

Avoiding "Death by PowerPoint"

Updated 2005 Corbin Ball Associates

**Q. How do you avoid "Death by PowerPoint?"**

A. We have all been there -- sitting through computer presentations with endless screens of boring text. As we struggle to keep our eyes open, the phrase "Death by PowerPoint" comes to mind. Of course, it is not the program that is the problem but the \*poor use\* of the program that causes the trouble.

As a professional speaker who speaks to more than fifty groups each year, I use computerized presentation programs in nearly every presentation I give. I have learned by trial and error what works and what doesn't. So, if you ever have to make a presentation or deal with non-professional speakers who use computer presentation programs, here are my tips for good PowerPoint use:

Limit the number of words on each slide:

Fifteen words should be the maximum on any slide! The presentation should not be a reading report! Only a few words or a phrase to emphasize or reinforce an idea are all that is needed.

Use a bold, simple and large font:

Veranda and Arial (emboldened) are my favorites due to high screen legibility. Minimum font size should be 18pt but my average font size is 40pt to allow for easy reading in the back of the room. Also, keep the fonts consistent throughout the presentation and use no more than two different font types.

Use transitions wisely:

You can always tell a new PowerPoint user who has just discovered slide transitions: words are flying in from every direction often with more sound effects than a StarWars movie. Speakers must keep in mind that they are the show - not what is on the screen. Transitions often distract from the message. I typically use dissolves (the least jarring transition there is). When I change to a major new topic, I will use Uncover Right-up to subtly indicate that it is a new topic. Slide build transitions should be used when indicating direction (i.e. flow chat, graphs, etc.) For example, I will use a wipe right when using a line graph, subtly reinforcing the direction of time helping the audience to read the graph. Judicious use of transitions can help an audience know where you are going, rather than distract them.

Avoid stock templates:

Stay away from the standard background templates that come with the program. Instead, use a custom template to make your presentation look different right from the start. Many are downloadable for free from the Internet (go to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) and search on the phrase: "free PowerPoint templates").

Choose a design template where the words are easily distinguished from the background:

Avoid busy backgrounds, or ones with hard-to-read fonts, or fonts with equal color density to the background (i.e. the worst case would be bright green letters on bright red field).

Let the audience know where you are going:

PowerPoint is great to help audiences know where you are in a program. List the agenda (what will be covered); key points; use topic headers at the top of your slides; use thematic clipart for each subject area; use full screen titles to announce major presentation transitions; include a conclusions slide (what was covered). The more you help an audience know where you are going, the more they will stay with you and learn.

Use a wireless advance mechanism:

Do not be tethered to your computer. I never have to think about walking over to the computer or have someone else advance the slides - my full concentration is where it should be - on the audience! People often ask me how I advance my slides as the unit is so small and it is attached to my palm with a light rubber band so that I can use both hands for gesturing -- they don't see it at all.

Use pictures and graphs:

The old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words has never been truer than with computer presentations. Pictures add interest, they can reinforce themes, they can add humor, and they can show in a few seconds what it would take minutes to explain. I use pictures, screenshots or thematic clipart on nearly every frame.

**Q. What about using Web technologies as an alternative to a slide show? Have you done that? How do you use Web sites and Web technologies in your presentations?**

A. I use a wide range of products demonstrating the technologies I am speaking about. Palm emulators, flash animation, streaming video, avatars, and many others - anything that I can load on my hard drive rather than pull down live from the web. These offer a change of pace and add interest. I almost never go online during my presentations. Instead I use screen shots of the web

sites. Aside from significant reliability issues, with screen shot captures one can frame the image, enlarge the text, focus on just one part of the page, use circles or other annotation devices.

A principal challenge of showing Web pages in front of a group is that a monitor and a projection screen are not the same. Most of the time, the font on a web site is way too small and the information too densely packed for group viewing on a screen. By pasting screen captures from web sites into the PowerPoint program, carefully cropped and sized, the presenter can make a point about a web page much more strongly, more reliably and much easier than trying to navigate online. There is nothing worse when doing presentations on technology for the technology not to work. Capturing screenshots of the web sites and pasting into the PowerPoint program usually completely eliminates these issues.

The exception to the above is when I do a presentation on Virtual Meetings where I go online connecting to a remote location to not only talk about, but truly demonstrate this technology.

**Q. What are some of the biggest technological snags presenters encounter at customer sites? How do you overcome them? Have you got any "emergency tools" that you carry?**

A. The biggest snag I see, as mentioned above, is trying to go online in front of the audience. It is the kiss of death, especially for technology speakers, to be screwed up by technology. I you must demonstrate a web site and can't simply use screenshots, save it to your hard disk instead of going online. Also, change your screen properties setting to large fonts, which will enlarging the navigation buttons and image by 20%.

The other snag is not having multiple backups. For every presentation I give, I always carry the PPT presentation (and the other demo programs) on a CD that is \*not\* in my PC case. I also post the program to a password-protected portion of my web site just in case. I have used both of these options in the past two years avoiding what would have been disaster. I also carry backup advance mechanisms and laser pointer batteries for the same reason.

**Q. What kinds of images or other digital media "sell" a product or an argument these days?**

A. Streaming video, flash demos, and other multimedia images can be quite powerful if used judiciously - remember, the speaker is the show, not the program. The real sale comes from your passion in your topic and your ability to convey it.