

skillstudio

leads

The PowerPoint Revolution

Ever suffered from death by PowerPoint?

Tired of text heavy slides being presented?

Like to liberate your staff from PowerPoint Fatigue?

Have a read of Liz Banks' hard hitting review of the misuse of MS PowerPoint in business today. And see for yourself that there is now a cure for PowerPoint Fatigue - where the presenter takes centre stage; the audience is treated to a performance; and PowerPoint is used as a tool to enhance the message as opposed to being the crutch on which so many presentations currently rely.

This article was published in the October 2005 edition of ARGENT, the Journal of The Financial Services Forum.



Liz Banks is Managing Director and co-founder of Skillstudio Limited, a UK-based communication skills training consultancy. Liz is passionate about helping people realise their true potential. She is also a regular contributor of articles on presenting and public speaking, and has appeared on several TV and radio programmes as an expert commentator on communication skills.

For more information on Skillstudio's unique range of training options check out their website at:- www.skillstudio.co.uk or call them on +44 (0) 8456 444 150.

Presentations

WHERE'S THE POWER – AND WHAT'S THE POINT?

A sledgehammer is a great tool, but only when used for the job it is designed for. The same is true of presentation software, as Liz Banks relates.

It's Friday afternoon, and you are about to watch a colleague's presentation. As the lights dim and the dull purring of the projector lulls you into a semi-comatose state, feelings of despair begin to take over, as the presenter introduces his thirty slides. You brace yourself for the endurance test that lies ahead.

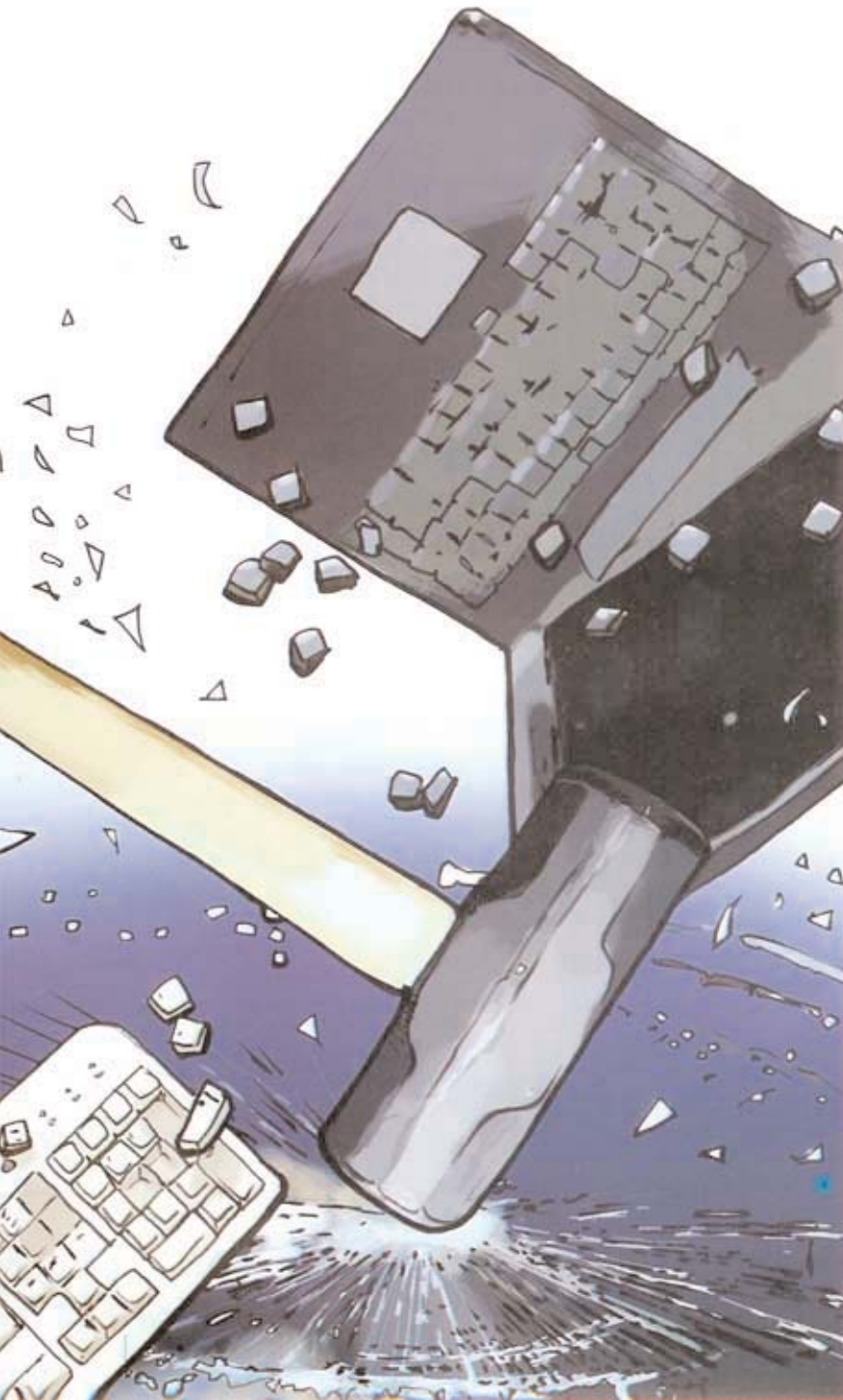
Recognise the scene? It is becoming increasingly common in the business environment, and we now need to take stock and ask what the purpose - and point - of PowerPoint is.

