

Talking Points

Picking the Right Typefaces, Colors and Content Can Make the Difference Between an Engaged Audience and One that Decides It's Nap Time.

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Note: Dr. Kodukula was interviewed for this article, and his book *Speak with Power, Passion and Pizzazz! 222 Dynamite Tips to Dazzle Your Audience* is cited.

You can see it coming:

slide after slide detailing every miniscule aspect of the project presented in 8-point type, laden in some weird curlicue typeface. And maybe, just maybe, there's a sound effect or two.

Death by PowerPoint is never pretty—or necessary.

When it's time to make a big presentation, many project leaders just can't resist breaking out all their toys. They scribble notes on paper, bullet off key points on flipcharts, create drawings for overhead projectors—and then there's the fully loaded PowerPoint slide. Yet, all these systems, tools and techniques often obscure a basic fact: Without a well-conceived message and a properly executed approach, even the most tantalizing information and eye-catching graphics will miss the mark.

"The vast majority of presenters make significant mistakes. Their presentations fall short and leave attendees bored, confused and exhausted," says Prasad Kodukula, Ph.D., PMP, coauthor of *Speak with Power, Passion and Pizzazz! 222 Dynamite Tips to Dazzle Your Audience* [Hats Off Books, 2003]. He's also president of Kodukula & Associates Inc., a Chicago, Illinois, USA firm that specializes in management training and public speaking.

Speakers must learn to organize their material logically, present it in an engaging way and offer a clear message—all while interacting with the audience.

"When a presenter establishes an emotional connection with the audience and offers information that's usable and digestible, success follows," Dr. Kodukula says.

THAT'S WHAT WE CALL OVERKILL

Although it may seem counterintuitive, less is often more. People usually try to pack too much into a short presentation, says Garr Reynolds, associate professor of management at Kansai Gaidai

University in Osaka, Japan and author of *Presentation Zen, Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery* [New Riders Press, 2007]. They overload the audience with information, creating slides chockablock with tangential material and obscure details.

The fact of the matter is PowerPoint slides should serve as a complement rather than a crutch. Reading project notes or slides verbatim is a recipe for boredom. And falling back on an array of typefaces, graphics and special effects to dazzle an audience doesn't make up for a lack of substance.

Many presenters devote far too much time to perfecting slides and not nearly enough to understanding the audience and polishing the content. A compelling story with a strong narrative arc is the foundation for any successful presentation. Mr. Reynolds likens it to an excellent documentary film: It's easy to understand the underlying message and walk away knowing what's important.

Outstanding presenters first establish rapport with an audience—usually through an anecdote or a few questions to encourage feedback and interaction. Then, they proceed to key points, the body of the presentation and the conclusion. When it's done right, the session seems more like a friendly discussion than a data dump.

"When an individual knows the material and can relate to the audience, he or she is in a position to communicate effectively," Dr. Kodukula explains.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

Part of the problem is that many speakers—including project managers—don't understand how the human mind works during a presentation, says Stephen M. Kosslyn, Ph.D., John Lindsley professor of psychology and chair of the department of psychology at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. He is also the author of *Clear and to The Point: 8*

> A COMPELLING story with a strong narrative arc is the foundation for any successful presentation.

SLIDE SHOW: KNOWING RIGHT FROM WRONG

SMART ROI

- Basic typefaces throughout
- Limited color usage and special effects
- Same bullet point style throughout
- Bolder colors
- Simple backgrounds
- Clear charts and graphs
- Business-like graphics that apply to content



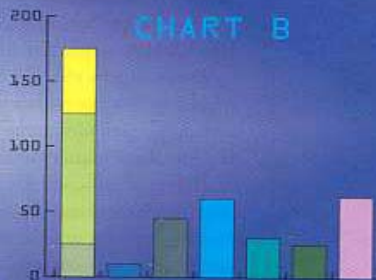
THE
GOOD

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR COMPANY'S ROI THIS YEAR AND IN THE FUTURE!!!

- Hard-to-read point size
- Complex typefaces
- Mixed styles of art and type
- Clashing colors

MIXED USE OF TYPE

- Different bullet styles
- De-emphasizing main points with color
- Busy background
- Clip art



THE
BAD



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—PRASAD KODUKULA, PH.D., PMP,
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Psychological Principles for Compelling PowerPoint Presentations [Oxford University Press, 2007].

"Humans have certain cognitive strengths and weaknesses," he explains. "People remember things extremely well when they hear stories and a strong narrative voice." To establish a clear storyline, speakers should supply the necessary information and skip any extraneous information that distracts from the main point.

For example, "If you're displaying a graph and it isn't necessary to break things down by gender or age, don't do so," he cautions. "People will be mentally averaging the irrelevant distinctions in the slide, rather than thinking about the point you're trying to make."

