Does PowerPoint Make Us Stupid?

A "minifesto" on using the software that changed meetings forever

By Sue Johnston
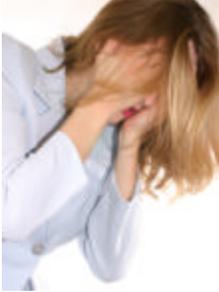
Let's do the math.

If 30 million presentations will be given today, and they're all as interesting as the ones you've seen lately, how many people will stay awake, pay attention, and get the message?

Once upon a time we could go to a meeting and people would talk to each other. Sometimes they wrote things on a board or passed around documents to examine. But the main ingredient of a meeting was the sharing of information and ideas. The visual element was secondary. And nobody pretended it was entertainment.

In today's meetings, we sit in darkened rooms, staring at too-bright pages of blurred, microscopic figures, gritting our teeth over the inevitable typing errors, gagging on cheesy clip art meant to add life to dry content, reaching for the Tylenol when the yellow text shows up on the blue background with the red gears in the border, wondering what's really going on, and hoping it will all end soon.

Microsoft has sold several million copies of its PowerPoint presentation software, which means people are churning out trillions of slides every year. But Bill Gates and his mates aren't to blame. For years, companies have been using devices from 35mm slides to overhead projectors to slap images up on the walls of business meetings. Microsoft just perfected the technology and made it cheap. The business world is now addicted.

And that's not a good thing.

PowerPoint – Plague or Pest?

In his book, *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* Lou Gerstner tells of an important meeting he attended shortly after becoming president of IBM. One of his execs was putting his second transparency on the overhead projector when Gerstner walked over and turned off the projector. "Let's just talk about your business," he said.

There, in the heart of techno-land, a leader recognized that what was on the slides was never going to reveal the business story as well as a good conversation.

Edward R. Tufte, the Yale professor who (quite literally) wrote the book on *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, makes some strong arguments that suggest PowerPoint should not be put in the hands of just anyone. His 2003 pamphlet, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*, suggests that the software's linear approach and its requirement to reduce everything to a series of bullet points impede our ability to perceive and process data.

"PowerPoint is entirely presenter oriented, and not content-oriented, not audience-oriented," writes Tufte. Although presentation software helps speakers outline their talks, to show diverse visual materials, and to use the slides in talks, printed reports, and the internet, he suggests there's a darker side. Slideware also allows presenters "to replace serious analysis with chart

junk, over-produced layouts, cheerleader logotypes and branding, and corny clip art. That's PowerPoint Phluff"

Bullet points, he says, may be helpful to presenters trying to organize their data – particularly poorly organized speakers. But it does nothing for the audience. He cites brain research that shows the difficulties human brains have processing such "thin" information and making decisions based on it. He condemns the triumph of format over content and "an attitude of commercialism that turns everything into a sales pitch."

A 1998 Harvard Business Review article suggests that bullet lists "encourage us to be lazy." We pare information down to mere generalizations. Our lists, while they can show priority or sequence, don't show the relationships between the items. Using PowerPoint makes situations seem less complicated than they are.

Tufte recalls the failure, in early 2003, of the Columbia space shuttle and suggests that circulating information via PowerPoint led to engineers underestimating the possible damage caused by debris hitting the shuttle, shortly after lift-off. An ambiguous headline, followed by unspecific data in bullet points suggested to viewers that the Columbia was not in danger. The problem was compounded because the presentation slides were circulated to people who hadn't been present for the live presentation.

PowerPoint? Or power pointless?
When someone with Tufte's reputation takes on a product as successful as PowerPoint, others are quick to join the battle. Articles with headlines such as, "Ban It Now! Friends Don't Let Friends Use PowerPoint" have appeared regularly in the business press, internet sites and web logs. Yet for every one of these there's another showing you "How To Addict Your Audience To Your PowerPoint."

What's the deal? As with everything else, the answer is moderation.

Just because this software *allows* you to use preformatted backgrounds, choose fonts of many colours and styles, and make text or graphics fly in from the wings to the sound of a cash register's "ka-ching!" doesn't mean you *should* do it. Simplicity can be powerful.

My own current PowerPoint style is to use an eye-catching photo on a plain background with my point as the headline. It's just a background for a conversation about the content. It's the first step towards my goal to be able to just sit and "talk about your business" The coolest presenters now just talk. They move around the room. They make eye contact. They use their voices to express energy and emotion. They aren't distracted by temperamental remote controls and the possibility of projector malfunctions.

Your content can also influence the choice of presentation style. Some material doesn't lend itself to the PowerPoint format. One of my clients complained to me that she was getting nowhere developing the sales presentation for her new business. "It's too linear!" she wailed. This woman and her business rely on a web of connections between people and ideas. Nothing about her moves in a straight line. So I showed her my mind mapping software and the thoughts flew together. Now her presentation is a meaningful dialogue rather than a deck of slides.

