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The Science of Silence: Intentional Silence as a Moderation Technique

Summary: Keeping quiet is a powerful moderation technique for user interviews, usability testing, and workshop facilitation. Well-timed, deliberate periods of silence elicit thoughtful, accurate responses and insights, and build trust with participants.

By [Kate Kaplan](#) on May 5, 2019

Topics: [User Testing](#), [Research Methods](#)

The Disgust for Hush: A Universal Pattern

Silence.

Dead air.

Crickets.

Even the simple act of reading these words might cause a prickly, uneasy feeling.

The fact is, lack of back-and-forth chatter makes us uncomfortable. Research by Koudenburg, Postmes, and Gordijn has shown that, in the United States, it takes only four seconds before an extended period of silence becomes uncomfortable during conversation. Four seconds! Why the disgust for hush? Long story short, humans equate silence with rejection. We have an evolution-driven desire for conversation because it makes us feel connected and accepted.

So why would we want to intentionally create periods of “awkward” silence with participants in workshops or research activities?

The power of intentional silence is well-known and utilized among many professional groups: Sales people pause after their pitches for dramatic effect. Counselors practice waiting five seconds after a patient stops speaking before responding. Nurses and physicians employ intentional silence in order to demonstrate compassion and respect. And negotiators adhere to the saying: “He who speaks first, loses.”

As UX professionals, we, too, can harness the power of intentional silence. If we can just become comfortable with that brief period of unsettling silence during our user interview sessions, usability tests, and workshops, we’ll get more out of our participants. Intentional silence, used strategically, can create space, invite response, and signal interest. And it is in periods of silence where participants often offer crucial and most-poignant information.

How to Be Intentionally Silent: Count to Seven

I use a personal guideline when practicing intentional silence: When I find myself in the depths of a poignant pause, I count to seven before speaking. It is an attempt to coax the participant into filling the silence first. Let the first four seconds tick away — remember, this is where the awkwardness will spike — and then allow a few more seconds to pass. The additional three seconds provide space for the participant to collect his or her thoughts and continue speaking after the awkwardness has peaked. The longer you keep quiet, the more the other person will want to fill the void.

When to Be Intentionally Silent: User Interviews, Usability Testing, and Workshop Facilitation

Here are some situations relevant to UX professionals where intentional silence is particularly powerful, and some examples of appropriate and inappropriate

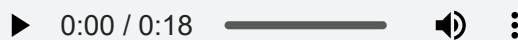
usage.

User Interviews

When interviewing users, apply intentional silence to create space for participants to think and respond in a thoughtful, unhurried manner. Show you are interested in what they have to say by allowing them time to articulate their thoughts. Don't finish interviewee's sentences in an attempt to read their minds in order to fill silence. Participants are likely to simply agree with you and discontinue their thought.

Poor Example: Interjecting During Pauses Shuts Participants Down

In this audio clip of a user interview, the interviewer jumps in to finish the interviewee's thought when there is a brief pause in conversation. Effectively, the participant discontinues his train of thought and potentially valuable insight is lost.



Transcript:

Interviewer: *"Tell me a little about your design process."*

Participant: *"Ok, so, there's a process we have here that we're trying to use to timebox our design process. It's like a way to..."*

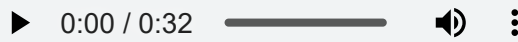
Interviewer: *"...to scale Agile?"*

Participant: *"Oh, yeah, SAFE. You know about it then."*

Good Example: Intentional Silence Allows Participants to Process Their Thoughts

In the next clip, rather than fill the silence when the participant struggles for a few seconds to find the right words, the interviewer uses intentional silence to allow

the participant time to gather his thoughts. In this example, the use of intentional silence results in a valuable insight regarding the difficulty of including UX in the company's Agile design process.



Transcript:

Interviewer: *"Tell me a little about your design process."*

Participant: *"So, there's a process we have here that we're trying to use to timebox our design process. Like...it's like a way to..."*

[Interviewer uses intentional silence]


Participant: *"...well, it's a way to make sure our designers are working with different roles. But there's really no clear way to insert UX into the process. I mean, it's been a challenge for our team."*

By the way, how long did that moment of intentional silence feel to you as you were listening to this clip? Did you start to feel uncomfortable? The silence was only five seconds (though it might have seemed longer due to our innate discomfort with that length of pause in conversation)!

Poor Example: Interrupting Silence Cuts Off Participants' Thoughts

Even when interviewees appear to have finished what they had planned to say, it's a good practice to wait a few seconds. Often, they will add on interesting information, as their first utterance is often simply thinking initial thoughts out loud.

In the following clip, the interviewer rushes to fill the silence after the participant appears to have made a complete statement, moving on to a different topic.



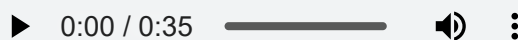
Transcript:

Participant: *"We're really good at going fast. Like, the teams are just clipping along and it really makes it so we hit our milestones..."*

Interviewer: *"Ok, then. Let's talk about how your team uses tools."*

Good Example: Intentional Silence Helps Participants Dig Deeper

Compare the above clip with the following example: The interviewer uses intentional silence to encourage the participant to elaborate, and the participant continues his thought to reveal poignant information that actually conflicts with his first statement.



