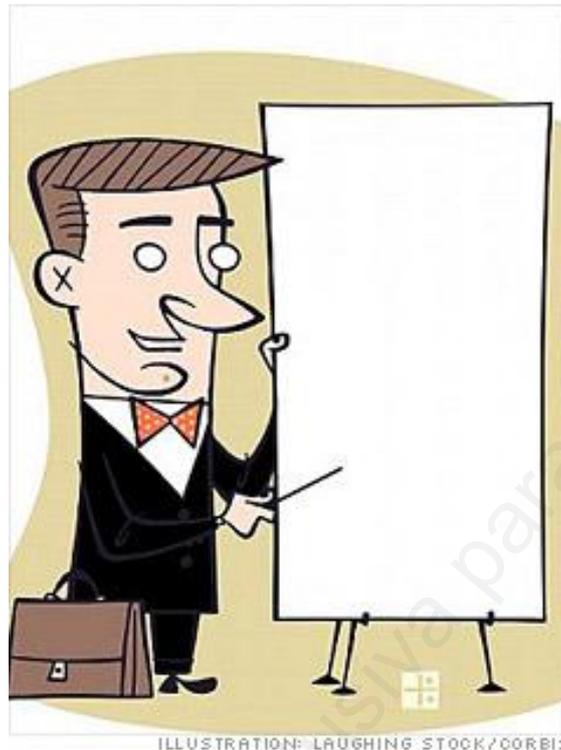


PowerPoint abuse: How to kick the habit

Megan Hustad

The hardest thing about any presentation is looking your audience squarely in the face --and that's precisely what presentation software allows people to avoid.



Few pieces of software are as ubiquitous -- and as maligned -- as PowerPoint. Microsoft (MSFT) doesn't track PowerPoint usage numbers but a spokesperson confirmed that Office -- the software package that contains the program -- is used by one billion people worldwide. Not everyone is happy about that. In an article for the New York Times, reporter Elisabeth Bumiller described military leaders' dismay over how PowerPoint had infiltrated the war effort in Afghanistan. "PowerPoint makes us stupid," said Gen. James N. Mattis of the Marine Corps.

Others conveyed their impression that PowerPoint stifled discussion, discouraged questions, and generally conveyed less analysis, less persuasively, than the same content would if delivered orally. It also sucked up man-hours. According to the Times, when Company Command asked Lt. Sam Nuxoll what he did most of the day, Nuxoll responded, "Making PowerPoint slides." He wasn't kidding.

Some company leaders are reacting to this grumbling by trying to curtail its use. They're either stipulating no presentation decks -- period -- or limiting the number of slides allowed.

A fine idea, says Warren Berger, design expert and author of *Glimmer*, but perhaps beside the point. The problem is not PowerPoint, or even how much time is spent preparing decks, but how it's used, Berger argues. The hardest thing with any presentation is looking your audience squarely in the face -- and that's precisely what presentation software allows people to avoid.

"People are using PowerPoint as a way to limit their engagement with the audience. Whether they realize it or not, they're using it that way," Berger said when I reached him on the phone.

According to Terri Sjodin, speaker and author of the forthcoming *Small Message, Big Impact*, people use PowerPoint because "it's the best, most socially acceptable crutch." No one aspires to deliver a boring presentation that's information-heavy but light on persuasion, she points out. But peer pressure and the age-old fear of public speaking tend to get the better of us.

This points to an interesting possibility: that we resort to presentation software in the subconscious hope of deflecting the audience's scrutiny and judgment from us to our slides. "It takes people's eyes off of you," says Berger. "So you can basically be engaged with your slides instead of engaging with the audience. And similarly the audience can be engaged with the slides instead of you."

Oddly enough, Richard Saul Wurman, originator of the TED conference -- definitely a culprit in popularizing the PowerPoint-backed speech -- insisted on doing away with speaker podiums precisely in order to intensify the uncomfortable feeling of having too much attention trained on you. (As he put it: "I wanted [the speaker] to feel more vulnerable.")

For his part, Peter Arvai, CEO of Prezi, a recent challenger to PowerPoint's crown, is remarkably candid about presentation software's inability to fix poorly structured arguments. It was the developer's job to expand a software user's options. But persuasion, he emphasized, is a social problem. And "it's not our role to solve social problems," Arvai told me.

Arvai explains Prezi's success -- since launching in April 2009, they've logged over 10 million users -- by pointing out that Prezi slides can be arranged not simply one after the other, but above and below each other, and the presenter can swoop up and down, zoom in and pan out.

Caveats about persuasion aside, "this allows people to enjoy it more, understand it more fully, and remember it better," says Arvai. "Our brains are wired to think spatially."

Or, as Berger counters, Prezi is just "PowerPoint with vertigo." Berger suggests using image-heavy slides for quick comic relief, or more elegant data visualizations that put chunky SmartArt bar graphs to shame.

Bullet points? Avoid them. Bullets don't tell stories, says Sjodin. "Every point that pops up is like another lash with the whip," says Berger. They also make it hard to distinguish between real conflicts and mere hassles, or how items on a list relate. Does one bulleted "pain point" cause the next one, or are they completely unrelated phenomena? Most slides won't tell you.

I'm inclined to think it's precisely the hard work of making those distinctions and telling an audience, in essence, "Yes, I believe this thing causes this other thing, and here's why," that makes a presentation compelling.

So it all comes down to lo-tech skills. In a talk at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, South Park and Book of Mormon creators Trey Park and Matt Stone gave advice to student screenwriters on making sure one doesn't scrimp on the hard work of drawing connections. They discussed dividing a big white board into three acts (beginning - middle - end) and scribbling plot points across it. Every piece of South Park action, or what they call "story beats," is jotted down.

Then, says Parker

"We can take these beats, which are basically the beats of your outline, and if the words 'and then' belong between those beats, you're fucked, basically. You've got something pretty boring. What should happen between every beat that you've written down is either the word 'therefore' or 'but.' So it's not this happens and then this happens. Instead, it's this happens therefore this happens. Or this happens but this happens also, therefore something else happens."

It should also be noted that Parker gave this advice without slides or a podium, looking directly at his audience.

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