

Suspense and Distraction: Zeigarnik Effect

The element of mystery can be effectively employed to involve your audience. We are all naturally curious about the unknown. When we feel we've been left hanging, it drives us crazy! We want to know the end of the story. We want our tasks to be completed so we can check them off our list. This is also known as the "Zeigarnik Effect," named after Bluma Zeigarnik, a Russian psychologist. This effect is the tendency we have to remember uncompleted thoughts, ideas, or tasks more than completed ones.

We see the Zeigarnik Effect on the news and other television programs. Right before a commercial break, the newscasters announce some interesting tidbit that will come later in the hour. This piques your interest and, rather than flipping the channel, you stay tuned. Movies and dramas on television leave you hanging in suspense. By leaving something uncompleted right before the commercial break, the programs draw our attention, keep us involved, and motivate us to continue watching. We don't feel satisfaction until we receive finality, closure, or resolution to the message, our goals, or any aspect of our life.

You also see the Zeigarnik Effect in the courtroom. We already know that people feel more confident and impressed with information they discover for themselves over time. This dictates that persuaders slowly dispel information, rather than dumping large volumes of information all at once. A lawyer should not disclose everything he knows about the case or the plaintiff during his opening statement. As the trial progresses, the jury can fill in the blanks for themselves with the additional information they gradually receive. This works much better than dumping all the information on them in the beginning. You will hold the jurors' attention longer and your message will have more validity. The jury discovers the answers for themselves, and will arrive at your desired conclusion.

Distraction has been proven to increase your ability to persuade. On the flip side, if the distraction is disagreeable, your persuasive ability will diminish. This means, depending on the situation, you can persuade better with a distraction than with total concentration. Leon Festinger and Nathan Maccoby proved this theory with their landmark study. What are the best distracters? They discovered that food and sex appeal worked the best.

In another experiment, the two men attempted to persuade college students that fraternities are bad. They knew their presentation would not be received well by the students, so they did the experiment a second time. This time they used a funny silent movie during the presentation. The results were clear. More of the students who were distracted with the silent movie changed their opinions about fraternities. In this study, distracting the conscious mind increased the persuasiveness of the message.