

Death by PowerPoint: It's time to stop the madness

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A recent New Yorker magazine features 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?"

The joke is lost on few. In the last three to five years, there has been an enormous backlash against PowerPoint presentations. The PowerPoint pendulum has swung from "Isn't this neat?" to a syndrome called "Death by PowerPoint" -- that state of comatose suspension while audiences wait for a PowerPoint presentation to conclude.

Let's face it: PowerPoint presentations are mind numbing, soul-deadening, spirit-sapping exercises in staying awake. Some companies have even outright banned all PowerPoint presentations.

Why, oh why?

The reasons for the PowerPoint backlash are many, but one in particular stands out: People hate being read to and, yet, nearly every presenter throws the entire "script" up on the screen and monotonously regurgitates every single line.

Speakers inflict this suffering upon their audience for four main reasons:

- They are petrified of public speaking and use Power Point as a security blanket.
- They don't know any better.
- That's the way it's done at their company.
- 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.

Not this way

Here are three rules to help make your PowerPoint presentations invigorating and refreshing:

Rule No. 1 -- Remember that readers are not the same as listeners. The brain uses differing parts to process the written word versus the spoken word. Speeches and PowerPoints are meant for listeners, NOT readers.

So prepare a feast for your listeners' eyes and ears. 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. This way your face, with its voice and expressions, can reveal your passion and commitment. Be an expressive proponent of your material, not a deadly reader of lengthy sentences.

Rule No. 2 -- Do not make yourself part of your audience. Symphony conductors do not sit behind the symphony. Neither should you turn off the light and sit at the back of the room with your computer, and send out a disembodied voice that drones.

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

Rule No. 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 three different documents:

- Personal notes, to be seen only by the speaker and used as a reminder of the topics and key points
- Illustrative slides to highlight 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.

You can make it right

Bad speakers are bad. Bad PowerPoints just make them worse.

Obviously, then, there are two fixes: Become a better speaker. 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 theater. Craft your set, stage the lighting, use dramatic focus, create a narrative flow and end big.

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

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