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Making-Over PowerPoint

Tailoring Your Message through Relational-Style Presentation

By Chantal Bossé

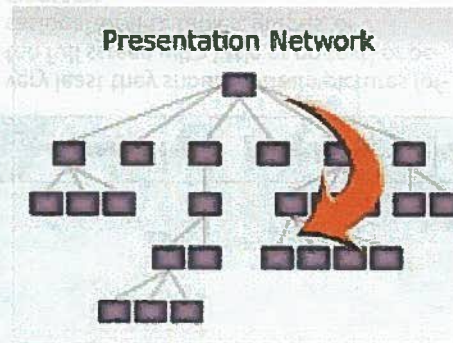
During the past twenty years, PowerPoint presentations have found their way into virtually all aspects of human interaction – for better or worse, some would say. This article focuses on the “better” use of PowerPoint, techniques few people yet know but that may considerably alter your view of digital presentation and its potential. Professional communication styles are changing and the old ways of using PowerPoint are evolving too. Here is a quick summary of the four most important issues you might wish to consider.

Throw-Away vs. Reusable Content:

A frequent criticism of PowerPoint is that it encourages cheap, throw-away, bullet point-filled slides that offer viewers little visual meaning. John slaps a few pages of notes on Sally’s desk and says, “Here. Make this look pretty for my trip to Japan next week.” What John typically really means is that he wants the slides to act as digital notes he can read while presenting – regardless of what might be best for the

audience. In all likelihood he won’t use these slides again after the performance because they have no lasting value. Little thought is given to overall communication strategy or to the advantages of designing high-quality, reusable slides that work equally well with future audiences in other contexts.

Forward-thinking companies and organizations are beginning to realize audiences deserve better. They are moving away from long, linear, isolated, low-value slide shows and looking at presentation materials more from the perspective of a Web site or database designer. Focus is shifting to building quality content and then strategically planning its continued use. Information is arranged in small, related modules and designed to be flexible, permanent, and reusable across perhaps hundreds of performances and multiple pre-



senters. We call this kind of content arrangement a Presentation Network. Speakers using such an approach often have hundreds, or sometimes thousands, of individual slides and slide shows available for on-demand selection. Relevant pieces of information are accessible via navigation in ways very similar to moving around inside a Web site.

Text-Based Content vs. Rich Media:



A closely-related issue involves moving away from excessive text on slides to rich media alternatives. This is an extremely important topic for modern presenters to consider. A sizeable number of studies suggest our brain processes and understands more information if messages are both verbal and truly visual in nature at the same time. By “truly visual” we mean in this case that slides should contain anything besides written text, which really is

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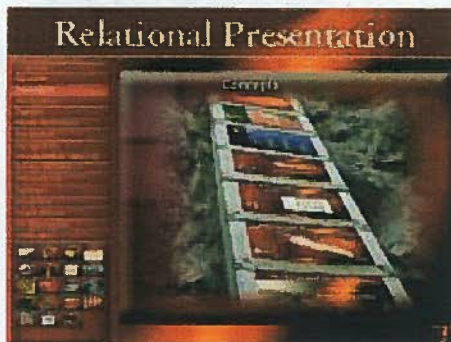
just a form of verbal information. Consider using meaningful pictures to visually augment what you are saying, along with customized graphics, video, and again meaningful animations – movement that accomplishes some helpful or explanatory purpose. The slide pictured here is one we use while exploring the system dynamics found in speaking environments. It does contain some basic animations but the visual elements themselves are the critical components.

The power of well-planned, carefully-designed visual display literally is beyond words. It can help “say” what words alone cannot. To be on the cutting edge of tomorrow’s digital communication, all of us must learn the language of visual media, where pictures, video, and other visual stimuli form the vocabulary. Think of it this way. When we view news channels, watch movies, listen to music videos, play video games, or visit graphics-based Web sites these days, are there endless successions of bullet points? Do scenes drone on across monotonous slide backgrounds all looking alike? Whether we like it or not, our presentations compete with these other forms of media people are seeing every day. Without visually-meaningful content on your slides, what is there to keep an audience’s attention?

If possible, almost all your slides should have a strong visual media basis. In the

very least they should contain pictures (often full screen with little or no text) or occasional SIMPLE tables, graphs, or diagrams.

Strictly Linear Delivery vs. Choice:



Human communication patterns are naturally spontaneous and interactive, yet the traditional use of PowerPoint (whether bullet points or advancing from slide-to-slide) locks us into a set sequence. We no longer have the freedom to change directions and otherwise adjust message flow. If someone asks a question, the best we can do most of the time is either answer verbally or say, “You know, I have a slide that talks about that about 20 slides from now. Hold on and we’ll get there.” Of course, by the time you finally DO get there, the prime opportunity for customizing the message to that person’s interests (and attention) is gone.

Another reason presenters are moving towards network-based presentation is the quest for a natural, conversational speaking style when addressing an audience. Imagine a café conversation with a friend where you say, “Wait. Let me acknowledge you in 20 minutes after I finish telling you everything else I want to say.” That conversation probably won’t last long – nor does the attention of viewers when we cannot gracefully address their interests. Visual interactivity is essential for optimal PowerPoint use. We must be able to dynamically respond to our speaking environment and adjust messages accordingly.

The slide shown here is an example of how we visually explain the concept of staying on track during a live performance, even while actively encouraging audience interaction. The idea is to approach a message in segments (modules) and move from one segment to the next, towards the end goal. During that process an interactive presenter may occasionally (or frequently) navigate to supporting material and then return to the planned track.

Information vs. Connection:

Here is one final thought that is controversial even among many of the speakers we work with. So you be the judge. Most PowerPoint users tend to view their primary role as that of “giving information.” They must teach something, announce all

the details on how some product will save company money, or give board members all the data they can stomach in one sitting.

While information dispersion is certainly important, we suggest it is merely your secondary role as a presenter. Audience members will NOT remember all of those facts. They won’t. They can always look up the facts in a handout you give, in books you recommend, or on the Internet. What they WILL remember is how well you connected with them in a normal, human, interactive way – your sincerity, professionalism, passion, and empathy. In other words, your primary role is to entertain, connect, build a relationship, and basically sell viewers on the fact that you are worthy of their valuable attention. Without their attention, facts and information mean absolutely nothing. Use the suggestions described above (quality visual content, flexibility, and interactivity) to build connections and turn PowerPoint use into a truly powerful advantage in your activities.

More information on relational-style presentation is available at <http://www.aspirecommunications.com>.

A free guide for exploring visually-interactive speaking is available by emailing: rpguidepdf@aspirecommunications.com

