

Presentations with Point but no Power

PowerPoint® and similar programs have become increasingly popular with in-house trainers. The ability to prepare material directly on a computer to project onto a suitable screen has freed us from the acetate nightmare of poor quality overhead projectors, upside down slides, and scruffy flipcharts. So why then do we cringe when faced with yet another PowerPoint presentation? This article will begin to unravel the reasons, whilst helping suggest remedies to that hackneyed but true phrase of 'death by PowerPoint.'

The ability to give a presentation is a requirement in many business areas. It can be a powerful way to get across a message, to inform, explain and train. Sadly though, it is an assumed skill. It is a skill that managers are expected to have acquired along their career path without any formal training. We do not assume other skills so quite why we assume this one remains a mystery. Nevertheless the reality is that very few presenters have received any form of helpful training. Neither do they get accurate feedback. At the end of a presentation there are a few positive comments, maybe a round of applause, and an inward sigh of relief that it is over. No wonder it is such a wasted medium.

The first mistake people often make is to assume that if you can present, then using PowerPoint makes you a better presenter. This is not true. The use of PowerPoint should complement the presenter's message, not take over. Consider this further. If the slide show is the most important aspect of the presentation, how much money could be saved if we disposed of the presenter and merely emailed the show to the audience?

The presenter is the key element of the presentation yet on so many occasions I have seen the screen centre stage with the speaker lost to one side. So lesson one is to reverse that scenario.

It is said that the influence of a presentation is roughly as follows: words (text) form 7%, vocal input 38% and visual 55%. That is an interesting fact when you consider that most PowerPoint slides contain only text – normally in the form of dreaded bullet points. It is akin to having a car and only using 1st gear. The program is capable of so much more yet there is a reluctance to use it.

Accelerated learning techniques often use visual imagery to add 'stickability' to information. Slide after slide in many presentations forgo the power of the image in favour of words – and often lots of them, crammed into too many slides at sizes that inevitably require the presenter to apologise for the difficulty in reading the slide.

If there is one aspect of any speech that lacks influence, it is when it is being read word for word from a script. Consider this – how many presentations have you seen when that delivery is compounded by the script being on screen and still being read out as if the audience have not yet mastered the ability to read for themselves? The answer is of course, far too many.

Ten tips for successful PowerPoint Presentations

1. Put the screen to one side of the stage so the speaker remains the central focus
2. Hide the cables, wires, cases and other paraphernalia that detracts from your professional image
3. Because it can does not mean it should. Judicious use of animations – keeping them consistent is better than a wild mix of effects
4. Slides are slides, and notes are notes. Do not use one in place of the other.
5. Consider colours, lighting conditions and room sizes when preparing slides.
6. Use a remote pointer / mouse to free you from needing to access the computer.
7. Avoid bullet points in favour of relevant pictures – make sure they are relevant!
8. Have a 'plan B' in case of equipment failure. A complete set of acetates in a folder can help, unless it is a power failure.
9. Your presentation starts when you arrive at the venue, not when you take the stage.
10. Enjoy speaking. Take every opportunity to practice and deliver to audiences. Develop the skill and it will develop you.

There is hope however. Just like any other skill, there is a need for training and personal development. I would like to suggest that presenting, and presenting with PowerPoint are two different things, and one follows the other. Any potential speaker needs to develop positive presentation skills without the use of technical aids. This might seem daunting at first, but in reality, this is the foundation that speakers then build upon. The ability to speak with vocal energy, passion and interest is a key requirement. The ability to structure a presentation, to identify and develop key points in a memorable and influential style has to be learnt before adding in technical aids.

I said earlier the visual aids complement the speech. This means that they should be appropriate, memorable and helpful to the audience. They should not distract, confuse or enable the audience to lose rapport with the speaker. Guy Kawasaki is something of a guru amongst the speaking profession and has a trademark to his speeches that is known as the 'Kawasaki rule of ten.' Guy never uses more than ten slides, each with only one phrase on it. He speaks to each phrase and the level of audience retention is phenomenal. The reason for this is his charisma, his ability to take the audience along with him on a journey of knowledge and interest. In other words, Guy remains the focus of the event, not the slides – they assist the audience in recalling key points.

We are not all Guy, we do not all have that charisma and may need a little more to make our sessions memorable. That is surprisingly easy to learn, in the same way that it is (for most people) surprisingly easy to learn to drive a car. Once would-be presenters overcome the obstacle of accepting that they need training, the path is clear for them to learn and improve their presentation skills to an impressive standard.

For those who wish to develop their skills in this discipline, I would suggest the following route to success. Begin with conventional presentation and speaking skills. Develop your voice, learn to structure what you say and deliver it with enthusiasm, interest and passion. It is then time to learn sufficient basics of the building of PowerPoint slides so that you can create your own slides rather than rely on others to do this for you. Slowly begin to use PowerPoint within your limitations to enhance your message. With training, practice and constructive feedback, you might just become the new Guy Kawasaki, and if that is beyond you, at least you will know that your audience will be grateful to have been spared yet another lack-lustre performance. It is time to make sure people look forward to you speaking.

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About the author

Ian Price left Local Government work after 26 years and set up Business Training Direct - a company that specialises in presentation skills training. Providing a range of courses to suit all levels of knowledge and experience, Ian's training will ensure a high standard of competence is obtained in a short period of time. There are options for public courses, in-house courses and one2one coaching. Ian is also a trained hypnotherapist and can offer addition work when nerves and anxiety threaten to get out of control.

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