



INSIGHTS & IDEAS

TED is a small nonprofit that has built a massive audience by providing a platform for innovative thinkers to share "ideas worth spreading." Videos of inspiring, engaging TEDTalks have attracted 300 million views since TED began posting them in 2006. TED has set a new standard for speakers to be engaging, inspiring and memorable. The Hattaway Communications research team reviewed the most-viewed TED presentations to learn more about the phenomenon that is TED—and to share the secrets of a good TEDTalk.

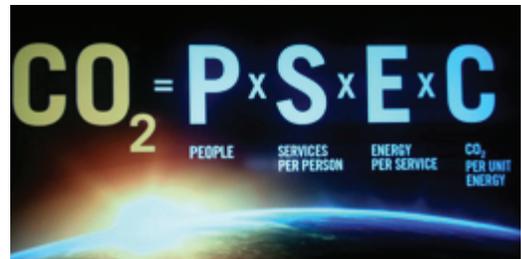
The TED talks that our team reviewed were considered "highly engaging" based on an index of their web traffic, Facebook posts, tweets, and coverage in new and traditional media. The analysis identified a number of practical ideas for delivering a unique, compelling presentation at TED.

01 SHOW YOUR PASSION The most common trait of successful talks was the personal energy of the presenters, which engaged the audience and conveyed the speaker's passion. A good TEDTalk is a dynamic and emotionally engaging performance. Presenters move about the stage to engage the whole audience, modulating their tone and demonstrating their frustration, excitement, hope, and curiosity. None of the presenters read off of notecards or Teleprompters. If you're used to reading speeches, consider speech coaching with a theater professional to learn practical techniques for connecting with an audience in an emotionally engaging and dynamic way.

02 MAINTAIN FOCUS WITH A SIMPLE, UNIFYING CONCEPT

Some presenters organized their presentations around one major claim, concept or visual. For example, in Bill Gates's talk, "Innovating to Zero," Gates used a single formula to explain how the human race can reduce carbon emissions to zero.

This formula engaged the audience by succinctly conveying a complicated concept. People recognize genius in simplicity: Albert Einstein nailed the theory of relativity with an even simpler formula, which you can probably recite by heart. It's not "dumbing down" your material—it's lifting up the central idea so that people can see it clearly.



Michael Pritchard's "Making Filthy Water Drinkable" talk took much the same approach, with a simple visual explaining how his unique water filtration technology removed bacteria to make contaminated water safe for drinking. The central idea: If the smallest known bacteria is larger than the 15 nanometer holes in the LifeSaver bottle, the water is safe. Pritchard poured filthy water into a LifeSaver bottle and drank it on stage to prove the effectiveness of the technology.

03 USE HUMOR, EVEN WITH SOBERING TOPICS In her “Stroke of Innovation” talk, Harvard psychologist Jill Bolte Taylor walked the audience through a play-by-play description of what happened when, at 35, she experienced a brain hemorrhage that triggered a massive stroke. Bolte Taylor combined factual information about brain functions with anecdotes from her frightening experience—and included humor to break the tension. For example, as she described the physical aspects of the stroke, she also explained how, as a scientist, the experience was “totally cool,” saying: “How lucky am I? How many brain scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain from the inside out?!”

Similarly, a visibly frustrated Jamie Oliver, in “Teach Every Child about Food,” revealed shocking and disturbing facts about the state of childhood obesity and nutrition. Still, the talk itself was fun to watch, in large part due to Oliver’s consistent use of humor and irony. For example, before unveiling a particularly disturbing set of statistics, Oliver joked: “I’m sure you’re all excited for me to crack into my rant.” Self-deprecating humor will make you more likable and can ease stress around a difficult topic—helping the audience focus on the substance of your ideas.

04 CREATE A LEARNING EXPERIENCE—AND A DIALOGUE Successful presenters created an atmosphere of learning during their talks. Some used the technique of posing a question to the audience, which got them thinking actively and piqued their curiosity about the topic at hand. Dan Pink, for example, began his “On the Science of Motivation” talk by asking: “How do you lift a small candle off of a table and burn it without getting any wax on the table—using only a candle, matches, and a cardboard box full of thumb-tacks?”

