

Bob Gunn, Editor

Forget Slides, Project Confidence

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Gavin was sweating the proverbial bullets. He was ready to send in his 50 PowerPoint slides for a presentation to the annual sales meeting when he got the word. The format of the session had been changed; there

would be no PowerPoint. Just Gavin and his associates sitting on stools in the front of the room discussing what each felt customers would find of greatest benefit with 40 sales and marketing people.

But without PowerPoint, how could Gavin remember everything he had to say? How could he be sure that he said it exactly right? If he had to give up some of his time to questions and discussion, how could he be sure he'd be able to get in everything he wanted to tell people? Or, even worse, what if he left an opening for somebody to pose a negative question or objection?

Like Gavin, many of us are wedded to "slideware." When PowerPoint came on the scene some 16 years ago, we rejoiced. It gave us a way to do presentations that allowed changes at the last minute, like overheads, but used color and graphics, like slides.

Now the bloom is off the rose. In

a typical afternoon of presentations, you can watch audience members' eyes glaze over. When the projector is (finally) turned off, you can feel the shuddering breath of relief.

The unofficial anti-slideware spokesman is Yale professor Edward Tufte. In the September 2003 issue of *Wired*, Tufte likened slideware to a drug with dangerous side effects; he charged it with inducing stupidity, wasting time, and degrading "the quality and credibility of communication.... Particularly disturbing is the adoption of the PowerPoint cognitive style in our schools. Rather than learning to write a report using sentences, children are being taught how to formulate client pitches and infomercials."

Recently, news has been made by an unlikely defender. Rock star David Byrne (lead singer of Talking Heads) wrote a book and DVD about pushing the envelope of creative possibilities with PowerPoint.



He has even been giving lectures under the title, "I ♥ PowerPoint." Byrne says his focus is on playing with the medium, telling *The New York Times* that the challenge is "taking a form that's purportedly logic and rational and making it poetic."

Critics remain unconvinced. "You can feel the medium resisting the invisible hand of the artist," wrote Veronique Vienne in reviewing Byrne's work for *The New York Times*. "Designed for easy digestion when projected on a screen, Power-

Point reveals its true identity when forced to perform without its well-rehearsed scripts.” And CNN.com covered Byrne’s work under the headline, “Does PowerPoint Make Us Stupid?”

For us, the issue isn’t about technology. Rather, it points to an important perspective for anyone who wants to communicate effectively with an audience. As a presenter, switch your focus:

- *From* what you want to say *to* what your audience would like to hear. What would be of benefit to them?

- *From* what they will think of you *to* what might generate insights for them.

- *From* trying to dazzle them with visual gymnastics *to* creating a feeling of connection.

- *From* wondering how much information you can include *to* thinking about what is really important for people to remember and reflect on.

- *From* delivering a good speech *to* starting a rich dialogue.

Above all, instead of concentrating on the technology, put your attention on getting the *tone* right. All too often, PowerPoint is used like a teleprompter or a set of crib notes. It’s a crutch. As a result, the presenter’s energy is directed toward the laptop, not toward the audience. Meanwhile, the audience is reading the slides instead of paying attention to the speaker! The speaker can’t connect to the audience’s non-verbal feedback, and the audience finds it hard to bond with the speaker’s emotional tone. When there’s little feeling, there can be no truth; where there’s no truth, there’s no beauty.

Which is the better way to launch into a presentation: Making sure the right slides come up on the screen or

meeting and greeting a few people? Making sure that the laser pointer works or taking a moment to ground yourself? The key to presentations that grab an audience and don’t let them go—that spark interest and responsiveness—is a feeling of calm security. You know that any reaction that inspires or provokes your listeners will open possibilities to build on your ideas, to make your presentation even better. In short, instead of slides, project confidence.

Avoiding slideware may actually improve communication. Vint Cerf, winner of the U.S. National Medal of Technology for his leadership contributions to development of the Internet, explained to CNN.com that the reason is “because people have to listen rather than being distracted by fancy PowerPoint charts.” CNN.com also quoted Peter Norvig, the director of Search Quality at Google, who said, “PowerPoint doesn’t kill meetings. People kill meetings. But using PowerPoint is like having a loaded AK-47 on the table: You can do very bad things with it.” And in his piece in *Wired*, Tufte wrote, “If your numbers are boring, then you’ve got the wrong numbers. If your words or images are not on point, making them dance in color won’t make them relevant. Audience boredom is usually a content failure, not a decoration failure.”

Such advice provides cold comfort for sufferers of stage fright. Gavin was one of those people. But he’s a team player, and he had enough faith in his leaders and in the process they proposed to prepare 10 minutes of remarks focused on what he believes customers want to hear about the company and what benefit the company has to give them. Instead of spending time manipulating computer commands, he found himself

reflecting more deeply on the question and was surprised by some of his insights.

Gavin gamely showed up on the appointed day. His hands shook only a little, and the tremor in his voice was barely perceptible. He delivered his prepared remarks in the time allotted—not one second more or less—sat on his stool while his colleagues gave their speeches, and fielded his share of questions.

So what was the result?

Participants rated the meeting as the best they’d ever attended. They gave Gavin and the others kudos for the courage to give up their slides. They stepped into the time left for questions with “what if” comments and suggestions. At the end of the meeting, the “salesperson of the year” spoke for her colleagues: “I know the remarks weren’t perfect, and you didn’t say everything smoothly. But I’ve never been so impressed and excited. I could tell you were speaking from your heart.”

In short, the audience felt engaged, moved, empowered, and ready to spread the message they’d heard. After all, isn’t that the powerful point of a presentation? ■

Bob and Betsy have expanded their “Best Practices” columns in a book, On the High Wire: How to Survive Being Promoted (Praeger Publishers). A portion of proceeds will be donated to IMA. For further information, visit www.amazon.com.

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