



Pointers

Presentation

A Publication of Dag Knudsen, Inc.

After years of enduring boring, poorly organized and poorly delivered presentations, audiences are revolting. They are demanding change, to wit from recent headlines and actions:

"The Pentagon Declares War on Electronic Slide Shows That Make Briefings a Pain."

1. Wall Street Journal headline (4/26/00)

City of Tallahassee passed a resolution:

"No PowerPoint presentations."

2. Personal communication from former city employee.

"Armed with PowerPoint, speakers make pests of themselves."

3. USA Today headline (5/12/99)

Electronic presentations are rated as ineffective, a waste of meeting time, and a waste of preparation time.⁽¹⁾

"...the Microsoft program which helps users create computer-based graphic and sound effects, has become one of the most dreaded facts of life."

4. ZDnet:news (4/26/00)

Army Secretary Louis Caldera suggests that Congressional support for new weapons programs may not be as strong as expected because PowerPoint presentations are alienating lawmakers.⁽⁴⁾

When Mr. Feaver of Duke University learned that the National Defense University teaches Latin American military officers how to use PowerPoint software, he observed: "If we really wanted to accomplish something we shouldn't be teaching our allies how to use PowerPoint. We should give it to the Iraqi's. We would never have to worry about them again."⁽⁴⁾

There are four reasons for this backlash.

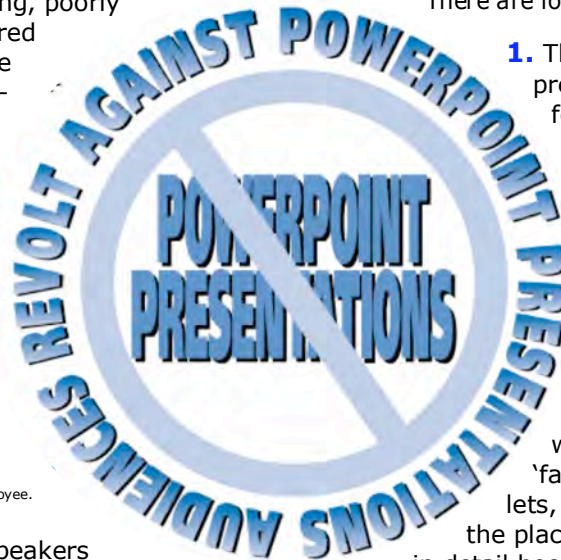
1. The "electronic" in electronic presentation has become the focus instead of the presenter. We used to talk about 'visual aids.' The visuals were an aid to the presenter and helped explain the message. The focus now has turned away from the presenter onto the projected image. The presenter might as well be automated, also. A wow factor is created by 'fancy' transitions, flying bullets, and images dancing all over the place. The audience is drowning in detail because increased capability leads to higher image complexity. The speaker's importance is completely overshadowed by the images.

2. The electronic presentation has replaced the written document. A seminar participant said: "I want to be able to e-mail my presentation to my client, or leave it behind after my presentation. For them to understand my message I need all the text on each visual." But a presentation is invariably an executive summary of a more detailed message. To create two products—presentation and documentation—in one form invariably leads to undesirable compromises. The quality of the presentation suffers greatly.

3. Feature-laden software misleads presentation designers into thinking that if the capability is there it must be good to use. Software designers seem not to understand the needs of the users. They create tools better meant for entertainers.

4. Everyone seems to think that use of PowerPoint* automatically leads to good presentations. Said one presenter: "Usually we put together 40 PowerPoint slides and then decide what to say in between."

5. Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE www.fripp.com/art.whitepaper.html



But just as PageMaker** software doesn't automatically lead to a beautiful brochure; a set of tools doesn't create a stunning corner cabinet; a cookbook doesn't create a sumptuous meal, so PowerPoint doesn't create effective presentations. Production of a fine product takes knowledge and experience and in the case of presentations, an understanding of communication, design and delivery.

