



Really Bad Powerpoint

I wrote this about four years ago, originally as an ebook. I figured the idea might spread and then the problem would go away--we'd no longer see thousands of hours wasted, every single day, by boring PowerPoint presentations filled with bullets.

Not only has it not gone away, it's gotten a lot worse. Last week I got a template from a conference organizer. It seems they want every single presenter to not only use bullets for their presentations, but for all of us to use the same format! Shudder.

So, for posterity, and in the vain hope it might work, here we go again:

Really Bad Powerpoint

It doesn't matter whether you're trying to champion at a church or a school or a Fortune 100 company, you're probably going to use PowerPoint.

Powerpoint was developed by engineers as a tool to help them communicate with the marketing department—and vice versa. It's a remarkable tool because it allows very dense verbal communication. Yes, you could send a memo, but no one reads anymore. As our companies are getting faster and faster, we need a way to communicate ideas from one group to another. Enter Powerpoint.

Powerpoint could be the most powerful tool on your computer. But it's not. Countless innovations fail because their champions use PowerPoint the way Microsoft wants them to, instead of the right way.

Communication is the transfer of emotion.

Communication is about getting others to adopt your point of view, to help them understand why you're excited (or sad, or optimistic or whatever else you are.) If all you want to do is create a file of facts and figures, then cancel the meeting and send in a report.

Our brains have two sides. The right side is emotional, musical and moody. The left side is focused on dexterity, facts and hard data. When you show up to give a presentation, people want to use both parts of their brain. So they use the right side to judge the way you talk, the way you dress and your body language. Often, people come to a conclusion about your presentation by the time you're on the second slide. After that, it's often too late for your bullet points to do you much good.

You can wreck a communication process with lousy logic or unsupported facts, but you can't complete it without emotion. Logic is not enough.

Champions must sell—to internal audiences and to the outside world.

If everyone in the room agreed with you, you wouldn't need to do a presentation, would you? You could save a lot of time by printing out a one-page project report and delivering it to each person. No, the reason we do presentations is to make a point, to sell one or more ideas.

If you believe in your idea, sell it. Make your point as hard as you can and get what you came for. Your audience will thank you for it, because deep down, we all want to be sold.

Four Components To A Great Presentation

First, make yourself cue cards. Don't put them on the screen. Put them in your hand. Now, you can use the cue cards you made to make sure you're saying what you came to say.

Second, make slides that reinforce your words, not repeat them. Create slides that demonstrate, with emotional proof, that what you're saying is true not just accurate.



Talking about pollution in Houston? Instead of giving me four bullet points of EPA data, why not read me the stats but show me a photo of a bunch of dead birds, some smog and even a diseased lung? This is cheating! It's unfair! It works.

Third, create a written document. A leave-behind. Put in as many footnotes or details as you like. Then, when you start your presentation, tell the audience that you're going to give them all the details of your presentation after it's over, and they don't have to write down everything you say. Remember, the presentation is to make an emotional sale. The document is the proof that helps the intellectuals in your audience accept the idea that you've sold them on emotionally.

IMPORTANT: Don't hand out the written stuff at the beginning! If you do, people will read the memo while you're talking and ignore you. Instead, your goal is to get them to sit back, trust you and take in the emotional and intellectual points of your presentation.

Fourth, create a feedback cycle. If your presentation is for a project approval, hand people a project approval form and get them to approve it, so there's no ambiguity at all about what you've all agreed to.

The reason you give a presentation is to make a sale. So make it. Don't leave without a "yes," or at the very least, a commitment to a date or to future deliverables.

Bullets Are For the NRA

Here are the five rules you need to remember to create amazing Powerpoint presentations:

1. No more than six words on a slide. **EVER.** There is no presentation so complex that this rule needs to be broken.
2. No cheesy images. Use professional stock photo images.
3. No dissolves, spins or other transitions.
4. Sound effects can be used a few times per presentation, but never use the sound effects that are built in to the program. Instead, rip sounds and music from CDs and leverage the Proustian effect this can have. If people start bouncing up and down to the Grateful Dead, you've kept them from falling asleep, and you've reminded them that this isn't a typical meeting you're running.
5. Don't hand out print-outs of your slides. They don't work without you there.

The home run is easy to describe: You put up a slide. It triggers an emotional reaction in the audience. They sit up and want to know what you're going to say that fits in with that image. Then, if you do it right, every time they think of what you said, they'll see the image (and vice versa).

Sure, this is different from the way everyone else does it. But everyone else is busy defending the status quo (which is easy) and you're busy championing brave new innovations, which is difficult.