Breaking Through the Clutter:
The Role of Attention in the Design of Effective Performance Improvement Programs
The Most Valuable Currency

In today’s fast-paced, heads-down world, people are quick to decide what they’ll pay attention to – and what gets swiped to the left. In a world awash in stimuli, our brains have evolved to become the ultimate bargain shoppers … devoting less and less time to root through a vast bargain bin of information in order to select a few items that somehow seem important.

So, if attention really is, as John Beck and Thomas Davenport suggested in their book *The Attention Economy*, an increasingly valuable currency, how do you, as the owner of a performance improvement initiative, attract the mindshare investment you need to achieve your goals?

Start by recognizing that all of your program stakeholders use the same instrument to process information – the human brain – and design an attention strategy that helps them break through the clutter and focus on what really is important. Earn their attention by enriching their lives in ways that matter. The result will be a healthy return for your stakeholders’ investment, as well as your own.

At Maritz Motivation Solutions, we partner with our clients to ensure that all aspects of their incentive and performance improvement programs blend together to deliver an experience that’s coherent and inspiring. And, because what gets attention gets done, we leverage the work of The Maritz Institute to infuse a people-centered approach to program design that starts with attention and ends with results.

So, while many considerations go into crafting an effective attention strategy, we’ve found three to be especially important:

1. Understand Your Audience
2. Design Their Experience
3. Build Four Pillars

“Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession of the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seems several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. It implies a withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others.”

— William James, psychologist and philosopher
1. Understand Your Audience

**Empathy Leads to Understanding.**

More than simply knowing your audience, earning stakeholders’ attention requires that you really understand them. This means moving beyond viewing them as “targets” to be convinced, but rather as stakeholders in your business, with a shared interest in success. Achieving this deeper understanding requires an empathetic approach to perspective-taking. By mentally “taking a walk in their shoes,” you can more clearly see their needs, desires and aspirations through the fog of personal bias. And while the power of perspective-taking can be harnessed in different ways, getting direct input via person-to-person interviews and day-in-the-life observation facilitates a clear understanding of the environment they must navigate and ways you can help them move through it. Observing behaviors in everyday settings can also reveal subtle tradeoffs your stakeholders would rather not be making … prime opportunities to redirect their attention to better ways of doing things.

Besides using empathy to “borrowing the lives” of your stakeholders, conducting a comprehensive motivation insight study can also yield a wealth of information to inform your attention strategy. By leveraging a suite of survey and research tools, this approach provides a high-definition view of stakeholder values, sentiments and preferences that enables you to know what they consider to be meaningful, memorable and motivating. Armed with this insight, you can use it to effectively frame program messages and personalize the participation experience in ways that not only capture attention but inspire action.

**Credibility is Key.**

Understanding who and what your audience views as credible is another critically important aspect of your attention strategy. That’s because people are strongly influenced by others they consider to be authentic, believable and trustworthy. Based on the widely published work of psychologist Robert Cialdini, we perceive two groups of people to have the most credibility: authority figures and others we see as being similar to ourselves. So, when respected leaders and highly-regarded influencers advocate for your program, their messages will not only capture attention, but carry greater weight. And, when people see colleagues and peers they trust demonstrating personal commitment to your program goals, they’ll be strongly influenced to do the same.

**Fairness Builds Trust.**

Finally, because people will walk away from situations they view as untrustworthy, the perception of fairness is mandatory for earning stakeholder attention and activating positive emotions. So, a vital aspect of understanding your stakeholders is ensuring that they consider the qualification for program rewards, perks and privileges to be equitable and commensurate with the effort required to achieve them. Perceptions of fairness also help create a trusted environment where people are willing to collaborate and compete. And, since striving to improve one’s personal status is rooted in self-identity, it’s especially important that messaging explain how status can be earned and maintained in ways that reinforce fairness and build meaning.

**Key takeaways:** Understanding who your stakeholders are, as people, and the environment they navigate, provides the foundation for a thoughtful attention strategy. Credibility and fairness are both vital considerations for building a trusted environment where stakeholders will feel self-assured when engaging with your organization and with each other.
2. Design Their Experience

Campaigns are Conversations.