Electronics have aggravated classical presentation design problems. These problems are:

- a) Lack of audience focused content.
- b) Poor and confusing organization of the material presented.
- c) Drowning the audience in seemingly meaningless detail.
- d) Poor design and use of the visual aids.

These problems lead to audience apathy and confusion.

Did we have these problems with overheads, slides, flip charts and boards? Yes! But electronics have exacerbated the problems. The capabilities now available have led to visual noise which only increases the complexity of presentations. Noise such as:

- a) Flashy, glitzy and gimmicky features added at random.
- b) Fast moving components, images and slides used in the misguided belief that the 'MTV' approach represents good modern communication principles.
- c) Poor quality visuals where dependence is on cue-note type visuals dressed up with fancy clipart and disturbing backgrounds which are often unrelated to the message on the visual.

SOLUTION:

1. Accept that PowerPoint or any other electronic presentation tool does not create effective presentations, skilled people do.
2. Accept that training and education in effective communication is a must in today's highly competitive world. Most presenters depend in great part on the effectiveness of their presentations and proposals to win business. Yet this skill, which is fundamental to their corporate success, is not based on any formal training. Presenters have come to depend on PowerPoint with the sadly mistaken belief that, even without training, they will now have a good presentation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even experienced professionals who attend my seminars consistently rate the training they receive as having 80-100% new material, all of which they say is immediately applicable to the real world. Which says there is lots to learn for the design and delivery of effective Presentations.

* PowerPoint is a registered trademark of the Microsoft Corporation.

** PageMaker is a registered trademark of Adobe Systems, Inc.

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4 Suggestions for Greatly Improved PowerPoint* Presentations

"PowerPoint" presentations are subject to revolt in the marketplace. "Boring," "Poorly organized," "Poorly delivered," are some of the reasons why many individuals and organizations are banning the use of PowerPoint presentations.

This backlash of an otherwise feature-filled and capable presentation software can be tied to four causes:

- 1: Incorrect content focus
- 2: Ineffective graphics
- 3: Misuse of animation features
- 4: Poor delivery and use of the visuals

These four causes are interrelated. Poor content focus leads to ineffective graphics, which leads to poor use of animation features, which leads to a method of delivery that turns off audiences.

PowerPoint is designed around an outlining technique which focuses on topics to be discussed: Major topics expanded with sub and sub sub topics. The resultant bulleted outline is displayed on the screen for the audience to see. The presenter reads the bullets to the audience and may expand on each topic. The bullets serve as cue-notes to the presenter. The less experience the speaker has in deliver-

ing a presentation, the more detailed the bulleted text becomes. In the end, the visuals represent the complete talk. The visuals now serve the function of a "teleprompter," except the audience can also see the text. This gets pretty boring to an audience.

In an attempt to give the boring cue-notes more pizzazz and in the misguided belief that this helps hold the audience' attention, it has become the favorite routine to add animated features to the visuals. Although animated features do nothing to enhance the message of the topics, the audience is subjected to progressive disclosure of the bulleted cue-notes in the form of drive-in, flying, camera, flash once, wipe out, dissolve etc. ad nauseam of the same boring bullets. In addition, transitions between visuals are added with cover down, left, right, up, dissolve, split vertical, in, out and up of still the same boring bulleted slides. And while all these animations were a "Wow!" a few years ago, audiences are getting tired of them. They are cheap entertainment with no substance.

So, how can the capabilities of PowerPoint be used to create effective visual aids? Let the visuals graphically support the spoken message! Technical and interview presentations can be done—and done well—in PowerPoint or any other presentation software or media when the following four suggestions are implemented.

1. Correct content focus: Present your material in the context that is of interest to the audience. This requires a change in outlining approach from topics to benefits of interest to the audience. Identify the reasons WHY your audience will be interested in your topic, then organize your material accordingly. For instance, an interview presentation should be organized around benefits the client gains from hiring you. Stop talking about your qualifications. Instead, show clients how they will benefit from your qualifications. Stop talking about your proposal. Instead, emphasize how they will benefit from the features listed in your proposal. Stop giving them just a fee proposal. Instead, persuade them to the value they'll receive from accepting your fee.