At first, it seemed to be the answer to all our concerns. For the less experienced presenter, it became a great way to put a slide-show together, its neat gadgets and easy-to-follow structure offering a "quick-fix" solution to presentation anxieties. All the user had to do was to "deliver" the slides.

So why, then, doesn't the audience always enthuse about it in quite the same way? And why do so many people who attend my workshops want to know how they can engage better with their audiences, and why their audiences often seem indifferent or even uninterested in what they are trying to present?

One reason, of course, may just be that the topic is deadly boring, but our experience suggests that there are some more worrying and fundamental causes of this emerging reaction.

For example, too many presenters - and these days there are many more presenters, in part because the



very availability of presentation software encourages more frequent presentations - seem to regard "delivering" as being synonymous with "reading aloud", or even "hiding behind".

But who wants to listen to someone reading aloud - don't we all know how to read already? If that is all the presentation is about, it would be easier just to give the slides to the audience to take away and digest at their leisure, in more congenial surroundings.

The slick and polished nature of PowerPoint - and the rival software packages before they fell by the commercial wayside - has weakened the human input in presenting to such a low level of significance that the presenter's role is often reduced to no more than the "PowerPoint operator" - and many are not particularly confident in that side of things either!

Presentations without purpose?

So where has it all gone wrong, and how can we redress the balance?

Part of the problem, of course, is that too many presentations these days are really tedious for both speaker and audience - and it shows! In the "old" days, when preparing OHP or 35mm slides for a talk took days, if not weeks, there was a natural barrier to presentation overkill. But now, when PowerPoint allows you (not that we recommend this!) to put together the slides on the train on the morning of the meeting, there is a tendency to opt for the full show when, in many cases, an informal meeting might serve the need rather better. A presentation without a real purpose is not a good idea.

Another key factor in the demise of the art of presenting is our basic human phobia about public speaking - one of the commonest fears - and our lack of motivation to address this issue. PowerPoint rode onto the scene as a knight in shining armour, offering a crutch to get over our fears - or, rather, to get round them by hiding behind the technology. The screen became our polished shield, reducing our feelings of insecurity by taking the audience's attention away from us and directing it to the big screen behind, which in most cases was far more exciting to look at.

Unfortunately, the protective effect evaporates very rapidly when you see the eyes of your audience starting to take on a glazed expression - and you are only on your third slide of thirty. You think it is time to mount your steed and flee - if only you could - but you still have twenty-seven slides to battle through.

So we need to go back to basics, to learn to get over our fears and anxieties and to regain control of our presentations. We don't need to ditch the PowerPoint, but we need to start using it rather than abusing it.

Golden rules

Going back to basics means we must return to the first

golden rule of PowerPoint - which almost everyone ignores. Remember that you are leading the PowerPoint, not the other way round.

But as we have already said, nerves play a crucial role

There is a tendency to opt for the full show when an informal meeting might serve the need rather better.

here. Because we are nervous, we cling on to our PowerPoint for dear life - as if we are clinging to a rock in a stormy sea. We therefore need practical techniques to allow ourselves to let go without fear of drowning.

Good delivery skills give us with this much-desired confidence. We have to re-learn the meaning of "delivery" - that it is not reading off the slide or hiding behind a laptop. It is all about the art of communication, and learning to command and engage with the audience. These are skills that can be learnt. In fact, most good presenters spend a lot of time practising their delivery techniques.

DON'TS AND MORE DON'TS

Don't ask people if they can "read the slides at the back". If they can't, there's nothing you can do about it - and you should have checked this out well before the presentation.

