5 Secrets of a Successful TED Talk

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Overview:

What makes a successful TED talk? In other words, most TED talks are good, but why are some great?

We set out to answer this question with one of our first crowd-sourced Citizen Science projects. Over the last year, we had 760 volunteers rate hundreds of hours of TED talks looking for patterns.

We were amazed at what we found.

Executive Summary:

There are specific nonverbal patterns that differentiate the most popular TED talks from the least popular TED talks. These have to do with hand gestures, amount of smiling and vocal variety. These are so distinct that we can use the patterns to predict which TED talks would be most popular simply by watching the TED talks on mute.

What's New?

A few authors have aspired to take on the puzzle of what makes a successful TED talk. Here's what's different:

- **More than One Opinion**: We crowd-sourced the data. Instead of one researcher coding and looking for patterns, we had hundreds of participants rating and analyzing the talks.
- **Beyond Words**: Although there are some amazing books about the verbal patterns, strategies and rhetoric in TED talks, very few focus on the body language patterns. And we quickly found out that the nonverbal is even more important than the verbal (see #1 below).
- **Previous Research**: We based our experiment on peer-reviewed academic research on nonverbal patterns. In this way, we know our results have a solid foundation in respected scientific trials (see citation list below).
- **Controls**: To get the most accurate results, we only used videos that had been posted on TED.com (so they had similar exposure), were posted in 2010 (so they had about the same amount of time to garner views) and were between 15 and 20 minutes long (so extra short or long talks didn't skew the participants' ratings). We also worked with the
amazing Data Scientist, Brandon Vaughn, to make sure our results were solid (see his bio below).

Why TED?

TED is a non-profit that posts videos of the best speakers in the world presenting on a variety of fascinating topics. This gave us the perfect database of videos of charismatic and intelligent people. Most importantly, the number of views on each video gave us a clear idea of popularity. For example, here are two amazing talks on leadership: one by Fields Wicker-Miurin called "Learning from Leadership's Missing Manual" and one by Simon Sinek called "How Great Leaders Inspire Action". Note the difference in views:
Puzzle:

While Wicker-Muirin gets a respectable 609,366 views, Sinek's talk gets a mind-boggling 20,929,959 views! And:

- Both talks were published the same month (September 2009) which means they had the same amount of time to garner views.
- They are both on similar topics.
- These are both respected, but NOT famous speakers.

Something about Sinek's talk caught fire, captured people and went viral. We see this pattern over and over again on TED. Some talks hit big and some don't. But, why?

The Bigger Picture:

While we examined TED talks in this experiment, the implications are wide reaching. We are talking about how to increase your charisma, presence and the personal power from a stage, in board rooms and when interacting with people.

We believe these 5 patterns show us how to be an influencer.

The 5 Patterns of Popular TED Talks:

These results surprised us. The most pleasant surprise was that these tips are extremely easy to implement for everyone in daily life. Here's what we found and how you can use the tips:

#1 It's Not What You Say, It's How You Say It

TED talkers spend so much time and energy on what to say--the words, the script, the bullets. But is how they say it more important? We found that there was no difference in ratings between people who watched talks on mute and people who watched talks with sound. Yes, you read that correctly:

People liked the speakers just as much with sound as on mute.

This means we rate someone’s charisma, credibility and intelligence based on nonverbal signals. This is surprising--we want people to focus on our words, but this experiment is no different from
previous research. Studies have found that 60 to 93% of our communication is nonverbal. Over and over again we find that how we say something is more important than what we say. The question then becomes, how do we say something well? Read on to find out which nonverbal signals were most important...

- Bottom Line: Focus on your nonverbal just as much as your verbal.

#2 Jazz Hands Rock

Once we realized the importance of the TED speaker's body language, we decided to look for specific nonverbal patterns that the top TED talks had different from the bottom TED talks. One thing became quickly clear:

**The more hand gestures, the more successful the talk.** There was a direct correlation between the number of views on a TED talk and the number of hand gestures.

The bottom TED talks had an average of 124,000 views and used an average of 272 hand gestures during the 18 minute talk. The top TED talks had an average of 7,360,000 views and used an average of 465 hand gestures—that's almost double! By the way, Temple Grandin, Simon Sinek and Jane McGonigal topped the hand gesture charts with over 600 hand gestures in just 18 minutes.

Why do we think this is? Our hands are a nonverbal way to show and build trust---studies have found that when we see someone's hands, we have an easier time trusting them. Also, when someone uses their hands to explain a concept, we have an easier time understanding them. Speakers who use hand gestures are speaking to their audience on 2 levels---verbally and nonverbally.

- Bottom Line: To be a good speaker, let your hands do the talking.

#3 Scripts Kill Your Charisma

Nonverbal communication isn't just about body language, its also about vocal cues. We had our evaluators rate the TED speakers on vocal variety, or the amount of fluctuation in their voice tone, volume and pitch. Again, the relationship was clear. The more vocal variety a speaker had, the more views they had. Specifically, vocal variety increased the speakers' charisma and credibility ratings. In other words, speakers who told stories, ad libbed and even yelled at the audience like Jamie Oliver in his TED talk, captivated the audience’s imagination and attention.

Researchers who have studied teacher ratings have also found that vocal variety is important for improving student evaluations (See Rocca, K.A.). When you are practicing giving your elevator
pitch or your next presentation, try saying your words at least 5 different ways. Practice putting emphasis on different words, slowing and speeding up your pace and varying your volume on important points.