2. Effective graphics: Each visual should contain a graphic that illustrates the topic discussed and helps prove the point the presenter wants to make. Click-art doesn't do it. Most illustrations in click-art are rebuses where the picture stands for a word. For example, using a picture of a handshake doesn't help the audience any more than using the word "handshake." An effective graphic helps the presenter get the message across without the need for cue-notes. It helps the audience clearly understand what the message is and why it is important to them.

3. Animated features: If animation features are used, they should be used only where their use clearly aids the audience's comprehension of the message. For instance, progressive disclosure can consist of a set of curves on a graph appearing one after the other. The presenter explains each additional curve and its importance. The progressive disclosure supports and explains, visually, what the presenter is talking about. Or, progressive disclosure can start with a simple process diagram to which recycle flows and later instrumentation symbols are added.

4. Good delivery and use of the visuals: Above all remember that the visual is not the message by itself but a support, an aid to the presenter. As supporting material, the visual should be addressed and explained in detail. Don't assume the audience will understand the graphic without your explanations. They don't! After having explained the graphic, the presenter should face the audience, establish eye contact, and amplify on what was just shown and explained on the visual.

Research demonstrates a dramatic improvement in audience's comprehension and interest when these four steps are followed. My seminar participants experience first-hand the value of this approach. They come in as skeptics and leave totally convinced.

Leave out the gimmicks of pointless animation. Instead use the PowerPoint capabilities to support your message. Follow these four steps and your PowerPoint presentations will gain and maintain the audience's interest.

* PowerPoint is a registered trademark of the Microsoft Corporation. However, the marketplace has adopted the word as a generic description of any electronic presentation. The comments herein pertain to any electronic presentation.

From Presentation Pointers Vol. 14, No. 2, 2001



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Computer-Based Presentations are vulnerable to Major Pitfalls* that can Greatly Diminish Their Effectiveness

Presentation Pointers Vol. 10, No. 2 1997

Because:

1. Rooms have to be darkened for the audience to be able to read what is displayed.
2. Legibility can suffer when utmost discipline in letter size and color contrast is not adhered to.

"Can someone please turn down the lights?" We've all experienced the same thing. The room darkens and we sit back for the show. What's the problem with this type of setting? When audiences sit in a darkened room in order to see what is on the screen, they lose eye contact with the presenter. This is not desirable. Research shows that eye contact plays a dominant role in credibility building. Eye contact enhances credibility. In turn, credibility enhances acceptance of the message.



Fig. 1: Eye contact plays a dominant role in credibility building

Research shows (Fig. 2) that when two presenters gave the same message the audience had greater acceptance of the message from the person who enjoyed higher credibility. So, keep the room lights on to enhance your credibility.

"But then the audience cannot see and read my visuals," you will say. This problem is easily solved:

Design the visuals so that an audience can easily read them while the lights are on in the room!

The advice is simple. But it takes great discipline and some knowledge to design computer-based presentations because it is tempting to use colors which are difficult to read in a fully lit room, and use letter sizes which are too small.

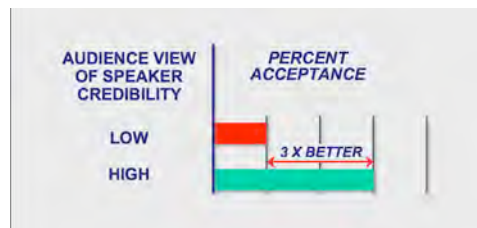


Fig. 2: Research shows that credibility is a significant factor in acceptance of the speaker and the message

Legibility is achieved when the contrast between the letters and the background is at its highest and when the letters have legible size and shape. White and yellow lettering on a black or very dark blue background provides excellent contrast and viewer comfort. Black and dark blue lettering and lines on a white, or slightly off white, background also represents high contrast. Any other background and letter color only makes the contrast worse. Therefore, use any of the standard backgrounds provided with your software with the greatest of care. These were designed to be used in darkened rooms (theater settings). Also, use red, green, purple or any of the other colors available sparingly because contrast is dramatically reduced. Legibility of text was established by research performed by Dr. Snellen. He defined 20/20 vision as the ability to clearly read a bold 3/8" tall letter at a distance of 20 feet. Further research has established that to overcome the lack of optimum contrast, and varying boldness of the letters, plus the vanity of people (they don't always admit to weakened eyesight and therefore don't wear corrective lenses), letters appearing on the screen should

be at least 0.8" tall for small group audiences seated 25 feet or less from the screen. Proportionately larger for larger distances.