Transcript:

Participant: *"We are really good at going fast. Like, the teams are just clipping along and it really makes it so we hit our milestones."*

[Interviewer uses intentional silence]

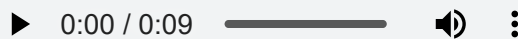
Participant: *"...I mean, well, we maybe miss one milestone per month, and that's always because marketing slows down the process, so it doesn't really count. It's like it always feels like they're operating on a different set of information than the rest of us. I don't know if they need to be in the standups or what, but ... it's bad."*

Qualitative Usability Testing

When [conversing with participants during qualitative usability testing](#), employ intentional silence to allow participants time to read, make judgements and generally reflect on their experience. Filling in periods of silence by barraging the user with questions or making inappropriate commentary about the design is often a sign of a nervous facilitator.

Poor Example: Filling Silence with Useless Commentary Distracts Users from the Task at Hand

Falling into general back-and-forth chatter with the usability-test participants invites side conversation and bias. In the audio clip below, the moderator cannot resist filling in the break in user speech with biased commentary. An interjection such as this one would influence the user's behavior and distract him from the task he is trying to complete.



Transcript:

Participant: *"This is crazy. I have no idea how to get to my account."*

Moderator: *"Yeah, that's pretty bad."*

Good Example: Intentional Silence Encourages Natural Progression in Task Flow

Instead, resist the urge to eat up silence with comments or a barrage of questions. Don't answer rhetorical questions or questions where the participant is simply thinking out loud, and don't interrupt the thought process. Allow participants the time and space they need to complete the task at hand as they would normally.



Transcript:

Participant: *"This is crazy. I have no idea how to get to my account."*

[Moderator uses intentional silence]

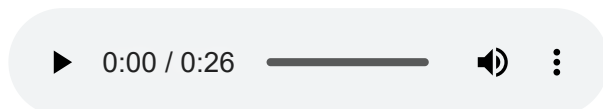
Participant: *"I just want to see when my headphones will get here."*

[Moderator uses intentional silence]

Participant: *"I'm just going to click on the cart and see if there's a way to get to my past orders."*

Poor Example: Too Much Intentional Silence Can Backfire

Beware of letting intentional silence linger for too long. Users might conclude that they are being unhelpful or that you are disinterested in the session. In the following clip, the moderator's prolonged silence frustrates the user, who is lost in the task.



Transcript:

Participant: *"This is crazy. I have no idea how to get to my account."*

[Moderator uses intentional silence]

Participant: *"Uh...If I click here, will it take me to my profile?"*

[Moderator uses intentional silence]

Participant: *"I'm lost. I have no idea what to do."*

[Moderator uses intentional silence]

Staying completely silent throughout a test session is often a sign of a nervous facilitator. When the participant grows agitated, such as in the above clip, intercede with rhetorical questions (e.g., "What do you think?") or neutral responses, such as "What are you looking for?"

Workshop Facilitation

Finally, intentional silence can be a powerful facilitation technique in group meetings such as workshops. Don't be afraid of silence in a group setting! Participants are more likely to share if there is space in the room for commentary. Remember, your role as a facilitator is not to share your knowledge with the group; it is to collect knowledge from others and align the many different perspectives in the room. Participants are more likely to speak up if there is a pause in the room.

Good Examples: Use Intentional Silence to Invite Contributions of Varied Perspectives

Precede your periods of silence with a question that invites response. Ask an open-ended question, then wait. Use the count-to-seven rule to ensure anyone with an idea has had ample time to contribute before moving on. Here are some examples:

- "I'm going to pause here so we can hear some additional perspectives."
[Count to seven.]
- "What are some reactions to that?" [Count to seven.]
- "Anyone want to play devil's advocate on that?" [Count to seven.]
- "Has anyone experienced something similar?" [Count to seven.]

Poor Usage: Intentional Silence After a Participant Contribution Can Feel Exclusionary

While using intentional silence to encourage contributions from workshop participants is a useful technique, be careful not to give the impression of a cold shoulder with misplaced intentional silence. Do not follow participant contributions with intentional silence if they have completed their thought. This signals rejection or disagreement to the contributor. Instead, acknowledge the comment and ask for reactions or additional thoughts.

What to Do Instead of Talking

You may be wondering, “What do I do during these silence periods instead of speaking?” Use your body language to allow time for people to articulate their thoughts. Maintain eye contact and focus. Do not say anything or even nod your head. Wait patiently and relaxed, giving the person time to speak. If you can’t resist filling the silence, use soft encouragers to invite the participant to elaborate, such as, “Tell me more about that,” or, “What did you think about that?” Another trick: If you must do something, take a sip of water, continuing your count as you do.

Cultural Influence on Comfort Level with Silence

It is interesting to note that research suggests a higher degree of discomfort with prolonged silences in Anglophone cultures, such as the United States. For example, the same study by Koudenburg, Postmes, and Gordijn mentioned in the beginning of this article found that, while English speakers became uncomfortable with silence after just 4 seconds, Japanese speakers were comfortable with a silence lasting twice that long (8.2 seconds). Additionally, research by Petkova has found that Finnish speakers are also more comfortable than Americans with extended periods of silence in conversation due to the high value attributed to privacy in that culture. However, regardless of the exact number of seconds that leads to discomfort in conversation, one fact remains true: Being heard is one of the deepest human needs, across all cultures. And being heard requires *silence*.

References

Koudenburg, N., Postmes, T. & Gordijn, E. H. (2010). [Disrupting the flow: How brief silences in group conversations affect social needs](#). Journal of Experimental Psychology.

Petkova, Diana P. (2015). [Beyond Silence. A cross-cultural comparison between](#)

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