach. In sales, speed also kills, but it kills your deals when you speak too quickly - and pace of delivery is a coachable skill!

The Three Aspects of Verbal Speed

We're going to examine the three causes of excessive presentation speed, which are Content, Attitude and Delivery techniques in order to provide some real life methods which will help you to slow down. However - before detailing any of these, you need to know where to start by establishing a baseline.

Have a colleague video your next 2-3 presentations. At least one should be a customer based presentation; one should be of you reading from some prepared text and if possible get a recording of a webcast presentation if that is part of your job function. Count the words, use a stopwatch and establish your current baseline speed of Presentation Words Per Minute (PWPM). Studies show that the optimum delivery speed to maintain people's attention¹ is in the range of 150 to 160 words per minute. Contrast this with the average reading speed of a college-educated adult which is in the range of 250-300 wpm.

You should also show one of your videos to someone outside of your industry and ask for their honest feedback about your pace.

Content.

The major cause behind excessive speed is too much content. It's a very simple cause and a simple thing to fix. Trying to pack 30 minutes of content into 20 minutes just doesn't work - it becomes confusing and unfocused for the audience. Anytime you say something like "we have a lot to cover" or "I'll speed up going through this part" take that as a big clue. Ideally if you are going to present for 30 minutes you have 25 minutes of standard content, and the ability to include additional information if, and only if, you have the time. Use the additional 5 minutes to engage the audience, tell reference stories etc.

Try this technique: examine the next presentation or demonstration you plan to give in detail. For every slide or every screen you are going to show ask yourself "*so what?*" and "*who cares?*" That means why are you showing it (does it reinforce your message?) and specifically who in the audience is going to care about it. Common fillers and time-wasters are slides with bullet-points as we are compelled to speak to each point and product demonstrations where there are either many menu options or ways to accomplish a task. Pick one demo method or the most important bullet on a slide and remove everything else.

Attitude.

The second most common cause cited by my audiences for being a motor mouth is excitement and nerves. We all want to show some passion for the solutions and services we are selling yet those nerves and the burst of adrenaline can cause your speech rate to rise by 20%. Although you cannot eliminate nerves you can find a way to diminish and harness them to your advantage (see the [Stress Free Demo](#) talking point).

This is one area where practice can make a major difference. Most Sales Engineers practice so that they are confident that their demonstration will not fail (which is different from being confident that their demo will amaze..) but they do not practice the finer points of the demo around speed, emphasis and relevance to the customers environment.

Try practicing just the first and last five minutes of your presentation in terms of communication techniques. Make sure you pronounce every word and say each syllable of each word very deliberately. This will artificially slow you down during practice - so that even when you do speed up during the real life event, you'll still be working at a slower pace than normal - and your speech patterns will be clearer and easier to understand.

Delivery Techniques.

The best techniques to slow down your speed are the ones which connect to your visual senses. Try one or more of these as a starting point.

1. Write "Slow Down" or "Breathe" on the back of your business card and tape it to your computer keyboard.
2. If you use a script, take a red highlighter and write in "pause" , "breathe" or "look at audience and smile" at key sections in the script.
3. Instead of words use the octagonal red stop sign.
4. My personal favorite for PowerPoint. Place a very small red dot in the bottom corner of a slide where you know you speak too quickly. Use the dot as a visual cue to slow down, breathe and smile.
5. Pick 2-3 spots in your presentation where you can deliberately pause and use silence to get people's attention. Use silence after asking a question, or before/after making a very important point.
6. When presenting to a large audience (>100), pick a small proportion of people scattered around the room, and whenever you look at that person, slow down a little.
7. If there is something unusual in the room, such as a picture or a plaque - condition yourself to pause or slow down whenever you look at it.
8. Use movement. If you are moving from your seat to a whiteboard that is a perfect opportunity to pause.
9. Use props. A glass of water works wonders for killing a sudden rush of emotional speed and energy.
10. Get direct feedback from a colleague in the room (up,down,OK)



If you are one of the 50% of Sales Engineers who speak too quickly in customer-facing situations then you need to make a conscious effort to change as it is damaging your sales abilities. Establish your baseline through measurement and honest feedback. Then sit down with your manager and then with your favorite sales person to put together a plan where you can start to implement some techniques to slow yourself down. This isn't something you can easily accomplish by yourself, but with some coaching and real time feedback you can see a difference in less than a month.

Your customers will thank you, your salespeople will thank you – and you will have become a better public speaker.

"A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, French Engineer (1900-1944)

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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ⁱ Williams, J. R. (1998). Guidelines for the use of multimedia in instruction, Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society 42nd Annual Meeting, 1447–1451