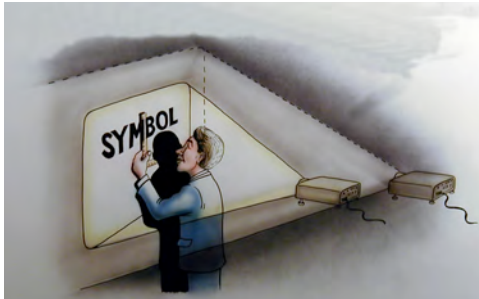


Fig. 3: Adjust projector location to assure readable letters while making the projected image as small as practicle

The following standards have served me well when I have designed presentations using computer software:

Background: Off-white.

Letter sizes: Thesis headlines: 36 point Arial or Helvetica Bold for upper and lower case letters, 30 point for all caps. Call-outs and text: 24 point Arial or Helvetica Bold, all capital letters. Going to lower case letters diminish legibility significantly unless you increase letter height accordingly. Use 28 point for upper and lower case letters. (Arial and Helvetica is mentioned only as a reference, there obviously are other fonts available).

Letter and line colors: White or yellow for dark backgrounds, black or blue for white background.

The computer is increasingly used for presentations these days. It can be a fine tool. But it must be used wisely and with knowledge of its limitations.

Now go and design a dynamite presentation!

Computer Based Presentations are Vulnerable to Major Pitfalls that Can Greatly Diminish the Effectiveness of Your Interview Presentations-PART II

From Presentation Pointers Vol. 10, No. 3, 1997

You have spent an inordinate amount of effort at your computer creating the "perfect" interview (or shortlist) presentation—the one that you hope will win you the job.

Yet, if you could read the minds of your audience, you might be surprised to learn how your computer based presentation often irritates, confuses, reduces understanding and leads your audience to stop listening to you.

Researchers have conducted thousands of experiments and found that our minds have limitations such as limited capacity to absorb and comprehend large number of facts. Yet, these limitations are often violated with the features found in presentation soft ware, for instance:

1. Automatically creating "bullet charts," the poorest form of presentation visuals for interview type of presentations.
2. Providing clip-art which is mostly useless for effective interview presentations.
3. Enabling too much information per visual which leads audiences to stop paying attention.
4. Creating vertical text which is difficult and at times impossible for the audience to read and therefore lead them to tune out.

Let's discuss each in order:

1. The classical bullet chart (Fig. 1) represents the least effective presentation visual. It is nothing more than the speaker's cue notes. The speaker looks at the "bullet," and then talks **about** the topic, often losing control of time and losing the audience with plenty of verbiage. The result: The audience tunes out. My seminar participants have verified this time and again through the seminar demonstrations.

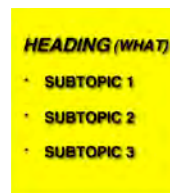


Fig. 1: The classical bullet chart is nothing more than cue notes to aid the speaker. They are not an aid for the audience.

2. Clip-art, or generic art work, is mostly useless for interview and other technical presentations because it rarely enhances the message. At best clip art ads decoration (Fig. 2). Useful graphics, on the other hand, make it easy for the audience to see and understand WHAT the presenter is talking about and WHY the topic is important.



Fig. 2: Poor use of clip art. The hand shake clip art adds nothing to the statement. Data proving improvements in quality would enhance the statement and aid the audience.