PowerPoint lets you get so lost in words and pictures that you lose track of your message. You can also burn up a lot of time looking for the perfect image to go with a thought or squeezing an idea into a headline that fits limited space without dropping the type size. Is this time better spent making sure your ideas are solid and that the flow from one idea to another is logical?

As Tufte and others point out, PowerPoint serves the presenter more than the audience. To be successful in reaching and serving your audience, you must keep them in mind as you plan, create, and deliver the presentation. Your job is to guide them to a logical and informed

conclusion. How do you get them there? What images and words will convey the facts or ideas they need to hear? Is a slideshow the best way to transmit these ideas?

PowerPoint – Plague or Pest?
A few months ago, I set out to find out what other people thought about PowerPoint and slide software and how they used it. I invited readers of my e-zine to take part in a PowerPoint Poll. It's not very scientific, since our sample size was just around 20, yet it revealed some interesting info about people's use of the product.

One theme that emerged was that PowerPoint's value very much depends on whether you are the presenter or the audience. As members of the audience, 50 per cent of respondents want to focus their attention on the presenter. The next most popular as a resting place for the eyes was the screen, at 30 per cent. Another 10 per cent look at the handout, if there is one. A final 10 per cent look at everything.

Asked to rate how well PowerPoint presentations help them understand various types of information, respondents find it very or somewhat helpful for technical material, quantitative material, and product information.

Type of information	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	Confusing	I tune out
Technical material	30	60	10	10	0
Financial material	20	50	10	10	10
Other quantitative info	33	33	11	0	22
Anecdotal material	0	10	60	0	30
Product/service info	0	67	11	11	11
News of changes at work	20	30	30	10	10

Asked about handouts of the PowerPoint slides, as audience members, people feel; these are generally useful for recalling details of the presentation later, but they're not much good if you didn't see the presentation unless detailed notes are attached. As presenters, more than half the respondents create separate handouts, rather than using copies of the slides, in any form.

Half of those answering the survey use the background templates that come with the PowerPoint software. Another 30 per cent use a format their organizations had created for them.

Asked to check all the reasons they use PowerPoint or similar tools to support their presentations, people responded as follows:
- o It helps me explain complex material   50 per cent
- o It makes dull material look interesting   20 per cent
- o It helps me organize the info   70 per cent
- o It saves me time   20 per cent
- o Cool presentations make my department look good   10 per cent
- o My clients expect it   40 per cent
- o My organization insists   30 per cent
- o I don't use PowerPoint or similar tools   0 per cent
- o Other (please specify)   60 per cent

Some of the other reasons included:
- o "Habit"
- o "Artificial "good feel""
- o "When art would enhance what I'm saying"
- o "Gives visual shape to abstract concepts"
- o "I know where I am in the presentation" (A moment of total honesty?)

When asked to select the optimal number of slides are ideal for a presentation, 30 per cent chose 12 (the number mentioned in most guidelines for good presentations). Another 30 per cent opted for 13-20.

Invited to say a few words about how useful the software is to them, we heard from several people, and it was interesting how many used the word "crutch."

"Too linear and formulaic."

"I find it useful as a presenter and not so useful as the presentee. Big message there!"

"Useful if used as a tool, not a crutch."

"It has its place as a 'corporate standard.' We are saddled with it, but it shouldn't be a weak presenter's crutch. Presenters should be licensed before use, to prevent the awful norm."

"Ease of use – fast editing. I have had management require me to make changes within the hour before doing the presentation."

"I think it is a crutch and I've rarely seen a PP presentation done well, so I'd have to say it hampers rather than supports a good presentation."

"Nothing is worse than having the speaker talk to the screen, press the remote like he/she is trying to launch a rocket, or drone through the bullet points one after the other, telling the audience what they can already read."

"It's inflexible, and speakers run into trouble when they need to cut time from their presentations."

"I like it when the presenter puts up a graph, when needed, or other technical information and lets us really stare at it. It confuses me to see pictures of words, such as an outline. It's pulling left and right brain at the same time. Pictures of emotional concepts are superb, particularly photographs of people. They are very compelling and I give the audience time to stare at them and feel. I use them in Emotional Intelligence talks and little else."

"Many of my PowerPoint presentations feature extensive graphics in order to catch and maintain attention. Most presentations are required attendance, so the interest level of the listener isn't always there."

So, what do we learn from all this?

As with all modes of communication, we must apply generous amounts of careful thought before proceeding. Eliminating PowerPoint isn't going to improve presentations around the world. Consciously selecting whether – and how – to use it will.

Sue Johnston, MBA, ABC, is a communication strategist and coach who helps people in business express themselves. Her company, It's Understood Communication (www.itsunderstood.com), specializes in workplace communication, with particular emphasis on emotional intelligence and employee engagement. Sue can be reached at sue @itsunderstood.com .

Sue Johnston © 2004