

EmPowered or Point-less?

by Pam Adams

If Joe Degitz were asked to discuss the pros and cons of PowerPoint, his presentation would, no doubt, rely on PowerPoint.

He'd try to make his PowerPoint every bit as useful, yet entertaining, as he tries to make the ones he and a colleague create for paramedics' continuing education.

He'd present bullet points of concise information, punctuated by images, sound and the occasional offbeat cartoon just to keep the audience alive because he knows, as well as anyone, the droning torture known as death by PowerPoint. "The thing that annoys me most is when an instructor puts every word on a slide, then stands there and reads it word for word," Degitz says. "I can read."

POWER POINTLESS - Along with PowerPoint's potential for strong presentations comes the risk of torture by tedium. CNS Illustration by Scott Adrian Hinton.

Bullet points are the sound bites of the printed page these days. Where there's a bullet point, there's a PowerPoint presentation plugging what's supposed to be key points to learn and remember.

From business meetings to classrooms, from fourth-grade science fair projects to Christmas Eve church services, some version of the "lecture-support" software tool has easily overtaken clumsy overhead projectors and infiltrated every aspect of life. Even Toastmasters International, that venerable training ground for public speaking, recently added guides on using visual aids - which is to say, PowerPoint and its less popular imitators - to its skill-building manual. But what we have here increasingly, to borrow a famous movie line, is a failure to communicate outside the PowerPoint formula.

"All mediums of communications have biases and play favorites," notes Chris Kasch, associate professor of communications at Bradley University in Peoria, Ill.

LOSS OF CONNECTION

PowerPoint, for example, leads toward visual images and speaker-centered communications and away from dialogue, discussion, inspiration or ideas too complex to convey in simple outline form. A widely disseminated online parody of the Gettysburg Address, done in PowerPoint, makes the case for the "PowerPoint-less" applications of the Microsoft Office software. "PowerPoint has the possibility to erode public speaking skills," Kasch adds. "Nothing can be more powerful or persuasive than a speaker walking around, making eye contact. PowerPoint can put a gap between the speaker and the audience."

SENSORY OVERLOAD

Few PowerPoint rangers are more dedicated than Degitz. As emergency medical services systems manager for OSF Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria, his job requires transferring lots of information effectively. Among other duties, he creates the online lessons that keep emergency medical technicians, or EMTs, updated on the latest life-saving techniques. Trainers use material he develops for EMTs' continuing education classes.

PowerPoint software allows him to incorporate video and sounds of the symptoms that help EMTs diagnose a case, along with the medical procedures they would have to perform. "We want them to see it and hear it," Degitz says, "and if you can, you want them to smell it and touch it." The sensory overload not only helps paramedics get accustomed to gory scenes, it also helps them remember what they've learned. The fact that EMTs and trainers anywhere can take advantage of Degitz's digital training tools doesn't hurt PowerPoint usage either.

"In the health care field, a good speaker has a good PowerPoint," he says.

But, anecdotally, more and more businesses and conference organizers are banning or limiting use of PowerPoint presentations in meetings.

Jon Greiner of Dunlap, past national president of Toastmasters International, uses PowerPoint almost daily in his job as technical information solutions manager for Cat Electronics. Between both roles, he's seen PowerPoint used - and misused.

"The speaker still has a responsibility to know what they're talking about," he says. "They should be using it to support the message, not as the message."

In theory, PowerPoint is most effective and makes public speaking much easier in education or as an "information transfer tool," he says.

As an "information transfer" tool, PowerPoint is most effective when the information is meant to flow in one direction, from speaker to audience. It can ease speaker anxiety while helping a speaker organize the main points of a presentation.

Visuals, including photos and video clips, can help enhance the message, Greiner says. Additionally, the combination of written, spoken and visual materials helps listeners retain the message.

That said, Greiner adds that his boss at Cat Electronics has limited PowerPoint presentations to no more than three or four slides per presentation. "The rest is discussion," he says, "so actual discussion takes place during discussion."

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