How to Use Presentation Slides to Best Effect

by Philip Yaffe

How often have you attended a presentation where great attention apparently went into designing the slides - and apparently none into how they were used? Or the speaker played with the slides as if to entertain rather than edify?

Such idiosyncratic presentation techniques have helped give rise to the calumnious term "death by PowerPoint". PowerPoint and other types of visual aids can significantly enhance a presentation if properly used. And significantly detract from it if improperly used.

It is normal for each person to have his or her individual style for using slides. Such individuality often adds to the effectiveness of the presentation; however excessive individuality damages clarity and comprehension, putting effectiveness at risk.

Fortunately, this problem can be easily resolved. By recognizing and applying three fundamental principles of slide presentations, you can make "death by PowerPoint" completely disappear.

Fundamental Principles of Slide Presentations

1. Use the Slides; Don't Be Controlled by Them

It is important to recognize that slides are a visual aid. And the most important part of this term is "aid". Too many speakers seem to believe that if they show enough slides, their presentation will automatically be successful.

The opposite is true. No matter how good the slides, if they assume center stage, the presentation will almost certainly be less effective than it could be.

2. Show that You Are in Charge

Keep in mind that the greatest visual aid is YOU. People come to hear what you have to say because they believe that you have something important to impart to them. So they want to see you, hear your voice, and watch your facial expressions, and observe body movements in order to better understand and evaluate your data and ideas.

If you start your presentation by immediately turning off the lights, and keep them off until the presentation is finished, it is almost as if you are not there. It would be easier and more convenient just to mail the presentation to the audience as a videocassette or DVD and let them play it at their leisure.

3. Present a "Win-Win" Situation

To be truly effective, slides must:

• Help the speaker deliver a better presentation
• Help the audience better understand the presentation

It is not a question of either/or. The speaker and the audience must both benefit; otherwise, neither one will. This means that you must deliver a good presentation both in terms of content and slides.

It is generally a good idea to prepare the first draft of your presentation without any slides, then return to your text to see where slides are really needed. This will ensure that you do not drown the audience in slides - and that each slide will be truly useful.

If you take these three fundamental principles fully on board, you will be well on your way towards an effective presentation. Here are a few practical suggestions to make your already good presentation even better.

A. Use Build-up Slides

Let's try an experiment. Open a newspaper or magazine to any page. Keep looking at it, but try not to read anything on the page. It is virtually impossible. The moment the eye is confronted with text, there is a natural urge to read it.

Putting too much text on a slide has the same effect. The speaker may expect the audience to pay attention only to the part of the text he is talking about and ignore the rest. In reality, while the speaker is talking about the text at the top, the audience will almost certainly be reading the text below.

The result is significant loss of attention. Since attention ensures better comprehension, using text-heavy slides is detrimental to speakers and listeners alike.

To maintain attention, introduce text gradually, not all at once.

In the days of 35 mm and overhead transparencies, this was achieved by using "build-up slides". For example, instead of showing five bullet points on a single slide, the speaker prepared six sides. The first one showed only the title; the rest of the screen was left blank. The next one showed the title plus bullet point 1; the rest of the screen was left blank. The next slide showed the title plus bullet points 1 and 2. The same was done for each succeeding slide. It was only on the last slide that the full text (general statement + bullet points) became visible.

Producing six slides was of course considerably more expensive than producing only one. But it was also considerably more effective.

You should use the same technique with computer-generated slides. There is essentially no additional cost. Moreover, you can use animation to highlight each new bullet point as it appears on the screen in order to reinforce its importance. For example:

Slide 1

Title

Slide 2

Title

- First bullet point

Slide 3

Title

- First bullet point
- Second bullet point

Slide 4

Title

- First bullet point
- Second bullet point
- Third bullet point

And so on.

Illustrated slides such as diagrams, flow charts, etc., work essentially the same way. Introduce the illustration piece by piece. This will prevent the audience from being drawn to one part of the image while you are talking about another.

There are three possible variations to this approach.

1.   Introduce the illustration piece by piece, with commentary on each piece, until the illustration is complete

2.   Show the full illustration to give an overview. Then re-introduce it piece by piece, with commentary, until it is complete.

3.   Show the full illustration to give an overview. Then re-introduce it piece by piece, with commentary, until it is complete. However, occasionally revert to the full illustration to remind the audience of where this piece-by-piece build up process is leading.

Read the Text to the Audience

Another common mistake is for the speaker to continue talking while the audience is reading. Once again, this results in significant loss of attention.

The remedy is quite simple. The speaker should read the slide aloud to the audience. The text of course should be "telegraphic", i.e. only key words. This ensures that:

• The attention of the audience is first totally focused on the key words on the slide.

• Next, it is totally focused on the speaker for commentary about the slide.

If the speaker reads the slide aloud, the audience is not forced to do two things at the same time: reading the slide while trying to listening to the commentary. Attention is maintained, and everyone benefits.

B.   Use Your Laser Pointer Correctly

My "bête noire" (black beast) is in fact red. It is the horrendous way many speakers use their laser pointers. Like old-fashioned stick pointers, lasers should be used to:

• Help the audience identify and better understand the importance of key words and phrases in text slides.

• Help the audience identify and better understand the importance of key elements in photos, drawings, diagrams, flow charts, and other illustrations.

Pointing is all that is necessary. Don't keep circling key words or visual elements. Don't keep swinging the laser beam back and forth across the screen. The eye will naturally follow these movements. Since they add nothing to the presentation, they can only subtract from it.

The best way to avoid making these damaging gestures is by using the pointer as name implies. Just point to identify the key word or element you want to talk about, then turn it off. When you want to point to something else, simply turn it on again.

C.   Pace Your Slides

Slides support what the speaker is saying. Therefore, they should:

• Appear on the screen only when needed.
• Stay on the screen only as long as needed.

The first point is obvious. You don't want to show a slide before you are ready to talk about it. And of course hardly anyone ever does this.

Immediately removing the slide from the screen when it is no longer needed apparently is less obvious. Many speakers leave a slide on the screen while they talk about something else just to have something there until they are ready for the next one. Worse, they create "filler slides" they don't really need just to have something there.

Both tactics damage the presentation. As long as something is on the screen, the eye will be attracted to it. This significantly reduces attention on what the speaker is saying, and so hurts comprehension.

When you don't really need a slide, don't show one. Either leave the screen blank or project a soft background color until the next slide is needed. Don't project a logo or any other illustration, which can only serve as a distraction.

If it will be several minutes before the next slide, turn the lights up so the audience can see who is talking to them. Remember, you are the star of the show, not the slides.

Properly used, slides can significantly boost the interest and effectiveness of a presentation. Poorly used, they can significantly damage it. It takes only slightly more effort to do the job well than to do it poorly. You owe to yourself and your audience to make this minor investment for this major return.

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