When considering the role that attention plays in the success of your program, it's important to remember that our brains continually look for patterns and ways to connect new information with prior knowledge. One way to provide your stakeholders with a progression of memorable reference points is to build your strategy around a series of overlapping conversations. In this way, each message builds on the last one and creates anticipation for what comes next. Conversations also provide important context for information that helps people assimilate it and make it actionable. And, conversations encourage turn-taking and reciprocity where feedback is encouraged and stakeholder-generated content is brought into the exchange.

Start with Purpose.

When formulating an attention strategy, remember that your program, like any corporate initiative, sends a message about the purpose and values of your organization. For this reason, it's important that messages be intentionally designed to convey what your company stands for and the values that serve as the foundation for the way you do business. People interpret and apply meaning to their experiences through the lens of their values. And high-priority values act as motivators because they're so closely tied to powerful emotions. By creating awareness of your organization’s purpose and values, and then making sure that every program touch point is congruent, you have the opportunity to deepen stakeholder relationships and create shared identity.

Leverage Data To Make It Personal.

Messages that are tailored to the individual can be especially effective because they demonstrate an understanding of that person’s unique situation. Personalized messages also acknowledge that people interpret their environments differently – bringing their own ideas, values and beliefs to the experience. Effective message personalization requires a data-driven approach to awareness that quantifies milestones and provides the information needed to take ac-
tion. In partnership with our clients, Maritz has developed lifecycle communications approaches that understand how the stakeholder’s participation experience changes over time. In other words, your conversation with stakeholders evolves with them as your program unfolds. Using this approach helps ensure that messages are always timely, relevant and tailored to the specific needs of the individual.

**Consider Face Time.**

Sometimes the best way to capture someone's full attention is to meet with them face-to-face. Live events like launch meetings, learning sessions and celebrations can be particularly valuable if an initiative includes a pivot in corporate direction or launch of new market offerings. Stakeholder gatherings also serve to build a positive emotional environment when it's important to energize or inspire positive emotions across a human network. So as you design the participation experience for your stakeholders, ask yourself: When might everyone benefit from face-to-face interaction?

**Provide Social Proof.**

Human beings are social creatures and we continually scan our environment for “proof” of the norms that have been established so we know how to fit in. This intense interest in knowing what “people like us” are doing is a strong motivator and should be considered when developing a people-centered awareness strategy. At the most basic level, publishing statistics that spotlight group performance helps people know where they stand. Ratings, testimonials and expert advice can also help shape individual behavior. But perhaps the most powerful form of social proof is storytelling. Well-told stories that include the dramatic arc of someone overcoming an important challenge – and being positively changed by the experience – deliver important insights to the audience at-large. And, in a hyper-connected world, great stories get shared and the positive emotions they trigger become contagious. So, consider how authentic narratives about your program will be shared by those who experience them.

**Mix Predictability And Novelty.**

People are wired to compare incoming information with “archived” experiences. While this process makes thinking more efficient, it can also reinforce thought patterns that are stubbornly rooted in the past. To help people switch off their preconceived or “autopilot” notions, add novel and surprising elements to a regular, predictable cadence of communications elements. In this way, people grow comfortable with the flow of the conversation but can still be surprised by the elements or channels used to deliver it.

**Have Peak Moments.**

In his book *Thinking Fast and Slow* psychologist Daniel Kahneman observes that people have a bias for remembering “short periods of intense joy” – or peak moments – especially at the end of an experience. Research also shows that initial impressions are important and that people’s motivation can sometimes lag at the midpoint between starting work on a goal and actually achieving it. All this suggests that an effective attention strategy should have peak moments built-in, especially at the beginning, middle and end as a way to maintain attention and ignite action. And, since peak moments are especially memorable, consider ways for people to capture, document and share their experiences.

**Key Takeaways:** Your attention strategy helps create meaning and bring context to your organization’s purpose, values and aspirations. As you build your strategy to attract and retain stakeholder attention, a proven approach is to leverage science-based design principles to direct attention in ways that help people get what they want and need from the experience – while they advance your business goals.
3. Build Four Pillars

Designing a complete program experience requires careful consideration for all of the core elements that make up a total program experience. Attention is one of four core elements or “pillars” that Maritz considers when designing a performance improvement program. So, in addition to capturing and maintaining stakeholder attention for your initiative as a whole, your attention strategy must also blend with approaches created for the other three pillars to provide a unified, cohesive participation experience. Besides attention, those pillars include: Goal Commitment, Progress Feedback and Rewards. Let’s examine the role of attention in each.