- Bottom Line: Memorized lines and scripts kill your memorability.

**#4 Smiling Makes You Look Smarter**

This finding is the only pattern that goes against the current research. Studies on smiling have found that leaders typically smile less. Nonverbal scientists believe that smiling is actually a low power behavior. However, in our research we found that the longer a TED speaker smiled, the higher their perceived intelligence ratings were. Those who smiled at least 14 seconds were rated as higher in intelligence than those who smiled for less. Doesn't this seem counter-intuitive? When we think of an intelligent person, we usually think of someone very serious. But even when TED Talkers were speaking about a serious topic, like Sheryl Sandberg’s talk on women leaders, smiling still helped her intelligence ratings.

- Bottom Line: No matter how serious your topic, find something to smile about.

**#5 You Have 7 Seconds**

We can’t emphasize enough the power of the first 7 seconds of any interaction you have. According to our ratings, people had already made their first impression and decision about the entire talk in the first 7 seconds of the video. Researcher, Nalini Ambady calls this ‘thin-slicing.’ She says that for efficiency purposes, the brain makes very quick judgments of people within the first few seconds of meeting them. Typically, this happens before any words are exchanged. So yes, think about your opening line, but also think about how you take the stage, how you acknowledge the audience and how you deliver your first line.

- Bottom Line: Make a grand entrance.

I hope this research has shed some light on what makes someone charismatic and how you can improve your own stage presence. Whether you are going to deliver the next top TED Talk or you just want to make an impact in your daily life, take these 5 easy cues and make them your own.
More About the Experiment:

Participants were asked to rate TED talks on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being low, 5 being high). **They were asked to rate the speaker's charisma, credibility and intelligence.** We did this in 3 parts:

**Part I: First Impressions**

Previous research by Nalini Ambady suggested that we decide if we like someone in less than 7 seconds. We wanted to know if there was a difference for people who watched an entire 18 minute talk versus people who watched just the first 7 seconds. See an example of the videos on our website ScienceofPeople.com.

**Part II: Verbal or Nonverbal**

Once we saw these surprising results' role in (see #1 above) we wondered if the verbal content or nonverbal presentation of the content had anything to do with the success of the TED talk. This time we had one group watch and rate the first 7 seconds of a TED talk and a second group watch and rate the first 7 seconds of a TED talk on MUTE! See an example of the videos on our website ScienceofPeople.com.

Here's what fascinated us at this point: All of the ratings matched the number of views. In other words, the talks that got the most views were also the talks that got highest ratings in credibility, charisma and intelligence **whether or not people only watched 7 seconds or on mute.** As we explain in our 5 patterns:

Our research suggests that we decide if we like the TED talk in the first 7 seconds--and it has very little, if nothing to do with the words.

**Part III: Patterns**

Finally, we started to look for nonverbal patterns between the videos that ranked high in charisma, credibility and intelligence. We felt since the results of Part I and II pointed us in the direction of nonverbal, that's where we would focus. Additionally, most of the previous research has been done on the verbal side of TED talks, but very little on the nonverbal side.

**More Fun Patterns:**

We also found that some nonverbal gestures were more important than others:
• **Credibility:** Speakers who rated high in credibility had higher vocal variety and longer smiling.

• **Charisma:** The most important thing for charisma was hand gestures and vocal variety.

• **Intelligence:** Smiling was the most important factor for intelligence ratings (More than 14 seconds of smiling seemed to be the tipping point for higher ratings in intelligence).

**Small, But Interesting:**

We only examined 50 TED talks for these patterns, but it proved interesting nonetheless:

• People in casual clothing typically rated lower than people in business or business casual.

• Women who wore business clothing got higher ratings compared to men in business clothing (not casual or business casual).

• Speakers in darker colors got higher ratings than those in lighter colors.

**More Fun Numbers:**

• Charisma was the name of the game. The most popular TED Talks rated 43% higher in charisma compared to less popular TED Talks.

• The most popular TED Talkers had 30.5% higher vocal variety than less popular TED talkers.

• For the charisma ratings, high TED talkers used at least 240 hand gestures. In general, TED talkers who used less than 240 hand gestures scored lower on charisma.

**Conclusion:**

There is a lot more research that could be done in this area. We could look at differences between men and women, across races and locations. It would be wonderful to compare these results to different years and see if that changes results. However, this preliminary research is helpful, inspiring and fascinating. What we perceive to be important about public speaking, charisma and presence and what is actually important might differ more than we think.

**Researchers:**

Vanessa Van Edwards is a behavioral investigator and published author. She figures out the science of what makes people tick at her human behavior research lab, the Science of People. As a geeky, modern-day Dale Carnegie, her innovative work has been featured on NPR, Business Week and CNN.
Brandon Vaughn is our Chief Data Scientist at the Science of People. While moonlighting with us, he spends his days working with data at Apple and running his podcast, First Things. He is a whiz with numbers and loves finding patterns in big data.

Thank You!

Thank you to all of the amazing Science of People friends who voted, watched and rated these videos. We could not have done this amazing experiment without you.

Thank you to TED for bringing together the best speakers in the world and sharing the knowledge with all of us.

Thank you to all of the TED speakers for speaking out, sharing your voice and letting us learn from you.

Citations:

- Deborah J. Merritt, Bias, the brain, and student evaluations of teaching, St. John's Law Rev. 82, 235-287 (2008)