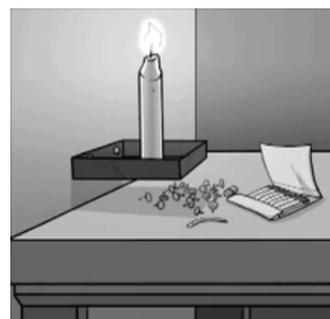
Having expended intellectual energy to come up with a solution, the audience was instantly pulled into his talk and anxious to hear the answer. This brain teaser was used as a springboard to demonstrate how incentives impact performance, and Pink went on to show how complicated tasks that require resourceful thinking (like solving the candle problem) are actually harder to do when individuals are provided with incentives. Despite the complex nature of the studies being discussed, the talk flowed seamlessly with the aid of this and other brainteasers.

Others used trivia questions to accomplish a similar objective. Simon Sinek’s talk on motivational leaders was peppered with a number of trivia questions such as, “Can anyone tell me who Samuel Pierpont Langley was?” or “Anyone heard of the law of diffusion of innovation?” A number of presenters polled their audience throughout their presentations with “by-a-show-of-hands” questions. Brain teasers, trivia questions and showing of hands are simple techniques that engage the listener both intellectually and physically, making a monologue feel more like a dialogue.

05 USE PROPS TO MAKE ABSTRACT IDEAS TANGIBLE Some presenters utilized props to make a dramatic visual statement and create a lasting emotional impression. Jill Bolte Taylor brought out a real human brain to demystify the mind and show how it is constructed.



Bill Gates released mosquitoes into the audience during his talk on malaria, saying “not only poor people should be susceptible to the disease.” Before Gates revealed that the insects were not infected with malaria, many audience members probably felt an approximation of the stress experienced by people in developing countries who face the threat of mosquito-borne diseases.

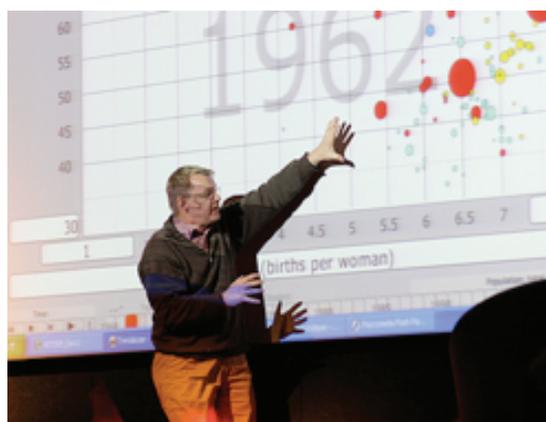


In his talk about childhood nutrition, Jamie Oliver brought out a wheelbarrow full of sugar. He poured it out, one handful at a time at first, to show the daily sugar consumption of the average child; then using a cup to show weekly consumption; then dumping the entire wheelbarrow of sugar on stage to show the amount consumed by the average American or British child in a five-year period. The physical portrayal of abstract statistics can help people comprehend facts and figures in a more concrete, personal and powerful way.

06 USE VISUALS TO CREATE HUMAN CONNECTIONS OR CONVEY FACTS Few successful TEDTalks featured elaborate visual presentations. Instead, most slide shows used simple animation and limited text—which encouraged the audience to focus on the speaker, without visual distractions. (Some used video instead of still photography, timing their talk with the images so the words and pictures flowed together.)

Visuals were almost always photographs, and were used mainly for two purposes. First, photography was used to create human connections to the topic. Throughout his talk about obesity among children, Jamie Oliver presented photographs of his “partners” in the fight against poor nutrition, saying, for example, “this pastor, one of my earliest allies in West Virginia, has to bury the people who die of obesity. He’s sick of it!” Oliver followed this impassioned anecdote by showing a picture of a double-wide coffin used to bury obese people.

Second, presenters used graphs, maps or other information design elements that captured the magnitude of an issue in an arresting way. Bill Gates, for example, used line graphs to show trends in life expectancy and animated maps to show the prevalence of malaria. Hans Rosling showed animated graphs that complemented his talk about the use and availability of statistics. While too many graphs run the risk of confusing the audience, simple and evocative information design can compel and captivate.



07 CONNECT YOURSELF TO THE TOPIC Successful presenters connected themselves to their topics, usually with just a few, well-chosen words about their personal interest in or history with the subject. In “Creativity and Education,” Ken Robinson told the audience about a familial connection to William Shakespeare, then used Shakespeare to explain the importance of creative education.

Many successful presenters, like Michael Pritchard, focused on their own personal stories of discovery and innovation—making both the speakers and the innovations more interesting. Pritchard discussed his anger at seeing news footage of unsafe drinking water in disaster areas like New Orleans after Katrina, which fueled his quest to develop a radically affordable water purification system. Pritchard’s talk, and many others, played out much like a movie about a meaningful innovation—in which a protagonist faces a problem or dilemma and experiences a flash of genius that changes the world. The narrative structure kept the audience engaged, and increased the personal and emotional relevance of the innovation being unveiled.

