POINT 48 LOUD NOISES STARTLE AND GET ATTENTION

If you want to get someone's attention with the Sound, Table 48.1 describes some choices and when to use each one (adapted from Deatherage, 1972).

Table 48.1 How to get attention with sounds

Audio alarm	Intensity	Attention-getting ability
Foghorn	Very high	Good, but not if there is a lot of other low frequency noise
Regular horn	High	Good
Whistle	High	Good, but only if intermittent
Siren	High	Good if pitch Rises and falls
Bell	Medium	Good when there is other low frequency noise
Buzzer	Low to medium	Good
Chimes or gong	Low to medium	Fair

PEOPLE HABITUATE TO STIMULI

Have you visited with someone who had a clock that Chimes every hour? You're lying in bed about to doze off, and there goes that darn clock again. " how can anyone get any sleep in this house?" You wonder, yet everyone who lives in this house sleeps just fine. They have habituated to the sound of the clock chimes. Because they hear it every hour, they don't pay attention to it anymore. Your unconscious mind is constantly surveying your environment making sure there is nothing in it that is dangerous. That's why anything new or novel in the environment will get your attention. But if the same signal occurs again and again, eventually your unconscious mind decides it is not new anymore, and therefore starts to ignore it.

TAKEAWAYS

If you're designing an application, you may have control over the sounds that occur when people take certain actions, for example, making a mistake, reaching a goal, or donating money. Pick a sound that is appropriate to the amount of attention you need. Save the high attention sounds for when it's really important, for example, if people are about to format their hard drives, or take an action that can't be undone.

If you use sounds to get attention, then consider changing them so that people will not have bet you ate and the sounds will continue to be attention-getting.

"Chapter 5 / Section 48." 100 Things Every Designer Needs to Know about People, by Susan Weinschenk, New Riders, 2011, pp. 110–111.