

The mobile in the meeting

How to deal with the distracted.



Rebekah Campbell is a tech entrepreneur and co-founder of Hey You, Australia's largest cafe app.

Some time ago I pitched Hey You to a major organisation. The chief executive and chief financial officer sat on the other side of an antique table with four other members of the executive team. My business partner and I perched together, PowerPoint deck ready to go. We'd spent weeks preparing this presentation; my palms were slick with anticipation and fear. This could be the opportunity of a lifetime.

One minute in, my pitch struck a hurdle. The CEO pulled out his mobile phone and began to twiddle. Was he, perhaps, looking up our app? As the minutes ticked by, it became clear he wasn't checking out our app; he was checking his emails. He sniffed and smiled at the content of one of his messages.

A few minutes later the CFO received a text message, whereupon he too focused on his phone. So I delivered my finely rehearsed lines to the tops of two balding heads. Other members of the team leaned forward, perhaps in sympathy, but it didn't compensate for the mental absence of two key decision makers.

Disrespected and powerless, I couldn't focus. I wanted to impress the group, but their leaders weren't giving me a chance. I began to fumble my words as my brain scrambled for a way to win back my audience. Should I complain? I wondered.

Psychologist and communications expert Clare Mann says my reaction is typical. She says the focus and actions of a listener affects the quality of the speaker's delivery. "When someone notices that they aren't being listened to, their attention will move to their inner voice. They'll question what the listener is thinking and lose eloquence."



I PULLED OUT MY PHONE AND ASKED EVERYONE TO USE OUR APP TO ORDER COFFEES.

I didn't feel it was appropriate to stop my presentation and demand the CEO pay attention. Mann's advice to is to work to win back rapport at any cost. "There is no point continuing to speak as if you hadn't noticed they were on their phones."

She says that continuing under such circumstances is unlikely to win the business anyway. The distracted executives will walk away underwhelmed by the presentation and without appreciating the key points. Worse, Mann believes that saying nothing creates anxiety and erodes confidence. "You don't want to feel like a girl who just gave a pitch and no one listened. It's important to constantly check in with yourself. What are you feeling and what are the consequences of not speaking out?"

If by chance they did say yes, Mann says, I'd have established a bad precedent. By checking emails or looking at their phone in a meeting, the person is making a statement that their time is more

important than yours. "If they don't treat you as an equal then you have to decide if you want to work with the person."

I've since presented at many disengaged meetings. It's frustrating when I've got something important to share and people are typing on phones or laptops. It's especially difficult when there's a power imbalance such as a business pitch. Mann concedes that calling out bad behaviour is difficult. Her advice for rescuing a presentation that has lost its audience is:

1. Stop the meeting and ask a question

Mann suggests using the person's name. "People always hear their name and if you ask something that requires a response then you can bring the person back into the conversation." If a group has lost interest, then Mann suggests standing up and inviting the group to participate. "Standing, moving forward or around a table surprises people and makes it difficult for them to ignore you."

2. Make a direct request

If they still aren't paying attention, then Mann says be direct and explain why it's important to listen. For example; "David, I have an opportunity that will transform your business. If you give me 10 minutes of your undivided attention, I know you will find what I have to say valuable." She recommends a firm tone of voice; don't try to be appealing.

3. Allow the person to save face

Your objective should be to bring the person back into rapport so they can engage in the conversation. Be careful not to criticise or embarrass: they won't listen if they feel uncomfortable.

Fortunately, I was able to win back the CEO and CFO at my boardroom presentation. I pulled out my phone and asked everyone to use our app to order coffees. It felt clunky and a bit aggressive but I was able to re-establish a connection with my listeners. I maintained eye-contact with the CEO for the rest of the meeting and asked regular questions to keep everyone engaged.

In hindsight, I'm glad that I didn't power forward knowing that some people weren't listening. The sense that my message wasn't being heard was both unpleasant and offensive. I wouldn't have forgiven myself if I had walked away knowing I hadn't made an impact.