Some described their personal epiphanies, which is the same experience you can create for your audience through sharing a powerful idea in a compelling way. People want to know why you’re talking to them about the topic—sharing your connection to the topic makes you more “real” and the issue more relevant.

08 USE STATISTICS SELECTIVELY TO EMPHASIZE THE SCOPE OF A PROBLEM—OR THE POWER OF AN INNOVATION

Despite the technical nature of many of the topics discussed at TED, the talks we analyzed were not loaded with statistical information. Numbers were used sparingly to convey the severity of a problem or the potential of a solution.

To convey the severe health and economic impacts of childhood obesity, Jamie Oliver intoned early in his talk that “your children will live lives 10 years shorter than you and I will, and 10% of what we spend on healthcare is on obesity. We can’t really afford that kind of spending right now, can we?”

Utilizing the same approach, after a brief one-minute introduction to his talk on water filtration technology, Michael Pritchard paused, looked solemnly at the audience and said, “While I’ve been talking, 13,000 people have contracted diarrhea and four children have died.” After discussing his new technology, Pritchard pointed out that while the United Kingdom alone spends \$16 billion annually on foreign aid, with his new filtration technology it would only cost \$20 billion a year to provide every human being in the world with clean drinking water. These statistics quickly demonstrated the severity of the problem—and the potential for solving it.

09 MAKE PEOPLE FEEL HOPEFUL Even talks that dealt with seemingly intractable global problems carried a tone of optimism. For example, in “Mosquitoes, Malaria and Education,” Bill Gates maintained an upbeat, hopeful attitude, providing information about the encouraging advances being made to battle malaria.

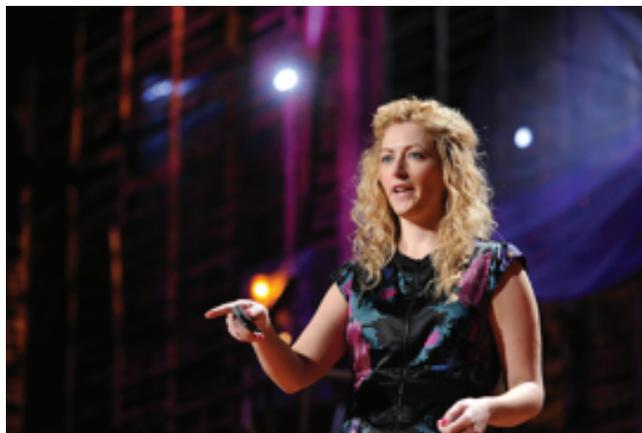
Jane McGonigal, meanwhile, gave an inspiring presentation about how she plans to mobilize the world through video games to help solve major problems like AIDS, poverty and hunger. She described games created to engage people with real-world problems and empower “gamers” to feel capable of making a difference. The potential of her approach is made real when she breaks down the vast number of hours people spend playing fictional games—and suggests the impact people could have playing games that solved real-world problems.

Hope is a powerful motivator. Speaking to people’s hopes for a better future will inspire them to pass on your message to others—and perhaps take action to support your cause.



10 CALL THE AUDIENCE TO ACTION Ultimately, the most meaningful communications inspire people to action. Many TED presenters called their audience to action and presented opportunities to make a difference. Jane McGonigal, for example, called on the audience to spread her “games for good.” In the conclusion of her talk, she provides the audience with information for locating the games, sharing them with friends, and getting others involved in the cause.

Similarly, after debunking myths regarding global development data, Hans Rosling calls on the audience to encourage the United Nations to lower its barriers to sharing statistical information.



TEDTalks Reviewed for this Article

Dan Pink on the surprising science of motivation
http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.html

Michael Pritchard's water filter turns filthy water drinkable
http://www.ted.com/talks/michael_pritchard_invents_a_water_filter.html

Bill Gates on energy: Innovating to zero
http://www.ted.com/talks/bill_gates.html

Jamie Oliver's TED Prize wish: Teach every child about food
http://www.ted.com/talks/jamie_oliver.html

Jill Bolte Taylor's stroke of insight
http://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight.html

Hans Rosling shows the best stats you've ever seen
http://www.ted.com/talks/hans_rosling_shows_the_best_stats_you_ve_ever_seen.html

Ken Robinson says schools kill creativity
http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

Bill Gates on mosquitos, malaria and education
http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/bill_gates_unplugged.html

Jane McGonigal: Gaming can make a better world
http://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world.html