

Presentations Part 1

PowerPoint, Flip Charts and other tools...

By Nik Paddison

nikinsim@yahoo.co.uk

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Every trainer or facilitator makes presentations at some point in a training event whether it be a theory, a project idea, a report or some data. We use PowerPoint, Flip Charts, white boards or newer multi-media technologies... Whatever your preference, if used well it can be an amazing tool to enhance and support learning, if used badly, it can distract and make potential learning an incredibly boring experience for the participants.

On reading different writers and bloggers views about presentations I discover a common theme from most experts regarding presentations, and that is, 'respect your audience'. I feel that this is one of the main key's to producing a good presentation. Regardless of choice of presentation methodology, understanding your audience/participants, respecting them and making every effort to enhance their learning experience is critical.

In reality today, with the wealth of fantastic tools at our disposal, there has been a trend to let the presentation tool do the talking and the trainer become the assistant. This is a presentation disaster, we might as well switch on a TV screen and leave the room. But it is more than just the tools we use that can make the difference between a good presentation and a bad one. Other elements that affect the quality of a presentation include; our voice, non-verbal communication, the images or words we use for illustration, humour or lack of it, whether we touch the emotions or not, layout of the space and whether we have a barrier between us and the people we are presenting too. This article is primarily about issues surrounding the use of PowerPoint (and similar tools) and flip charts. Presentations 2 & 3 will explore and examine the other elements.

PowerPoint...

Kathy Sierra on her former blog site referred to PowerPoint presentations in the following manner "stop your presentation before it kills again."¹ Edward Tufte goes even further, "Power corrupts, PowerPoint corrupts absolutely."²

Have you ever sat through a presentation of 30 or more slides that never seems to end, each slide filled with writing, charts, bullet points and occasionally a funny picture because the presenter is supposed to keep the attention of the audience. Even worse, each slide is being read line by line. Critics and designers from this medium don't form a consensus as such but basically agree that most people who use PowerPoint, use too many slides, overuse bullet points and fill each slide with far too much information and words. This paints a rather negative picture of PowerPoint, and I have to confess to a personal dislike for the medium, but the fact is, it is popular and it does have its place. Used well it can be a fantastic tool to support information giving and learning. And that is the point, the tool is only as good as we make it.

General agreement concerning slides is that they should have a limited number of words on them, experts vary in their view of this, but 3 and 7 words is generally considered as the norm. I don't have

¹ http://headrush.typepad.com/creating_passionate_users/2005/06/kill_your_prese.html

² <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html>

a precise number I work to but I never exceed 30, the less the better is a basic guideline. A good slide uses colour, though I would suggest not more than three on any one slide, though there are exceptions to this. Use of images – drawings, cartoons or diagrams, can greatly enhance the words used and the point you are making. Avoid using bullet points, there are other ways to put words on a slide, just look through some magazines and web sites to see design ideas for presenting words, phrases and short sentences.

The classic mistake of presenters using PowerPoint is the reading of each slide. This means the presenter turns their back on the group and talks directly at the display screen or wall. Sadly this is far too common a mistake. This action destroys any interaction between the presenter and the group. There is no eye contact and no direct communication, therefore giving the group permission to switch off or chat amongst themselves.

Another aspect related to reading each slide – apart from the fact that the group being presented to can do that for themselves – is that this action in effect makes the PowerPoint the presenter and the presenter becomes the support act. People are there to learn from the trainer not the slideshow. It is the trainer who can interact with the group not PowerPoint. The words and images on a slide are there to support the trainer.

As a presenter we should know about the subject we are presenting, therefore the best advice that can be given to anyone making a presentation is, turn your back on the slides, face the group, talk to them about the subject and make eye contact with them.

If the PowerPoint is well produced it will make sense according to what we say; we should be the lead in this relationship with the presentation tool, not the other way around. We may need to point to a word or image occasionally to emphasise a point and that's fine, the important thing is we are the one communicating. Note: the word communicate, while not explicit in its definition of being a two way process, the definition itself strongly indicates the need of an exchange between people in order for something to be 'communication'.

PowerPoint remains a fixed medium, meaning once the slides are produced you cannot re-arrange them halfway through a presentation or write on them. Unless you are willing to scrap your slides at some point in order to follow up something that has been raised from your group, interaction can be difficult. PowerPoint encourages people to focus out of the circle of the group to a screen or wall and away from the presenter. People often close the curtains or blinds in a room and switch the lights off to do PowerPoint presentations, this also makes eye contact and interaction more difficult. PowerPoint can also provide some people with something to hide behind, their laptop or a podium or a remote control for changing slides, this is a barrier between the presenter and the group and therefore serves to separate and break the communication and interaction.

