

PowerPoint – Effective tool or efficient torture

My first conscious horror of being locked into a fixed sequence was as a young kid watching vacation slide shows in smoky living rooms, with old fogies oohing and cooing over snaps of luggage in the hall, endless farewell groups at the airport, hotel rooms, single chrysanthemums in Japan, a Dior window in Paris, a train station in London etc.

These sessions usually culminated in a frantic final race to complete the remaining trays as "...it was now well past bed time.", providing tantalizing glimpses of the good stuff—naked bodies in St. Tropez, the latest Ferrari in Milan, etc. The inevitable crash of a box of slides to the floor upset many a proud raconteur who had spent hours arranging their stories for a by-and-large indifferent audience.

I feel much the same in most presentations today and often wonder if business people consciously set objectives when preparing a PowerPoint deal. Do they want to wow audiences with their grasp of technology or do they want to convey a relevant business message? Why do they pack in every graph, diagram and fact-sheet available, knowing the certainty of audience overload? Is the presentation designed to set a record as to how many features can be packed into a single presentation?

System failures are frequent, with audience oohs as the technology crashes and aahs as it is restored. I often think there is a need for a new profession: PowerPoint Presentation Restorers. We see these able souls, much like the ball-boys/girls at Wimbledon, darting at the crouch from the wings with frightening regularity.

My biggest peeve is that PhDs, executives and other formidable brain-power

owners for the most part proceed to read their presentations word for word, locked into a torturous sequence from which there is no escape. One thing is certain: the audience is denied full benefit of presenter knowledge, personality and insights they have come/paid to hear.

Briefly put, context is oftentimes missing. Have we all not sat sleepily in darkened rooms, completely overwhelmed and distracted only to ask at the end: "Would it be possible to have a copy of your presentation?"

I am often asked to review client presentations beforehand and find reading an almost possible habit to break. One such person, on the eve of her departure to a conference in Canberra, world-renowned in her field, ridiculously qualified and with the most scintillating of personalities to match, informed me she simply had to cover all the material. I suggested that it would be just as well to e-mail her presentation to Canberra for the good her presence would do.

Experience leads me to believe that four simple rules facilitate effective management of presentations within the framework of social/business etiquette anywhere in the world.

1. Establish and communicate a clear presentation objective:

State up front if your purpose is:

- Informational
- Supportive/Complementary
- Asking for specific action

2. Make your goal/message relevant to your audience:

- Emphasize the real message throughout your communication, remembering that the PowerPoint is a tool, not the presentation
- If the document is intended as a handout, provide as much detail as required
- Summarize each section into relevant main points
- Use these points as your guide only



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during the presentation

- Resist the temptation to read the document
 - Your audience should ideally focus on you and what you bring to the presentation—do not force the audience to focus solely on the PowerPoint
 - Display/refer to main points only to emphasize your discussion/talk—Restrict images, charts and graphics to relevant illustration of concepts
 - Allow adequate time for questions. Preferably allow for questions at the end of every section. *Be flexible:* If appropriate, it is often a good thing to answer questions when they arise
3. **Check that you have been understood:**
Be yourself, be firm in your message and what it entails, yet evidence an empathetic/flexible style
4. **Close—Clearly ask for what you want**
The fact that you are presenting means that you have earned the right to do so. Being yourself and delivering your special message is your reward. Be the industry resource you are meant to be!