nLightened Thoughts

Avoiding Death by Powerpoint with Eye-Catching Visuals

How many outstanding Powerpoint presentations have you attended? If you're like most people, that number is somewhere between zero and one. But it doesn't have to be that way.

The two most common mistakes people make when they create a Powerpoint deck are using bullet points and overloading the screen with text. Powerpoint is not a teleprompter, but you've undoubtedly attended a session in which the presenter showed slide after slide with paragraph after paragraph of text and then read the text to you.

What Did You Say?

That, without question, is the worst possible way to communicate, even though this isn't intuitive.

You might think that your *showing* people the information and *telling* people the information means that they'll absorb more of it. After all, they're receiving the same information two ways. And that's exactly the problem.

The part of the brain that processes text is also the part that processes speech and our brains can't do two things at once. When we try to multi-task, we're like extremely slow computers. Computers can't do two things at once, either, but they can switch between tasks in milliseconds. Our brains are much slower.

So when you read text to someone and expect them to read the text on a screen at the same time, they won't quite hear you and they won't quite read the text. They'll skip ahead to see where you're going and miss what you're saying, then return to listening and forget what they read.

The recommendation to fix this problem often involve limiting bullet points to some small number of words (3, 5, and 7 are common) and limiting the number of bullet points on a page to an equally small number. This helps, but it really doesn't solve the problem.
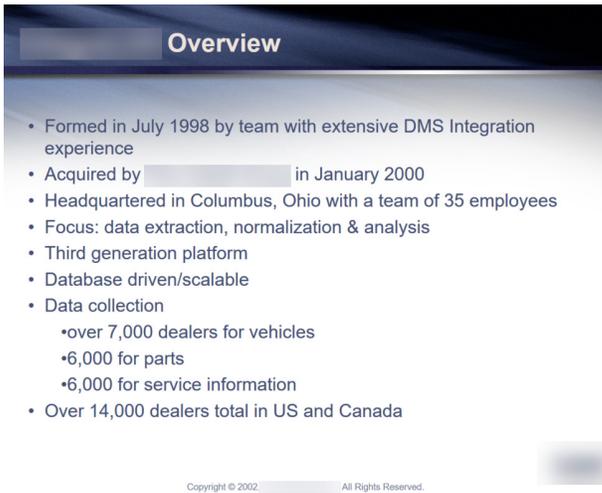
Tufte, Kawasaki, & Duarte

Several people have recommended either destroying Powerpoint or training people to use it more intelligently.

Statistician and Yale professor emeritus Edward Tufte (political science, statistics, and computer science) has a well intentioned but futile vendetta against Powerpoint. Tufte insists on clear communications, a lofty goal and one with which I agree wholeheartedly — but Powerpoint isn't going to be eliminated.

Guy Kawasaki, now a venture capitalist, was one of Apple's early employees. He was involved in marketing the original Macintosh and was Apple's chief evangelist for many years. As a venture capitalist, Kawasaki sits trough hundreds of Powerpoint programs every year. He says "Most of these pitches are crap: sixty slides about a 'patent pending first-mover advantage' [and] 'all we have to do is get 1% of the people in China to buy our product' startup."

Kawasaki has proposed the 10/20/30 rule for Powerpoint presentations: Have 10 slides, make your presentation in 20 minutes, and use 30-point type. "The majority of the presentations that I see have text in a ten point font. As much text as possible is jammed into the slide, and then the presenter reads it. However, as soon as the audience figures out that you're reading the text, they

This is an example of what not to do. It's a slide I created in 2002. Fortunately, I've learned a few things in the intervening 15 years.

read ahead of you because they can read faster than you can speak. "The result is that you and the audience are out of sync."

Those are good points. After all, as Kawasaki says, "If you must use more than ten slides to explain your business, you probably don't have a business."

But he doesn't go far enough. The best Powerpoint presentations have virtually no words.

