

Look Ma, No Hands!

The boy on the bike seeks attention. His mother on the bench talks to a friend. The boy casts a sideways glance at his mother. Her conversation continues. The boy calls to her. She glances up and returns to her conversation. He escalates, riding his bike close to her, letting go the handles and shouting, "Look Ma, NO HANDS!" She looks up just in time to see him crash into a trash barrel with a bang. He now has her attention, but not her praise. That will have to come another day. In the same town, in another location, a trainer tries to call a group to attention. He clears his throat. The would-be trainees continue talking. He says, "Good morning." A few trainees look up and reply. Not satisfied that he has attracted enough attention, the trainer shouts, "I said good morning!" All trainee-to-trainee conversation stops as the trainees mumble, "good morning." The trainer replies, "Come on, you can do better than that, "I SAID GOOD MORNING!!!" The trainees shout in return, "Good morning" and the trainer has fallen over his own "trash can." For the trainer has gained their attention but unfortunately, not their admiration. The shame of it is that the trainer has squandered an opportunity to capture the trainees' attention in a compelling, engaging manner that teases the topic to follow. There is abundant research that validates the importance of first impressions. People often make up their minds about a subject, a need, a person within 30 seconds of first encounter. And with today's quickened pace, the decision point may come sooner. This is not to suggest that first impressions cannot be countered. They can. But why solicit that extra work? Gaining the attention of modern learners is difficult enough without alienating them at the start. Entertainment experts say you have to open strong. Open with a bang they say. The purpose of an opening is to capture attention, create interest and build anticipation for the exciting journey to come. The same is true for learning. The trainer who captivates learners from the start has a natural edge. You should design your opening segment to achieve maximum results. Here's some considerations for opening with impact. Your opening should establish your presence. Learners will rarely pay attention to you if you do not have their respect and trust. Although the learning event is not about you, the opening needs to establish you. That way, you can move beyond having to prove yourself and into the content that will follow. Participants will relax and trust you once they perceive that you know what you are doing. This is your chance to establish that as a fundamental truth so that you can then refocus the program on the learning. Your opening should capture attention. Your first actions should leave no doubt the session has started. Immediately draw your participants into the action. This is a moment to be bold and brassy. Your opening should start with a bang, not a whimper. Do not prattle on about thanking the audience, the sponsors, the event planners, your wife. Do not waste precious time pimping your bio. Give them flash. Make them look. Make them focus. Shut them up. Your opening should peak interest. Beyond being bold and brassy, your opening should be interesting. It is possible to be both bold and annoying. Instead, you want the learner to be intrigued with what you are doing. The participants should find your actions, activity and presentation so compelling that they forget their conversations and focus on you. Get them to say, "Wow. This is going to be something." Get them to think, "I'm glad I'm here." Your opening should invite learning. Although the opening by its very nature requires that people focus on you, you want the content of that opening to be about the learning to follow. Accordingly, it is not enough to be bold, brassy and interesting. Your opening must also be tied to learning content in some yet undiscovered way. This is not the moment to teach. It is an opportunity to foreshadow the learning to follow. Your goal should be to spark the learner to want to know more about the topic to follow. My own presentations offer examples. Creativity begins with a magic trick featuring items that continually appear. The effect is reminiscent of the mind-numbing repetition found in some jobs. That's Learnertainment® begins with another magic trick featuring a rope and two pom poms. The routine demonstrates the pull and tension between the need for the trainer to deliver content and the trainee to have fun. I start my Learning With A Beat presentation by singing the first lines of famous songs. The trainees then complete the phrases. Given that the songs used are older tunes that the participants have not likely thought about recently, this simple demonstration vividly demonstrates how effective music is at helping people remember material. It is of course not necessary to become a magician. All that is required is an unusual, eye catching, enjoyable, relevant hook. Once you have announced your presence, established your participants' attention and interest, and have set up the learning to follow, you can get focus on content. The learners will follow. They will know they are in good hands.

About the Author

Horsereading trainers uk. Race horse trainer based at Denton Hall near the village of Piercebridge in Co Durham. Includes details.

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