

5 Secrets of a Successful TED Talk

What makes a [successful TED Talk](#)?

Here at the Science of People we endeavored to find out. Why do some TED Talks rack up millions of views, change lives and are talked about everywhere?

All TED Talks are good. 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. Before I get into the 5 patterns, I want to give you some juicy background:

Why TED?

[TED](#) is a non-profit that posts videos of the people with the best ideas 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:



Share this idea      **609,366** Total views  Share this talk and track your intelligence!



Share this idea      **20,929,959** Total views  Share this talk and track your intelligence!

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. 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, it's 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.

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:

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](#): 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.

Check Your Understanding Questions

1. What's more important, your speech's words or your nonverbal body language? What's the proof?
2. Why do scripts kill charisma?
3. How long do you have to make your first impression?
4. How many seconds of smiling is needed to increase intelligence ratings?
5. What kind of clothing is best for a TED Talk?