3. Too much data on a visual leads to overload on the part of the audience. "We get irritated, unhappy with the presenter, or just stop listening to the presenters," say my seminar participants when asked how they react to fact and verbiage loaded visuals. The research is clear: With five new facts per visual, most people can understand and recall what was covered. With nine or more new facts less than 20% of the audience understands and/or remembers what they heard or saw.

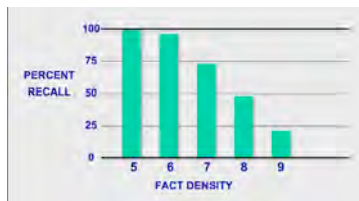
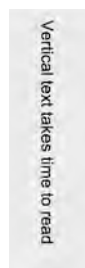


Fig. 3: Research shows that 5 facts per visual is all an audience can handle before there is a loss of retention.

4. Vertical text takes time to read. While the audience is occupied trying to decipher the vertically written text they cannot hear what the speaker is saying and the most important message may be lost.



Presentation software is tempting to use and will be used indiscriminately by those who do not understand its limitations and pitfalls. (See Part 1 in the last issue for other pitfalls). As in all cases where we want audience approval of our presentation, we need to help the audience see and understand what we have to offer. Using visuals which lead to confusion, boredom, restlessness and perhaps even sleep is not helping them get excited about our presentation.

Hed the research and create effective (i.e. winning) presentations.



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Use visuals as a partner, not a backdrop

Room lights are dimmed, the computer desk top is displayed for all to see. Up comes the first visual. The presenter ignores it. She is standing off to the side, talking. I don't hear a word she says because my attention is riveted on the projected image.

The presenter fiddles with the remote control. The computer balks. More fiddling. Finally, there it is. The audience sends a sigh of relief. Action is on hand. The first line scrolls up from the bottom of the screen. In rapid succession, a second line appears. Then a third line and a fourth until the screen is filled with bulleted text. My eyes scan across the screen trying to read and make sense of the words. In the meantime the presenter continues standing off to the side. She keeps on talking. I am distracted and lost and after awhile I realize that her message is lost in the ether and I have no means of retrieving it.

Typical? Yes. Preventable? Yes.

Scientific research has established the following human characteristics:

1. The brain can only handle one input at the time. Mechanically, we can read one thing and listen to another—but the brain cannot process both inputs unless what we see is also what we hear, at the same time.

2. Most people—more than 80%—will first focus on what they see. Therefore, a speaker who doesn't address the visuals first is not heard. As the audience tries to read the visual, the speaker's message is lost.

3. We tend to tune out, stop listening and stop trying to read the visuals when:

- a) Fact density is greater than six.
- b) Text is illegible.
- c) Audio and visual inputs are not connected—simultaneously.

4. We tend to get irritated and confused by indiscriminate use of gimmicks, such as bullets and clip art flying onto the screen from whichever direction.

5. We are "significance blind" and cannot remember without associations.

Properly designed and used visuals can overcome these audience constraints.

If your presentation goal is to persuade the audience to select you and/or believe your arguments, then you are best served when your first visual explicitly states the conclusion you want them to draw. The subsequent visuals should:

1. Prove your arguments graphically with very limited use of cue-note type bullets. No clip art.

2. Establish strong associations with the audience's knowledge base.

3. Be simple. No more than six new facts on each visual, and the text must be legible.

Continued...

Visuals are not pretty pictures in the background. Make full use of visuals to support your message. Therefore, the moment the visual is disclosed...

1. Go right to the visual, because that is what your audience is doing, and read every word on it. (Lengthy text is a no-no!! Limit the text to call-outs directly linked to your persuasive graphics).
2. Explain all the graphics in detail, because your audience is trying to understand what your graphic is all about. The graphic should support your point.
3. Then, when you have addressed the visual, face the audience and amplify on what you have just described, because the audience is now ready to pay attention to you.

This is contrary to the advice you have received elsewhere. You have been told, "Do not read the visual!" "Let the visual stand on its own."

The approach outlined above is based on research. Participants in my seminars experience the validity of every one of these recommendations. They use the methods and reap the awards, i.e. winning audience approval and business.

