

The Point of PowerPoint®

Use it as a tool, not a crutch.

by Randy Gunter

Over the last several years, we've seen the word "presentation" replaced with the word "PowerPoint." As in, "I'm going to give a PowerPoint on the new product to the board."

The issue, of course, is that PowerPoint, the computer slide presentation software from Microsoft®, should be used as a tool for making the presentation, it shouldn't define what the presentation is.

That in itself isn't the problem, the problem is that people misuse PowerPoint in a way that makes their presentations bad. They would have been better off not using PowerPoint at all. In fact, there are many people that would be much better off just talking without any visual aids whatsoever. Still, many people think it would be impossible to make a presentation without this software.

The Key Mistakes of PowerPoint

Let's face it, PowerPoint in the wrong hands can make for a very, very, very boring presentation. People tend to cram into their slides everything they can think of to get their message across, then end up reading it on the screen.

An effective PowerPoint slide should be like a billboard on a highway where you are cruising by at 70 miles an hour. If you can't read it in a few seconds, it probably has too much information. The simpler, the better.

Before PowerPoint came along, people use to give slide presentations. They would talk, and they would show a photographic slide or illustration projected on a screen to complement what they were talking about. Very few people had the means to put type on their slides, so they just used the slides to supplement their speech.

These slide presentations were a lot more effective than most PowerPoint presentations of today. But of course, you can take that approach with PowerPoint, how many words can you eliminate and use a picture instead?

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However, some people think because they can add all the type, they should. The best PowerPoint presentation is probably one that doesn't have any type in it at all.

Leave the special effects alone

Talking about using something simply because you can, the use of special effects in PowerPoint can create seizures in an audience.

Let's take a page from Hollywood: I guarantee you that every great director and editor out there in Hollywood has the access and technology to apply all kinds of

transitions to their movies when they cut from one scene to another. But I bet you could watch a dozen movies a day for the next few weeks and only see straight cuts and simple dissolves.

So why doesn't Hollywood use a spinning twirly iris effect when they cut from one scene to the next? Because it usually is distracting and it always looks amateurish.

With the exception of newer Star Wars and other B movies, you will rarely find a Hollywood picture use a "special effects" transition from one scene to the next.

Your PowerPoint will look more professional if you also use basic cuts and maybe a simple dissolve or two. Leave the twirling special effects to the people that are lacking in content and have to "jazz up" their presentation in other ways.

PowerPoint Should Never Be A Leave Behind

I had someone tell me that they had to put up all that type information on the slide because they were going to use the PowerPoint presentation as a leave behind piece.

The problem should be obvious, a PowerPoint presentation is almost always a horrible leave-behind. It's like listening to half of a phone conversation, you can probably pick out a few things, but since you can't actually hear the other person, you really don't know what is actually going on.

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It's the same with the leave-behind made out of a PowerPoint presentation: the viewer later won't have the benefit of being able to hear the speaker again, so the written slides are only part of the story.

Why not create a separate leave-behind that actually works as a leave-behind?

There really is only one reason that anyone would use the PowerPoint presentation as a leave-behind: it's easier. It's certainly not better, but it is easier. But I hope that you don't make decisions on what is the easiest way of doing something and rather on what is the best way of doing it.

Making a good presentation

The key to making a good PowerPoint presentation is to have something interesting to say, then decide if you even want to use PowerPoint at all.

With any communications, having a goal in place is a good start. What is it that you want to communicate to your audience? Can you simply tell them or do you need that projector? Will a graphic actually help make your point? Or is it really just a crutch that you need because you don't want to practice your presentation?

Now don't get me wrong, I believe that showing pictures, graphics and illustrations can be a powerful aid in a presentation. When I make presentations, there are usually a video clip or two involved.

Randy Gunter is the creative director for the Gunter Agency.

Tell Stories

One of the biggest pieces of advice that I can give in making a presentation is to tell stories. People can relate to story telling, and they'll probably remember a story much better than facts and figures. Can you make your point telling a story?

Graphics

Okay, let's look at a few things as far as the graphics part of a PowerPoint presentation. Some simple do's and don'ts.

- Do use a black background, it makes lighter graphics jump out and video becomes like a theater.
- Don't use a pure white background, if you need a lighter color, add a little cream or beige to the mix, it's easier on your viewer's eyes.
- Don't mix more than two fonts, and one is probably better. This is a simple design rule, but something that is often broken in PowerPoint presentations. If you're using two font families, pick one serif and one sans serif. It's okay to use different font weights (book, bold) and the italics to differentiate different parts within your text.
- Use the right resolution. Learn what resolution your projector can handle, then create your graphics at that resolution. The higher the better. This will keep your images sharper and get rid of "jaggies" in your type. Most projectors can do much better than an 800 x 600 resolution, yet many people stick to this default resolution when they make their presentation because it's easier or they simply don't know better.

A few more suggestions...

Don't turn down your lights on your audience. Try to leave the lights as bright as you can while still allowing your audience to see what is projected on the screen. This way you can make eye contact with the people in your audience (this simple thing will make a huge difference on how you are perceived by your audience.)

Go to YouTube and look up Guy Kawasaki's 10-20-30 Rule. Guy is one of my favorite business authors, so you can also go to the library and find his books like "How to Drive Your Competition Crazy", "Selling the Invisible", and "Art of the Start."

Guy talks about his 10-20-30 Rule for PowerPoint presentations: presentations should be no more than 10 slides, should take no longer than 20 minutes, and should use a minimum of 30 point type. Don't take my word for it, go online and hear Guy explain his thoughts.

Closing thoughts

To make a good presentation, practice it. And then practice it again.

Bring an extra bulb for your projector just in case the bulb burns out. Or even better, figure out how you can make your presentation if the projector explodes and you have to give your presentation without it.

It might be better that way anyway.

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