**Goal Commitment.**

Setting goals is a necessary ingredient for any initiative focused on improving performance. But, unless people make a commitment and formulate a plan to achieve them, their performance will likely fall short. Neuroscience suggests that our brains organize goals as a hierarchy – with more abstract and aspirational values at the top, mental representations of the goal itself in the middle and more specific, action-oriented steps-to-success at the bottom. The role of your attention strategy is to connect stakeholders to each level of this hierarchy...

- Linking your organization’s purpose to the values and aspirations of stakeholders.
- Making goals more tangible by helping people visualize the benefits their achievement will bring.
- Helping people identify the actions needed to achieve their goals and then make a plan to do so.

Studies have also shown that during goal pursuit, people tend to be either approach-oriented (trying to maximize benefits by focusing on positive cues) or avoidance-oriented (trying to minimize risk by moving away from negative cues). Understanding these mindsets helps frame messages that include both approach and avoidance action cues to address the needs of both groups.

“...You’ve got to think about the big things while you’re doing small things, so that the small things go in the right direction.”

— Alvin Toffler, author and futurist
Progress Feedback.
Making progress toward a meaningful goal can be incredibly rewarding in itself. Receiving accurate, timely and personalized feedback helps build trust and fuels motivation. For this reason your attention strategy should help people “feel” progress throughout their experience – including both measurable progress indicators and social feedback. For starters, it’s important that your strategy reflect the social context in which progress will be communicated and the extent to which messaging should be public, personal or a combination of both. And, because the brain more easily assimilates visual imagery, an effective attention strategy will leverage visual content and vivid language – to help people more literally see their progress and make meaning of numbers and statistics. Game mechanics – like earning virtual badges for meeting progress milestones – also capture attention and convey the small wins that help sustain progress.

Rewards.
The opportunity to earn tangible rewards is another core element of the program participation experience. Rewards provide a way for stakeholders to mentally represent the positive consequences of goal achievement. The right mix of reward opportunities activates anticipation during goal pursuit and builds self-image when they’re earned. And, “owning” something desirable – whether tangible or the memory of a peak experience – continues to pay cognitive dividends over time. A thoughtful attention strategy is designed to create heightened awareness of reward opportunities throughout the experience and demonstrate how personal effort can be rewarding on multiple levels. Strategy can also link the positive attributes of the rewards themselves (brand, quality, innovation, experience, etc.) to the sponsoring company’s brand, connecting a carefully curated offering to the organization that makes it available.

Key Takeaways: Attention is one of four foundational “pillars” that must be designed as part of a total program experience. While each pillar supports a core aspect of the experience, a thoughtful attention strategy considers the distinct role that goal commitment, progress feedback and rewards play, while recognizing the need to blend them together in ways that create a seamless, brand-relevant experience.

Remember, your stakeholders’ journey is really just a series of moments. Your challenge is to make sure these moments matter … and Maritz is here to help you.
Breaking Through the Clutter

References
The following chronologically-ordered documents, and the references cited in these documents, have informed and provided content for this paper:


*The Future of Meetings: The Case for Face-to-Face* by Christine Duffy and Mary Beth McEuen. A Hospitality Industry Perspective published by The Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell University (No. 6, September, 2010). Also published as a white paper by The Maritz Institute (2010).


About Maritz Motivation Solutions
Based in St. Louis, Maritz Motivation Solutions is part of the Maritz family of companies. We offer sales incentives, channel loyalty, employee recognition and consumer loyalty programs to U.S. and global companies. Maritz Motivation Solutions provides best-in-class program design, technology, communications and rewards fulfillment that includes the full spectrum of tangible and experiential reward options. At Maritz Motivation Solutions, we’re dedicated to being the best in the business, fun to work with and our clients’ most valuable ally. For more information, visit www.maritzmotivation.com or call 1-877-4-Maritz (1-877-462-7489).

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The Maritz Institute is a network of thought leaders advancing the human sciences in business. Through a deeper understanding of people, Maritz solutions help companies achieve their strategic business goals by engaging stakeholders in ways most meaningful to them. Simply stated, our mission is to create better business and better lives. For more information, visit www.themaritzinstitute.com.