Here are a few other guidelines from Dr. Kosslyn:

Remember the "rule of four." Cognitive research shows human short-term memory is generally limited to holding four units of information at any moment. For example, the first slide might depict four types of bridges. Once an audience has a chance to view and remember the bridges, then it's possible to provide three or four basic facts about each type of bridge—along with a line or two of text. Over time, it's possible to recall dozens, if not hundreds, of facts by creating a hierarchy and classification system. Not surprisingly, the right graphics can help comprehension.

Information should look the part. Project managers must understand how to emphasize and deemphasize content.

"Our brains are drawn automatically to differences. So, if a graphic or color is brighter, bigger or darker, that's what people are going to look at," Dr. Kosslyn explains. "You never want to make it difficult for an audience to figure out what they should be looking at and thinking about. You want to guide their eye and their mind where you want them to go."

So if you want a deliverable by a certain date, put it in bold.

It still comes down to location, location, location. Project managers shouldn't overlook pacing and placement. In the 1930s, German researcher Hedwig von Restorff discovered a person is more likely to recall one item from a list or one card from a deck if it's highlighted or differentiated from the rest. However, when one item stands out, it actually makes the others seem less important. As a result, the act of highlighting something can reduce overall comprehension. In a presentation, a dramatic slide can essentially wipe out recollection of the ones that come immediately before and after it. "If you're not careful you may have disrupted the audience's memory," Dr. Kosslyn says.

Plotting out the story line can help untangle even the most complex project material. Add to this a speaker who maintains eye contact, talks in an enthusiastic and varied tone, and isn't afraid to move around and gesticulate a bit, and the foundation for a great presentation begins to take form.

POINT TAKEN

Although it's tempting to grab a laptop and fire up a PowerPoint presentation whenever it's time to speak in front of the team or stakeholders, the high-tech approach isn't necessarily the best way to go. Sometimes, the seemingly retro act of merely talking without any props can pay dividends.

In other cases, handwritten notes on a white board or an overhead projector might get the job done. "It's important to think about how you can use the right tools to present information in the right way. There's no one approach that's best for every situation," says Bronia Szczygiel, a partner at Impact Factory, a London, England communications consulting firm that specializes in design and presentations.

Of course, PowerPoint slides are popular precisely because they're relatively easy to create—and they often make it easier to share information and

guide a discussion. But assembling a great set of slides means following some general rules:

1. **Steer clear of gratuitous graphics and distracting transitions.** In many cases, special effects only pull attention away from the message.
2. **Use a typeface that's large enough to be seen from the back of the room.** This usually means a 20-point typeface or larger.
3. **Get rid of the clutter.** Not every deliverable or deadline needs to be crammed into the presentation.
4. **Organize slides into 15- or 20-minute segments.** And then move to a question-and-answer session, discussion or exercise before resuming with another group of slides.

CHANGE IT UP

Peter Matassa, PMP, knows firsthand about the challenges of creating an effective presentation. Over the past 20 or so years, many have been on target and a few have fallen short of his expectations. Based on that experience, he says there's no substitute for upfront preparation and an ability to adjust on the fly.

Preparation—including carrying a backup copy of a presentation on a thumb drive—can alleviate jitters and solve the problems that do crop up.

But you know what they say about those best-laid plans ...

"Sometimes a presentation falls apart. People wind up with a dazed look on their face or they begin streaming out of the session," says Mr. Matassa, a vice president at TechKnowledge Inc., a Dover, Florida, USA-based consulting firm that specializes in project management. "At that point, you have to change what you're doing and grab their interest again."

It's not uncommon for a presenter to stumble, he argues. "It's how a person reacts and deals with the situation. If you're adequately prepared and able to think on your feet, you can turn things around."

The 5 Fastest Ways to Bore Your Audience to Tears

- 1 Use extremely detailed charts, graphs and tables and put them all in a 10-point typeface so no one can read it.
- 2 Make sure your slides include piles of text and information—and then add more.
- 3 Use cutesy graphics, wild sound effects and an array of animations. And don't forget to use a different transition effect for each slide.
- 4 Treat your audience as if they are illiterate and dumb. Why not read every slide word for word?
- 5 Hide behind the podium, stand motionless and read your notes in a monotone. Don't bother to make any eye contact with the audience.

Mr. Matassa also recommends conducting research and understanding the audience *before* you head into a presentation.

When addressing stakeholders, for example, people of different age groups, education levels and concerns may have varying needs or preferences. It pays to customize the presentation to the particular audience.

And project managers must remain open to change, trying new techniques and paying close attention to audience reaction and comments.

"No matter how many presentations you've done, it's important to understand that you can always grow and you should always be open to change," Mr. Matassa says.

The best speakers are those who let their natural personality emerge in front of a group. "There's no single way to succeed with presentations," he says. Some people can tap into humor and others fall on their face trying to be funny. Some presenters are able to engage with the audience, others tap into remarkable storytelling skills.

"The most important thing is to be yourself and trust that your knowledge and ability will come across in a presentation," Mr. Matassa says. "There's no substitute for authenticity." PM