



GETTY

LINGUISTIC TRICKS TO GRAB AN ONLINE AUDIENCE'S ATTENTION

Pausing, asking questions and varying your pitch during virtual presentations will help to keep your listeners hooked. **By Valerie Fridland and Ruth Gotian**

With presentations moving to a virtual format and looking set to stay even after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have found it challenging talking only to a webcam light. One of us (R.G.) recently gave a virtual talk at an international meeting at the end of a long day of presentations. Not being able to see the audience, she had no idea whether people were paying attention, checking e-mails or playing on their phones.

In this feedback vacuum, maintaining an entertaining, engaging demeanour becomes challenging.

One way to maintain engagement is to pay attention to your language use. The two of us have experience in this: V.F. is a sociolinguist who for 25 years has studied how speech is tied to identity and brings linguistic research to bear on how and why we say the things we do. R.G. works in adult learning and leadership development, and coaches faculty members

on how to improve their virtual presence during presentations.

It's not always obvious how the small linguistic choices we make affect audience engagement. Here are a few ways you can improve your virtual presentation style on the basis of linguistic research.

Throw out some questions

Putting your audience on mute does not make for scintillating conversations, so it's useful to



Former US president Barack Obama varies his pitch and pacing in speeches to hold interest.

remember that questions are powerful linguistic devices. Most people, having been trained in the rules of conversation since they were children, will be familiar with the idea that questions summon responses. So, find several points in your presentation where you can invite verbal feedback – such as by asking your listeners to share relevant experiences, or by checking what they know about the topic at hand.

It might take longer to get a response than in a non-virtual space, so don't worry about a time lapse before audience members answer (you could perhaps call on a participant you know would be comfortable to get things going). Even if your audience needs to remain muted, asking rhetorical questions and pausing for a few moments helps to get people thinking about your topic and its relevance to them.

A lot of people might have questions or ideas but be unwilling to speak in front of a virtual crowd, so encourage them to make use of the chat feature (and remember to check it).

Vary your vocal pitch

When we are face to face, we often rely on gestures, eye contact and body movement to keep things interesting. Our ability to incorporate this extra communicative layer to the spoken word is impaired when we're just another face on a computer screen.

This is where the voice can become an asset. When we rely heavily on reading from notes or explaining points on slides, we forget to sound excited about what we are saying. Studies show

that speakers who vary their pitch are perceived as showing more happiness and emotion¹, so it's an easy way to keep an audience's interest and communicate excitement about a topic.

“Communicating enthusiasm and excitement helps to keep people engaged.”

People who read books aloud to children are likely to already know how to do this. Try underlining some parts of your presentation to remind yourself to emphasize it with varied pitch, or use a high rising pitch as you pose one of those rhetorical questions.

Ums and uhs are OK

Filled pauses, such as the familiar 'ums' and 'uhs' that pepper speech, are a sign of cognitive effort. In other words, they come out when we are thinking hard or searching for what we want to say. Giving a presentation involves more cognitive processing than just having a casual conversation. Studies show that ums and uhs increase when speakers take on a directive role, use complex words and sentences or discuss abstract topics²: all aspects that are inherent in virtual presentations.

Psycholinguistic research shows that filled pauses are surprisingly beneficial from a listener's perspective, even though speakers often try to avoid them. When information is preceded

by a filled pause, studies suggest that listeners have better memory and recall of that information^{3,4}. Put another way, hesitation tells listeners to pay attention to what is coming.

But using too many filled pauses can also lead to the perception that a speaker lacks authority and credibility. So, although being prepared and familiar with what you are planning to say will minimize your ums and uhs, don't worry too much if a few get by – they might actually help your audience to remember what you said.

Be intense

Communicating enthusiasm and excitement helps to keep people engaged, thereby avoiding the dreaded video-conference fatigue or, worse, a glazed-over audience. Aside from varying your pitch, you can also make savvy use of words known as intensifiers – 'very,' 'really,' 'incredibly,' 'so' and 'absolutely', for example. Intensifiers communicate intensity: why just describe something as 'important' when it could be 'tremendously important'?

Multiple studies in communication research show that use of intensifiers increases the perception that a speaker is certain and in control (see, for example, ref. 5).

Use 'like' less

Discourse markers – such as 'you know,' 'well' or the ever-popular 'like' – are words that help us with conversational cohesion or highlight important information in a somewhat similar way to filled pauses. They give listeners subtle clues about how to interpret what we are saying. But some discourse markers, especially 'like,' are more colloquial than others, particularly across generational divides. Whereas younger speakers often say 'like' at the beginning of a sentence or use it in place of 'about,' many speakers still consider this inappropriate in formal settings.

Including certain words, avoiding others, modulating the pitch of your voice and actively engaging with your virtual audience can keep them engaged and take your oral presentation skills to the next level.

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