Your PowerPoint Presentation Doesn't Have to Be Boring

Raise your hand if you dread watching PowerPoint presentations. We have all seen the bad ones, and to paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart's definition of porn, you know the bad ones when you see them. As someone who presents 30 or 40 programs per year, I want to engage my audience, not see them looking at their watches counting down the minutes until I am done. This article will highlight some best practices when designing and using Microsoft PowerPoint with presentations.

What makes a bad PowerPoint? There are many examples, although most have one or more traits:

• **Too much text.** The presentation is supposed to complement what the speaker has to say, not provide a word-for-word repetition of it. While necessary at times, large blocks of text are often overwhelming. Plus, if you place every word on the slides, then why should your audience listen to you?

• **Too much clutter.** Most presenters are not trained in design, yet many ignore this fact and place so many visual objects on the slides, often to accompany too much text, making it hard for the audience to read the slides. And if the audience is focusing on how bad the design is, then it won't be paying attention to whatever you are saying.

• **Bad contrast.** There is a reason that most publications have black or very dark text on a white background. It's easy to read. Your slides should also have good contrast. Avoid dark text on dark backgrounds and light text on light backgrounds.

• **Don't read your slides.** Again, like having too much text on the slide, reading them word for word again raises the question why your audience should listen to you.

• **Not talking to the audience.** The best speakers are focused on the audience, engaging them, barely looking at the screen. The screen doesn't care what is there, the audience does. Look at

Illustration 1 - Original Slide

May Store Data in the Cloud

An attorney may ethically allow client confidential material to be stored in "the cloud" provided:

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the screen only to confirm the right slide is showing and focus the remainder of your time on having a dialogue with the people who are there to learn from you.

• **Too much animation and too many transitions.** Just because PowerPoint has more than 50 different ways to move between slides or for text and graphics to appear doesn't mean you have to use all, or most, of them. Transitions serve a purpose, particularly when you are discussing items on a list, such as "bullet points," but otherwise, use them sparingly.

• **Be prepared.** Presenters who know their material are more confident, more engaging, and know how long their programs will take. They don't "stretch" their talks to "fit" the time designated for their talks. They also don't talk fast or skip through slides, leaving the audience to wonder what they missed.

Now that I have outlined what not to do, here are some suggestions for what to do to make your presentations attractive and engaging, so that your audience will want to stay until the end and will want to attend your next program as well.

• Prepare. This seems obvious, but it bears repeating. When creating a program, I spend about three hours for each hour of presentation time, designing

the slides and making sure that the material I am discussing is organized logically. There is no substitute for preparation.

• Use readable fonts (often called typefaces), and make sure the text is large enough to read. There is a technique known as "typography" which involves arranging type so that the content is legible, readable, and appealing. For example, highway signs use a sans serif typeface known as "Highway Gothic," which was developed by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration. Sans serif typefaces do not have the extra stroke or decorative designs on the ends of letters, like you have with Times New Roman. My preferred typeface for presentations is "Meiryo," a sans serif style that has a very clean appearance on screen and in print and is optimized for on-screen reading. Other typefaces that display well include Tahoma, Verdana, Arial, and **Impact**. Avoid calligraphic styles.

• Print a copy of your presentation and make certain that the pages are numbered so you can glance at the slides and easily see the page numbers. Generally, I will print my slides six to a page so I can see what's coming up; you can also view upcoming slides using PowerPoint's "Presenter View," which is

on the Slide Show tab in the "Monitors" section. The advantage of numbering the pages is that if you must skip slides or go back to one, you can just type in the page number, such as 19 for page 19, and hit the Enter key rather than scrolling backwards and forwards, which can be distracting to the audience and to you.

• Use PowerPoint's design features, most of which are on the "Design" tab, to help your program. In general, use a clean look, but not one so barren that it appears you simply typed a few words on the slide and didn't care how they looked. In that regard, don't do the things listed above.

• Finally, use the little known "Design Ideas" feature in the "Designer" section on the Design tab. To get the best results, create your basic slide, including any needed graphic. Then go to the Design tab and click on Design Ideas and the program will suggest potential ways to make your slide more visually appealing. The process is easy and even those of us with limited design skills tend to get excellent results. Of course, you will still have to tweak the size of your fonts to create your slides, but it will be worth the effort. Since I started using this feature, audiences consistently comment about how my programs are visually appealing.
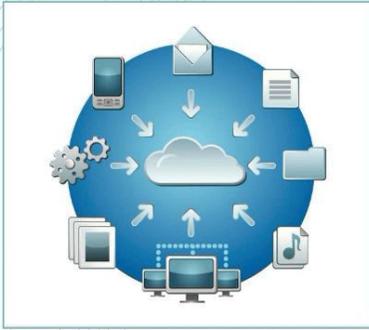
Here is an example. Illustration 1 (on page 9) represents the basic information I wanted on the slide with an image. Illustrations 2 through 7 (found on pages 10–12) are examples of options presented to me in the Design Ideas sidebar. And finally, Illustration 8 (on page 12) is my final version, after I adjusted the font sizes and typespacing.

PowerPoint presentations should convey information relevant to what you, the speaker, are discussing, and not overwhelm or distract the audience from you. Many websites offer excellent tips on how to improve your programs. For the most part, the suggestions are as easy to use as the Design Ideas feature. Take advantage of them, avoid the pitfalls, and implement the best practices; you will be pleased with the results. ∎

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Illustration 2

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Illustration 8 - Final Slide as Used in Presentation

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