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Is PowerPoint Past Its Prime?

Maybe the Problem Is Not with the Program!

I've just returned from a conference where I was once again appalled at how we manage to turn the most interesting subjects into a mind-numbing ordeal. We tend to refer to these bad presentations as "death by PowerPoint" and blame the program for killing our ability to communicate with an audience.

But the problem isn't with the program. I concur with presentations guru Garr Reynolds that the problem is how we use the program. Part of this is that we aren't aware of the many tools built into the program or the resources available online to support it. The real problem, however, is that we lose our focus by forgetting three basic facts about using PowerPoint:

1. It's about the audience, not you.
2. If they are reading your slides, they're not listening to you.
3. If they can read your presentation from your slides, why should they waste time listening to you?

It's all about the audience

Presentations consultant Nancy Duarte in her first rule of presentations says that the audience is king. After all, they are the reason you are speaking. Understanding their

expectations is the starting point for developing your presentation.

Once you accept that the audience is your focus, the advantages of PowerPoint become a lot clearer. One of the facts we forget is that a large portion of your audience consists of visual learners; they respond better to visual concepts than to text.

There is evidence to support the theory that people can retain and recall concepts communicated visually much better than those communicated by text. The ability to convey visual concepts is what makes PowerPoint such a powerful tool.

One other issue is the limited attention span of the audience. The average audience member has been conditioned by television to have an attention span of about eight minutes. This is the reason speakers need to introduce new material every eight to ten minutes. PowerPoint allows for the necessary visual stimulation.

While PowerPoint can provide you with cues for your key topics, it is not your outline. That's what notes are for. Presentations are intended to enhance the audience experience, not the speaker's.

They're not listening

I've seen it many times: the speaker flashes a text heavy slide on the screen and the eyes of the audience are drawn to it. The speaker fades into the background and anything being said is only partially heard as the audience struggles to read the slide.

The reverse should be true. Your slide should be like the background scenery in a play with you taking center stage. It should stimulate the audience in a way that calls attention to your topic in a way that makes the audience want to pay attention to you.

Many speakers try to put everything they want to tell the audience on a slide. Sometimes this is because they are afraid of forgetting something, or so the audience can have the slide deck as a take away. The result is that key points are buried in supporting information and get lost.

Worried about forgetting something? Prepare notes (PowerPoint makes this easy). Rehearse more. Better still, don't worry about it. If you forget something other than a key point, it really won't matter. I always prepare more material than I will use and adjust my presentation based on audience reaction. Remember, internalize, don't memorize!

Why should they listen to you?

Your slide deck is not your handout. I know PowerPoint makes it easy to turn it into one but let me repeat that: your slide deck is not your handout. If the audience can get everything of value in your presentation from your slide deck, you have most likely crammed too much information onto your slides.

Handouts are part of your presentation along with your slides and notes. A well-crafted handout lets you avoid trying to cover

everything in your presentation. You can provide charts and graphs that the audience can actually read. A well-done handout is more likely to be retained, something that is important if you're trying to build relationships.

Converting your old PowerPoint

Converting an old PowerPoint is a good way to learn how to increase its effectiveness through simplicity.

Consider the typical slide: it has a number of major bullet points with supporting bullet points under each. Your starting point is to delete all the supporting bullet points. Why? Think about it; the supporting points are the content you are providing. They constitute the value that you are giving to the audience. They belong in your notes or handout.

Now take the key points that remain. Chances are you can make each one a separate page or build a progression that can be revealed as you talk. It's also possible that your key points really aren't key but are actually supporting a larger concept. That's what you want to target.

Finally, consider what material goes in your handout. You can provide more detailed information and references or expand on key points. Supporting graphs and charts are also fair game. Anything that enhances the value of your presentation to the audience can be considered.

PowerPoint is a tool. It has done a lot to ruin presentations but that is not the fault of the tool. It is how we use that tool that makes the difference between a memorable presentation that provides value to the audience and death by PowerPoint. After all, "it's a poor workman who blames his tools." 