I read somewhere on the internet that someone asked a number of people to give PowerPoint presentations to the same group but one person would present without the use of PowerPoint. Afterwards the audience was asked what they preferred, they unanimously stated the PowerPoint presentations were better than the one with nothing. While I do not dispute this experiment I would want to add another question, 'which did people learn most from?' The reality of PowerPoint is that as participants we expect to be entertained and in today's multi-media world PowerPoint fits the bill. It does not seem to matter how bad the actual presentation is, if we believe we are being entertained, it's OK, it's what we paid for. On the other hand, turning up and not receiving the PowerPoint or equivalent, the feeling is one of not getting our monies worth, we feel we have been cheated.

To summarise this section on PowerPoint I would end by saying, when producing a presentation the number of words per slide needs to be limited, the number of slides in any one presentation needs

to be limited, use of colours and images needs to be thought through. Don't turn your back on the group and please please please don't read the slides. One clear advantage of slides is that they are not reliant on our handwriting skills but the temptation to fill each slide with a small books worth of information can be too much for most presenters, resist! As Kathy Sierra says, "If you're still committed to slides, or if you're certain you need them, here's my favourite overall recommendation: Put each slide on trial for its life. Ask it to defend itself. *Show no mercy.*"³ In other words are they necessary, are they needed!

Flip Charts

Everything written above about PowerPoint is more or less the same for flip charts, so I will not repeat all of it. The basis of both mediums is the same, single pages of information that can potentially enhance learning. As with PowerPoint there is plenty of room to abuse the group with flip chart. I remember when I first started training I used to write pages of information on flip charts, writing down a summary of a theory would cover 2 or 3 flip chart pages. This is a disastrous technique, its information overload and really uninspiring for the participants. Imagine getting ready for learning about an exciting subject and then having to sit through 20 minutes of listening and looking at line upon line of writing, and suddenly the flip chart page is turned over and there is another full page of information. It's catastrophic. The most common mistakes in using the flip chart is unreadable writing and pages filled with writing. In international projects I work on I usually ask participants to make a presentation about their organisation. Most of the time the result is a single flip chart page that contains the aim, objectives, mission statement, target group of the organisation, description of the organisation... This is not a presentation, it is the individual failing to understand what the important information is that they need to inform people about. They either don't have any confidence in their ability to talk about their organisation or they are brainwashed into thinking that everything they are going to say must also be written down. As with the PowerPoint the classical error is that the individual reads everything they put on the flip chart, while having their back turned to the rest of the group. This is the flip chart becoming the presentation while the human is the assistant to the tool. I am talking here about people who generally have little or no experience in making presentations, however I have seen and endured many experienced trainers and presenters making similar mistakes – far too often!

On a down side, flip charts use huge amounts of paper, not so good for the environment, and they are costly. They are much more difficult to give that professional looking edge too, unless you are a sign writer or artist. The flip chart stand is a physical annoyance that is difficult to move out of the circle when you don't need it. But the flip chart does allow for greater interaction, a blank page is always a page away and can be instantly written or drawn on, allowing the presenter to react to a question or a change in direction. Even previously produced flip chart pages can be added to, I often use blank graphs or diagrams and through interacting with a group and asking questions, I add the relevant words and information to complete them. Using a flip chart allows for ease of eye contact and direct interaction with all the group, it is a more personal tool. It is possible to hide behind a flip chart stand in the same way that people hide behind their laptops but it looks very strange. I have to say I think a good PowerPoint, meaning very well produced slides, will always look better than a good flip chart, however personally I will remain a flip chart man for now!

Other Multi-Media Tools

Today there are many new presentation tools, I don't pretend to know too much about any of them, but some do look interesting and may in time tempt me away from my flip charts. There are tools that allow you to write on a white board and it can appear on a computer screen. There are single page displays that in reality are huge. You can show the whole page, fill the screen with a single part of the page and then zoom in to specific detail. There are touch screen technologies and touch pad

³ http://headrush.typepad.com/creating_passionate_users/2005/06/kill_your_prese.html

technologies. The new technologies will have negative aspects as do the PowerPoint generation and the flip chart, though I feel that the interactive technologies being produced continue to improve on the PowerPoint concept and start to have some of the positives of a flip chart.

Conclusion

Whatever our medium of choice the aim has to be to stimulate people not put them to sleep. Our aim must be to encourage people and enthuse people to the subject we are telling them about, whether it be a sales pitch for a product, explaining a theory or presenting the results of a company survey. Whatever the reason for the presentation, our aim must be to have people from the group or audience follow up on what they have heard, whether that be to buy the product, do their own research to learn more about the theory or change company policy as a result of the survey. Pages of text or bullet points in flip chart, PowerPoint or... will not do this. Our task is to make interesting, dynamic, informative, stimulating and inspiring presentations, things that people will remember and therefore remember the message. Look at printed advertisements, magazines and web sites, there are people out there producing brilliant design ideas to get messages across every day, yet most of us, and yes I include myself in this, rely too much on using simple but boring bullet points and everything else negative I have talked about. How is anyone going to be inspired and learn anything from this boring clichéd approach to showing information? We must take the time to come up with, adapt, copy even, great presentation ideas and so make our presentations something that assists us in delivering that message and so enable people to learn something rather than crippling them with boredom.