

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



5 Ways

YOUR CHURCH CAN DEAL WITH SHORT ATTENTION SPANS

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Have you heard that our attention spans are shorter than a goldfish's?

It's true. A recent [landmark study done](#) by Microsoft found that the average human attention span lasts 8 seconds. Trusty goldfish can pay attention for 9 seconds. The study goes on to show that our ability to concentrate is in a free fall ... dropping by 1/3 in just over 10 years. (I tried to read the entire 54-page report, but well, you know. They did provide a great executive summary to help people impacted directly by the focus of the study.)

You know this to be true in your church. We can see the evidence all around us. People are less able to concentrate for extended periods of time than they were just a few years ago. **Our digital lifestyles are depleting our ability to concentrate on a single task.** Attention is at a premium in a multi-screen world where watching a show on your laptop while checking Snapchat on your phone has become normal behavior.

Rather than bemoaning this fact, church leaders need to face this reality head on and structure our ministry for people with depleted attention spans. **For too long the church has ignored these realities.** We do so at great risk of losing our ability to connect with the broader culture. We have to adjust to the times. Here are a few ways that any church can deal with people's diminished ability to focus.

• **Show Don't Tell** // We live in a post-literate world. It's not that people can't read ... they just don't. The idea of a single communicator getting on stage and speaking for 45+ minutes without any props or visual aids is lunacy. We need to think long and hard about how we communicate visually with people. The slides that you use with your sermon are a critical piece of communicating the gospel. Watch some compelling TED talks and you will see that they are a collection of visual ideas as well as words. Move beyond black backgrounds and white text to images that drive the core ideas and concepts. Get theatrical and use props that reinforce the bottom line of your message. Move beyond sticky statements to compelling imagery that lodges into your audience's brain.

• **Change the Channel** // Move from one series to another in a way that changes up the focus. If you do an Old Testament character study in one series, move to the hard sayings of Jesus in the next series. If you use pop music as the skin for a summer series, shift to a graphical format that emphasizes ancient images next. Pick monochromatic graphics for your series before Easter and then explode with color to celebrate Resurrection Sunday. Over the years at our church, we've worked hard to change up what's coming next constantly to keep people interested. Don't just change the visual style of the series from one to the next ... think about the emotional tenor of your series, the breadth of biblical content and the use of elements such as special music. The more variety there is from one series to the next, the more you'll keep people interested.

• **Simplify** // People don't have the bandwidth to remember your 10 core values. They aren't able to remember your vision statement with

15 words in it (let alone remember your 50-word mission statement ... or what the difference between vision and mission are anyway). Narrow the focus to a few core ideas that are transportable from person to person. Whittle down the "culture-creating language" to as few ideas as possible to make it easier to comprehend and spread. Ask yourself if your junior high kids could understand and explain your strategy. If they couldn't, simplify it. Develop vivid, high-leverage word pictures that point toward where you want your church to go. Avoid long narratives at all costs. [Will Mancini discusses how church leaders can get breakthrough clarity](#) and it's worth your time to follow him for more insights on this front.

• **Provide Frameworks** // One of the reasons people have such short attention spans is that we are inundated with information at every turn. We have more access to information in a jeans pocket than the most studied person had overall just a generation ago. Giving people facts and figures isn't useful anymore. People aren't impressed with what a word means in Greek because they can look it up online themselves. In a world of too much information, people who provide curation and structure to that information are sought out. Don't teach on a disconnected idea from Scripture – connect the messages together with overarching themes that relate to daily life. Show people how the Bible reinforces values and approaches throughout the entirety of Scripture. [Tim Day's book God Enters Stage Left](#) does a superb job of presenting the meta-story of Scripture as a play with 7 acts ... a worthwhile model for providing a framework!

• **Think About Shareability** // Are you packaging your ideas into bite-sized, sharable chunks? Spreadable ideas are at the core of church leadership. For a long time we've based our models on a "come and see" mindset. We need to switch to a "go and share" attitude. Taking apart our 40-minute weekend message and creating a series of social media bites to pass along during the week helps people remember what we talked about. It also invites them into the process of proclaiming that message through commenting, "liking" and sharing. Working backward from how people pass along the core ideas of the message to their family and friends drives us to think differently about our process. Designing our upcoming youth event around what students are most likely to share with their friends rather than attempting to force them to post about it leads us to a better impact. Capturing and spreading great images and videos of the people working in a service project will help the next time you're looking for people to volunteer. Taking this a step further, [how can your church be a platform for people to share their content](#) rather than just a broadcast focus point for your messages?

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