

**Your Mind on Media Newsletter:  
“How to Promote Focus in a Multitasking World”  
Joanne Cantor, Ph.D., November 30, 2011**

Knowing what I've learned about how inept our brains are at multitasking, I've become increasingly aware that many of the people I deal with in stores and offices apparently don't understand their limitations. On a recent trip to the Apple Store, I couldn't get the clerk to look me in the eye as he asked how he could help. He continued to enter something on his iPhone. When I told him I'd wait until he was finished, he calmly professed that he could multitask, while I insisted that he could not.

This experience led me to write a post for *Psychology Today* in which I retold this incident. I then described some classic research from the 1950's which demonstrated that when we're monitoring one stream of verbal information, we absorb and remember virtually nothing of a second, simultaneous information stream. In that blog post, I also gave four suggestions for encouraging the people we encounter to single-task, at least in their dealings with us.

Read the full post:

[“Don't Speak 'Til You See the Whites of Their Eyes”](#)  
(see link to my *Psychology Today* Blog on my home page)

So how can we promote single-tasking while interacting in the workplace? Not an easy assignment, given that most of us are tightly tethered to our digital devices. One of the most challenging venues is meetings, where everyone is tempted to sneak a peek at their messages. Here are a few suggestions for counteracting digital distractions in meetings:

Make meetings as rare, as short, and as efficient as possible, and invite only those people who need to be there. Then, if someone becomes absorbed in their iPhone, try one or more of the following suggestions:

1. Say, "is it time for an email break?"
2. Call the person's name (which should catch their attention) and ask them if they have any objections to the proposal you've just made.
3. Pass them a note on top of their device, saying, "come back to the meeting--we need you!"
4. Show them the [Stroop Test](#)\* to demonstrate how difficult it is to do switch back and forth cognitively.
5. Give them my [Multitasking Exercise](#)\* to make them understand how much faster things will go if everyone's "there" mentally as well as physically.

-- We're swimming against a strong tide here. This may not be easy at first, but if we can get the people we work with to understand the benefits of focus, we'll accomplish a lot more and do it much better!

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## **Recent Sightings:**

Presentations:

National Sales Meeting, Webcrafters, Inc.  
University of Wisconsin Police Leadership Team  
Wisconsin Health Information Management Association  
Meeting Planners International  
Gateway Technical College

Media Interviews:

"The Sound of Ideas," Cleveland (Ohio) Public Radio  
"All About Living," WTDY Radio, Madison  
Canada's *National Post*  
*Wausau Daily Herald*  
*Curb Magazine*

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## **Making These Ideas Work for You**

I was at a meeting a few weeks ago, where I ran into someone who had been to one of my presentations in June. This woman, who runs a nonprofit community group and spends hours and hours a week in meetings and hearings, told me this:

"Since I heard your presentation, I think about you whenever I have the urge to check my Blackberry during a meeting. I know I can't be present for two things at once, so I ask myself whether what's going on is something I can afford to miss."

The people in your business, association, or school can also benefit from the interactive activities in my keynotes and workshops. Email or call me (608-221-0593) to learn about how we can help them succeed and thrive in the Internet age. Or go to the [Speaking](#) section of my website to explore the various programs I can offer on increasing productivity, maximizing creativity, and reducing stress.

\* These exercises can be found on my Resources page.