

Why You Should Pay Attention to Your PowerPoint® Slides

By Judith Filek—President
Impact Communications, Inc.

Most business professionals today use PowerPoint to tell their story. However, many slide decks are ineffective. They interfere with having a good conversation. Instead of clarifying and demystifying concepts, slideshows create pandemonium. The book *Slide:ology* by Nancy Duarte is a must read for anyone creating their own slides.

First and foremost, Duarte says we must determine if booting up our laptops and showing slides is the best vehicle for the particular audience. For example, many senior level executives loathe PowerPoint, referring to it as the “great interrupter” to a good conversation. They prefer a simple, succinct explanation of ideas or issues and, at most, a one page handout. They simply do not have time to sort out the meaning of your slides.

However, if we determine that PowerPoint is essential to explain features or functionalities or to report numbers, speakers must learn to create visual stories that connect with listeners who have varying needs and knowledge levels. We cannot assume that a generic slide deck will be relevant to any and all audiences. At best, unfocused slides will evoke a tepid response from listeners; at worst, they will leave listeners down right annoyed and terminate interest in your solution. Consider that your presentation and slides may be the last chance you will have with a customer before the individual determines a decision. Are your slides conveying the message you want to deliver?

Presentations today often reflect the agenda of the presenter and not the needs of the audience. They are the speaker’s notes. Duarte says that after a certain point the number of words on a slide prevent it from being a visual aid. If there are more than 50 words, the slide is a teleprompter for the speaker. If that are more than 75 words, the slide is a document, better distributed as a handout.

Audiences need time to process what is up on the slide. They will either read or listen, but they can’t

do both. When the speaker begins talking before listeners are done reviewing the slide, it creates a tug of war. Listeners want to pay attention to what the speaker is saying, but what is on the screen is more compelling than the auditory for most people. If there is a lot of text on the slide, it will take listeners a long time to read and digest it. The more visual the slide, the easier it is to grasp. Slides should not create visual vertigo or dissonance.

The default slide for most speakers is a bullet point list. Instead of making the effort necessary to transform slides into visual stories that support or enhance the message, speakers use one boring bullet point list after another. All of the slides seem similar. Main ideas are not distinguished from the rest of the slides. We are a visual society, and we think and dream in pictures, not bullet points.

Reaching an audience doesn’t happen by accident, especially when software is added to the picture. Speakers who make communicating effectively a priority will create slides that reflect what their audience already knows, what they want to know and what they need to know in order to make a decision. Successful speakers know they have to do their homework first so that listeners will feel they have had a personal and relevant conversation based on the slides they were shown.

We may think there is only one way to convey an idea, but the opposite is true. There are many meaningful ways, and choosing the right one depends on the audience. For examples of how to create meaningful slides consult *Slide:ology*. You won’t be sorry.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our website, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.

Copyright © 2008
Impact Communications, Inc.
All Rights Reserved.