Don't make the text too small - edit your words, not the font size, if they don't fit the slide. There is a reason why 44pt Arial is the default font in PowerPoint.

Don't use lots of different fonts - this distracts the audience and can make the slides difficult to read. Choose one font - or at most two - and use consistently between slides. If you don't like Arial, remember that some fonts (Bodoni, Tahoma and Verdana, for example) have been specially designed for legibility on-screen.

Don't get carried away with the technical wizardry in PowerPoint. For example, simple dissolves between slides can make your presentation look professional, but some of the options are so glitzy that they, rather than the words, become the focus. So don't overdo it, and stick to just one style.

Don't forget to rehearse the presentation, to check that the things that you intend to say will actually make sense to the audience, and to check how long it will take to say them.

And don't forget to add at least 10% to that estimate of delivery time. The real thing always takes longer than any rehearsal, and you don't want to spoil your carefully-prepared conclusion or punch-line by having to rush it at the end.

Voice is a crucial element in successful presentation delivery. Very few people use it to its full potential. When we work with people on their vocal technique, they are surprised at how empowering this is in generating confidence and, thus, more impressive and persuasive delivery.

A strong presence is also very important. Poor stance, irritating habits and lack of eye contact will all inhibit ability to engage with an audience. Often, presenters remain too close to, or even attached to, their laptops. It is as though they are saying to their audience, "Don't look at me! I'm not important - I'm just an accessory to the equipment".

I always advise presenters to move away from the equipment when they begin their presentation. By moving closer to the audience at the start, you are saying to them, "I am in charge of the presentation and want you to listen." Using a remote control rather than the mouse will encourage you to move more. The more you move, the more you command your space and engage with your audience.

Getting equipped

Another golden rule is implicit here - make sure that you know how to use the remote and the mouse, and that you are familiar with all the basic keyboard operations (such as W for white screen). Make sure you know how to re-boot your presentation - PCs do "hang"

audience to look at the screen rather than the presenter. Review what is on your slides and ask yourself if it is audience-friendly. Too often, slides are less of a friend and more of a foe. Who needs a friend who throws an endless stream of words at you with the sole consequence of boring you to death?

Clarity

Slides must be kept clean. Clear out the unnecessary words. Fewer words say more, and have far greater impact. Use punchy phrases that grab attention and are easy to read at a glance. Remember, the more the audience reads off the slide, the less they are listening to you. And reading is tiring - especially on a Friday afternoon after lunch. Soon the faces in front of you will adopt that glazed expression, and the minds will drift away to thinking about plans for the weekend.

"But how will I stay on track if I don't have all my notes on screen?" is the typical cry of alarm. But it is actually easier to present with cleaner slides.

Slides with just short phrases and key words provide an effective prompt, but also give you the freedom to become more spontaneous and conversational with your audience. Remember, the slides are there for your audience - they are not your notes. Do not confuse the two; they have different purposes.

If you are nervous about "drying up" or drifting off course and missing some key points, you can always

We need to look at people if we want to engage with them - but how can we do this when we are reading off slides?

occasionally, and few things sap the confidence of a presenter more than having to ask if there is an "expert" in the audience. And remember to double-check all this in the room as well, with the equipment you will actually be using.

The next issue is the construction of the slides. Have you ever had a conversation with someone in which you didn't look at each other at all? If you have, the chances are that there wasn't a lot of rapport between you. We do need to look at people, and give eye contact, if we want to engage with them, and this is just as important when we are making a presentation. But how can we do this when we are reading off slides - and often looking at the screen behind us, leaving our backs to the audience?

Another golden rule is that PowerPoint should only support the message, not be the message.

Reading your slides verbatim is not the answer. This is about as inspirational as the most leaden TV presenter reading an autocue with no understanding of the story behind it - and it also encourages the

combine the old with the new by summarizing the things that you want to say (rather than show on the screen) on crib cards which you can also use for cues to change slides. Or, if you are presenting from a lectern with a lap-top in front of you, there is a facility in PowerPoint (that not a lot of people seem to know about) that lets you put - for your eyes only - a script or prompts alongside the slides.

A good PowerPoint presentation that stimulates and inspires - is this possible? Yes, if you have the power to deliver with confidence, and yes, if your presentation makes the right points. Keep the PowerPoint in perspective and don't allow it to dominate. Always remember: you are the presenter and you are your best visual aid. ■

Liz Banks is the managing director and co-founder of Skillstudio.