LeaderPerfect Newsletter
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Quit Presenting, Start Interacting
by Dr. Mike Armour

In some places corporate America is turning against PowerPoint. Certain companies have actually banned it for presentations, especially presentations to top management.

The cause is not some bias against Microsoft. Indeed, it's not even PowerPoint that's being rejected. Instead, companies are reacting to the wholesale proliferation of tedious, boring presentations. Unfortunately, poor use of PowerPoint and speakers who are unduly dependent on it contribute mightily to the boredom.

What's needed, then, is not an attack on PowerPoint, but an assault on boring presentations. And the place to begin is to rethink the word "presentation" itself.

Making a Presentation

My reflection on this subject started with a client's casual remark. "I have to make a PowerPoint presentation next week," he said. I hear this statement frequently, of course. But it never really arrested me until that moment.

I suddenly recognized that the phrase "make a presentation" invites the wrong focus. "Making a presentation" puts emphasis on mechanics, not on the core message. On delivery, not dialogue.

And dialogue should be our objective, even if the audience is so huge that its feedback is entirely non-verbal. Interaction, not presentation, is the principal goal.

In my client's mind, preparation for his event meant getting a PowerPoint presentation ready, first and foremost. But how differently he might have envisioned his task had he said, "I'm preparing to interact with an audience next week."

Key Questions

With interaction as his perspective, would he have even used PowerPoint? Perhaps. But "getting the PowerPoint slides ready" would hardly have been his primary preoccupation. Instead, he would have focused preparation time around four key questions:

1. When the interaction is finished, what do I want my audience to believe?

2. When the interaction is finished, what do I want my audience to feel?

3. How can I equip them with a compelling "why" for believing and feeling this way?

4. What specific action do I want them to take based on these beliefs and feelings?

Questions like this ensure that preparation never loses sight of the audience or gets bogged down in the pure mechanics of the presentation. These questions also compel the presenter to gain greater clarity, greater precision in articulating the core message.

Clarity always benefits speaker and audience alike. When the presenter is absolutely clear on his or her core message, the message will get across, whether PowerPoint is used or not.

Too Many Words

I'm amazed at how many people think that extensive PowerPoint support is so critical to their presentation that they cannot be effective without it. Commonly clients in mid-level management say to me, "I spent hours working on this presentation, trying to get the wording just exactly right on every slide."

My response is, "If you needed that much time to get the wording right, you either have too many words or too many slides or both."

My conviction on this point grew stronger last month while reading reviews of a new book about the presentation skills of Steve Jobs. (If you want to check it out, the title is *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs*. The author is Carmine Gallo.)

When Jobs introduces a new Apple product, he routinely holds an overflow crowd mesmerized for up to an hour and a half. Yet, in that period of time, he uses only a dozen slides (not created in PowerPoint, I'm rather certain), which together total no more than fifteen to twenty words. Not fifteen to twenty words per slide. Fifteen to twenty words for the entire presentation.

Wordy slides, one after another, are a menace to engagement between the presenter and the audience. While people are reading and analyzing the content of a slide, they are not giving the presenter undivided attention.

Content-heavy slides also diminish the speaker's full engagement. As the word count on the screen multiplies, so does the challenge of remembering everything on the slides. The presenter is reduced to looking at the screen repeatedly to be certain that "I'm covering everything in the right order." Before long the presenter seems to be having more dialogue with the PowerPoint material than with the audience.

The surest way for a speaker to miss opportunities to engage the audience is to be so focused on content that there is no energy left to monitor feedback from the audience and respond appropriately. Feedback and response are the essence of interaction. And engaged interaction is always more persuasive than the most creative PowerPoint package.