Nancy Duarte is a writer, speaker, and CEO best known for her books on presentations: *Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences*, *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations*, and the *HBR Guide to Persuasive Presentations*.

She a 3-second rule that reminds me of the 3-second rule direct marketing guru Ray Jutkins recommended many years ago: "If you don't get the recipient's attention in 3 seconds," Ray said,

Today, I probably would have created 4 slides instead of just one so that each of the single words could have been disclosed based on the presenter's preferred timing.

"your expensive direct marketing piece will be in the trash."

Duarte, says that if a viewer isn't able to understand the key points of a slide in 3 seconds, it's too complicated. She tells her clients to think of slides as billboards.

Have you ever seen a billboard with bullet points? Drivers have only a few seconds to glance at a billboard so a complex message won't work. Something like "McDonald's, next exit, turn right" is about all that can be processed in 3 seconds. Add an image of a Big Mac and — if the motorist is hungry — your billboard has done its job.

Bullet point are easy and that may be why people use them. Back in middle school, you probably learned to create an outline for papers you wrote. I think most people just wrote the paper and then created the outline after the fact, but that's where bullet points come from. They're outlines — the signposts for your presentation.

But your signposts should not visible to the audience.

Keep it Interesting

Performers know that the act should end when the audience still wants more.

They also understand timing, pacing, and organization. Stand-up comics, for example, make the job look easy, but only after they've spent hundreds of hours to create a program that appears to be spontaneous.

Powerpoint can play music and videos. Would these make sense in your presentation? If so, be sure to confirm that the equipment you're using will be able to play back the media.

Change direction or break occasionally. Ask questions that involve the audience. If you've ever seen an outstanding teacher in action, you've seen this technique. The session you're presenting may be scheduled for an
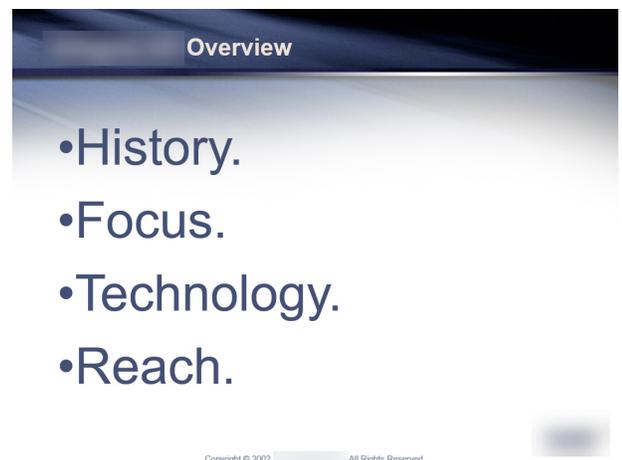
hour, so find a way to ask for feedback every 10 minutes or so. Involvement eliminates boredom.

But Don't Go Overboard

Animations can be helpful. I'm not suggesting those silly animations that Powerpoint can create between slides — the flips, spins, twirls, and such. Those are horrible.

In most cases, transitions should be fades or cuts. If you think you need one of the cheesy special effects, think about Apple or Amazon or Microsoft. Would they use this effect?

But if you want to show growth over time on a chart, animating the growth is both reasonable and effective. Use the technology in ways that make sense.

Had I been asked to create this slide a few years later, I might have concentrated on single-word signposts and I hope I would have have lost the bullet points, too, because they serve no purpose.

When you have several points to discuss, it's effective to use a multi-part graphic and then show each new segment at the appropriate time. The presentation shown at the lower left could begin with just the history piece showing, then the other pieces could be added.

Or the speaker might want to show just the individual pieces during the explanation of each segment and then bring all four puzzle pieces back to sum up the company's advantages.

The take-home message here is to use photographs or other illustrations whenever you can, to avoid creating slides with a lot of text, to minimize bullet points, and to create a dynamic presentation that will captivate the audience.

Do that and death by Powerpoint will be a malady of the past. Ω