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Tips for PowerPoint: -Go Easy on the Text -Please, Spare Us

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You would think that Mark Glackin didn't like PowerPoint at all. Ask the advertising vice president his thoughts about Microsoft's tool, which he's used to spruce up his presentations for the past 12 years, and you get an impassioned, 1,200-word screed on the things that drive him absolutely nuts about it.

Needless to say, you also get a PowerPoint slide summarizing his points. To name a few, people write paragraphs for each bullet point and simply recite their slides. "If you are going to just read the slides, email them and don't make everyone come to a meeting," he wrote in an email. Please don't squeeze a ton of text into your slide; don't go special-effects crazy with flying text. It may enhance your PowerPoint but not your point.

"Oh, do you want to hear more pet peeves? I'll over-share anyway," he wrote. Collect multiple presentations on one machine so there isn't endless laptop plug-and-slay. And ban laser pointers, which are wickedly distracting, he says. "It's like trying to watch the net at a ping-pong match."

Even people who love PowerPoint have no shortage of gripes about it. Over the years, the software has been blamed for boring people senseless. The phrase "Death by PowerPoint" is common corporate parlance. Some companies and conference organizers have prohibited PowerPoint, and the press perennially skewers it as a thought-free plague. One legal scholar, tongue-in-cheek, proposed a constitutional amendment banning its use.


Yet, there are an estimated 30 million PowerPoint presentations given each day around the world, inviting the question: Why, if so many people dread presentations, do we still see so many of them?

One answer: (big bullet point, please) Because it's a lot easier on presenters than the audience it's allegedly intended for.

"It's much easier to write a presentation if you're writing in bullet grunts," says Edward Tufte, the pre-eminent designer of visual information, who argued in a 28-page polemic against the program, "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint," that PowerPoint routinely disrupts and trivializes content.

Mr. Tufte says thought and analysis are sacrificed for convenience to the speaker, hurting both content

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and the audience. "PowerPoint allows presenters to pretend they're giving a presentation," he says. Still, "its cognitive style profoundly corrupts serious communications," he says.

Dave Paradi, who co-wrote a book on PowerPoint, adds that executives routinely "seem to be surprised that they should think about the audience before they think about what they're saying." Mr. Paradi estimates that bad PowerPoint presentations cost companies \$252 million a day in wasted time. He thinks that's a conservative figure.

PowerPoint proponents say slideware doesn't bore people, people bore people. The tool puts powerful features at their fingertips and they need learn only how to best use it, they say. To lifeless presentations, it adds what is described -- unfortunately -- as verve, flair and panache.

Besides, for those who freeze in front of an audience, PowerPoint can help keep them on message, another reason for its popularity. "Fear of public speaking ranks slightly below night-landing a plane on an aircraft carrier during a storm," says John Falck, a partner at a proprietary trading firm who has seen his share of "soul-sapping PowerPoint muggings." When they freeze and forget their own name, they can just read it off the first slide, he says. "PowerPoint is a great crutch."

Another PowerPoint truism inflating its popularity: Your own PowerPoints don't smell.

Two weeks ago James Studinger, a sales representative, was told by another salesman about his "wonderful" PowerPoint presentation. A moment later, Mr. Studinger was staring at a slide that said only "Long Term Relationship." His mind began to wander; he pondered why someone would devote a whole slide to those three words and why someone would think that would impress him. "By then I was beginning to wonder about the competency of a person who thought that was a great presentation," he says.

But he didn't protest, which may be another reason why PowerPoint is so prevalent: People tell everyone but the presenter of their boredom -- civility that only reinforces its use.

"It's just not worth generating the ill will that it's going to cause," says Stephen Rojak, fresh from a presentation. When he was in software sales, Mr. Rojak's former company sent him to a class to learn how to make an effective presentation without PowerPoint, because all of its competitors were using it. "I used to call it the Betty Ford Clinic for overcoming PowerPoint dependency," he says. The instructors mocked the program with slides of photos, noting in one: "This is our corporate headquarters," and with another, "This is our corporate headquarters at sunset."

But the civility has some self-interest. Larry Chung, a software developer, doesn't criticize fellow presenters, he says, "because I know the tables could be turned a few weeks later." To him, PowerPoint presentations are like corporate karaoke. "For the most part, it's tough to listen to," he says. "We all applaud each other even though we know how bad it stinks."

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