

Death by PowerPoint: Torture or Show Stopping—Your Choice

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In the last 3-5 years, I have witnessed an enormous backlash against the use of PowerPoint in presentations. The PowerPoint Pendulum has swung from "Isn't this neat?!" to "Oh, no, not another boring Power Point!"

I use the phrase "Death by PowerPoint" to describe that comatose suspension between life and death while you wait for a Power Point presentation to conclude ("Stop! Stop! Please stop!").

Some companies have even gone so far as to ban all PowerPoint presentations, telling their managers to "Just tell me your recommendations and get on with it."

The reasons for this Power Point backlash are many, but one in particular stands out: people hate being read to and nearly every presenter does just that. They throw the entire "script" up on the screen and monotonously read every single line, every single word to their audience, who are sitting in the dark....secretly checking email messages on their Blackberries.

Speakers inflict this sadistic suffering upon their audience for 4 main reasons:

1. They are petrified of public speaking and use Power Point as a security blanket
2. They don't know any better
3. That's the way it's done at their company; no one knows any better
4. It's easy and it's safe.

It takes hard work, time, discipline, courage, and an understanding of just what engages an audience to produce an interesting, unique, and creative PowerPoint presentation.

Lee Gomes, business writer at the Wall Street Journal, says that "While PowerPoint has served as the metronome for countless crisp presentations, it has also allowed an endless expanse of dimwit ideas to be dressed up with graphical respectability."

Yale graphics guru, Edward Tufte, scathingly asserts that PowerPoint "elevates format over content, betraying an attitude of commercialism that turns everything into a sales pitch."

Robert Gaskins, one of the two creators of the PowerPoint concept (the other, Dennis Austin) believes Tufte's criticisms are spot on. They have "no patience with cubicle warriors who, in the guise of doing actual work, spend endless hours fiddling with fonts!"

They like telling the joke that the best way to paralyze an opposition army is to ship it PowerPoint and thereby contaminate its decision making.

A New Yorker magazine included a cartoon showing a job interview in hell: "I need someone well versed in the art of torture," the interviewer says. "Do you know PowerPoint?"

So my point has been made: PowerPoint presentations are mind numbing, soul deadening, spirit sapping exercises in staying awake. Ruth Marcus of the Washington Post writes that this energy draining essence of PowerPoint was captured perfectly in a spoof of the Gettysburg Address by computer whiz Peter Norvig of Google.

It featured Abe Lincoln fumbling with his computer: "Just a second while I get this connection to work. Do I press this button here? Function-F7?" He collapses his speech into six slides, complete with bar chart depicting four score and seven years. (See sidebar for a sample PowerPoint slide from the Gettysburg address)

But it doesn't have to be this way!

I believe the day will come when an audience collectively thinks: "Oh, Boy, a PowerPoint presentation!" Incredulous? Let me explain.

Here are Three PowerPoint Rules to help make your PowerPoint presentations invigorating and refreshing.

Rule #1—Remember first and foremost that readers are not the same as listeners. The brain uses differing parts to process the written word vs. the spoken word. Speeches and PowerPoints are meant for listeners, NOT readers.

So prepare a feast for your listeners' eyes and ears. Think of the audience as consumers. Use color—with consideration of your audience—unique design, pictures instead of data and bullet points, and "sell" your ideas to your consumers.

Stand with the screen to your left, so the audience can scan your material from left to right, the way this culture is taught to read. Keep your feet pointed toward your audience, so your face, with its voice and expressions, can reveal your passion and commitment to these ideas. Be an expressive proponent of your material, not a deadly reader of lengthy sentences meant for English Comp 101.

Rule #2—Do not make yourself part of your audience. You are the actor, the director of the play, the set designer, and the choreographer. Symphony conductors do not sit behind the symphony. Neither should you turn off the lights—nappy time—sit at the back of the room with your computer, and send out a disembodied voice that drones "Next....." over and over and over.....

Take your position up front as the "owner" of this message, engage your audience with your entire being, and make the PowerPoint part of your "presentation presence."

Rule #3—Audiences don't need or want everything you've got. (No one is as interested in your wedding pictures as you are.) So the presenter should develop 3 different documents:

- Personal notes, to be seen only by the speaker and used as a reminder of the topics and key points
- Illustrative slides, which illustrate the major points and help motivate the listener and sell the message.
- Handouts or leave-behinds, where the speaker puts the references, data, the appendices to the talk. Some may actually study these; some may glance at them; many will toss them. But they are there, revealing the background work that went into your engaging presentation.

So is it PowerPoint that's bad?

No. Bad speakers are bad. Bad PowerPoints just make them worse.

Obviously, then, there are two fixes: 1) Become a better speaker 2) Quit taking the easy way out with PowerPoints.

Next time, surprise your audience with an energetic, engaging presentation, which incorporates visually appealing PowerPoint slides. Think of your PowerPoint "show" as theatre. Most PowerPoint "shows" would close on opening night. Craft your set, stage the lighting, use dramatic focus, create a narrative flow (an impressive seamlessness), and end BIG.

In summary, you are everything from costume designer and tech crew to janitor. This is a reality all presenters must acknowledge, accept, and prepare for.

After all, PowerPoint is the messenger, not the message. So don't kill the messenger.

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Side bar Graphic:

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address—PPT Slide #4

Review of Key Objectives and Critical Success Factors

What makes our nation unique

- Conceived in liberty
- Men are equal
- Shared vision
- New birth of freedom
- Gov't of/by/for the people

