

How PowerPoint Ruined The U.S. Economy

OR STOP MAKING PRESENTATIONS

Right now, in countless hotel meeting rooms, public auditoriums, corporate conference rooms, and small, cramped offices, thousands of competent and otherwise productive executives, managers, and sales people are quietly snoring and drooling on expensive note pads. They sleep because some poor consultant, vendor, partner, or other supplicant is hiding in the dark behind a data projector, "telling them what he's going to tell them, telling them, and then telling them what he told them" with every word emblazoned on the screen.



"Now, wait a minute," I hear you saying. "What's wrong with good 'ole PowerPoint? I mean PowerPoint's got your situational templates, your automatic color schemes, your animation, your sound effects...."

Hey, I'm not saying you can't do cool things with presentation graphics. I'm just saying they're not how you get results as a business communicator. And, OK, it's not Microsoft's fault that PowerPoint is the ubiquitous presentation graphics program on the market...well, it is their fault, but it's not their fault that it costs the US economy billions of dollars. PowerPoint, Keynote, Google Docs presentations, etc., are all equally capable of robbing a communicator of his value and ability to connect with people. But, the point remains that *most business presentations don't work*. Yes, deals get done, and, yes, sometimes they even get done in close proximity to PowerPoint presentations. But, the vast majority of those deals happen in spite of the presentation, not because of it.

Case in point: way back in the good old days of the "dot-com bubble," a prominent IPO-churning investment bank asked me to assess the presentation materials they used to pursue private companies for M&A and IPO underwriting. The "right pitch" (or so they reasoned) could bring in millions for the firm with a single win, but competition was fierce with numerous banks offering virtually identical opportunities.

Their PowerPoint pitch droned for nearly 80 pages about the company's great history and achievements. These presentations sometimes lasted 3 1/2 hours. I felt like Don Quixote trying to convince this company that their unique ability to create value had nothing to do with their corporate history and everything to do with how they were going to meet the unique needs of this prospect. Not surprisingly, the investment bank, unable to shift their focus away from themselves and onto the needs of their clients, became a victim of the economy's dramatic downturn. Equally unfortunate is that the addiction to PowerPoint-driven, self-absorbed presentations remains alive and well today. The good news is that this creates opportunity for differentiation by using a less formulaic approach.

What's the Real Cost?

A long PowerPoint presentation is not the best way to communicate, but, you ask, where did I get 'billions of dollars' lost from? Ok, let's take a look. How much did the investment bankers pay the smart young analyst trainees who stayed awake until sun-up consolidating reams of data and plugging it into PowerPoint? What was their core competency? I bet it wasn't PowerPoint. What was the executive presenter's time worth? What if he could have closed more deals in less time? What was the opportunity cost of a wasted "branding opportunity"? What is the opportunity cost of failing to differentiate your company, product, or service from your competition? I'm calling it billions—you can do your own math. The real cost may be in the formulaic thinking these presentations tend to reinforce. Somewhere along the line, executives started worrying more about their elevator pitch than about the problem their company solved. If we've learned anything from the cyclical collapse of various "bubbles," it's that you have to have a great business before you can tell a great story, and PowerPoint has little to do with either one.

What's the Objective?

As business communicators, leaders must move other people to action. It is not enough for people to simply hear or even to understand you.

Every single, discrete, business communication is an opportunity to deepen a relationship and move another person closer to an action that will drive your business forward.

Yet, most standard business communication tends to look and feel like a data dump. Guess what? By itself, data doesn't connect—*people* do.

Learn To Connect First

If PowerPoint "data dumps" don't work, what does? In a word...connection. Relax, You don't need to lead a corporate encounter group. No group hugs necessary—I promise. As a business communicator, connection means that everything you say and everything you do is driven by *the result you want in relationship to the reality of the people you are talking to*. The way you use your body and voice, as well as the ideas you choose, had better meet the needs of the people you are talking to if you want them to change in some predictable way. As a business communicator, if you are not being driven by the result you want with a *radical sensitivity* to the people you are talking to, then you are *leaving money on the table*. Next time you have an important phone call to make, instead of asking yourself, "What do I want to say?" ask instead, "What do I want the person I am calling to do as a result of our conversation?" Starting with the result you want forces you to be more strategic and to plan your ideas with a greater sensitivity to that other person. Put on her moccasins for a while and look at the world from

her perspective. It is her reality, needs, wishes, etc. that drive her willingness to act...not yours! If you let *her* reality, in relationship to the *result* you want, drive what you say and how you say it, then you are communicating strategically in a way that deepens relationships, creates value, and differentiates you from your competition.

Establishing a Core Message

Let's say you need to talk to the Board of Directors for your company to get approval on discontinuing quarterly reports so you can focus on long-term client and shareholder value. You don't begin by planning with PowerPoint. PowerPoint wasn't designed as a planning tool. It was designed as a "presentation graphics" tool. It has simply been used too long in the wrong way. Instead, you plan with a yellow pad, or, if you must, with an MS Word document. First, determine the action you want from the other people in the meeting; then evaluate their needs; and let that combination drive your "core message." That message has to offer a "quid pro quo," i.e., "Take the action I want you to take, and I will deliver something you need."

All you have to do is convince your listener that you can deliver on the promise in your message, which you do with your supporting ideas.

If you dream up ideas that go beyond that promise, chances are you are back to talking about what *you* want to talk about (not about what *they* need to hear)—and worse—are merely dumping data.

Graphics as Friend Not Foe

Only when your ideas are listener-focused and results-oriented is it logical to ask, "Must some of these ideas be made visual?" If the answer is yes, then it's time to go have a pint at a local pub...or at least imagine you are going to one. Because the way we create visuals on the fly—when you have no technology and the people you are talking to need some sort of "visual aid"—provides a pretty good thinking process for developing visuals that work. In a pub, sometimes a complex concept can be made simple with a quick sketch on a cocktail napkin. If you are willing to work hard enough to evaluate your ideas from the standpoint of the people you are talking to, in the context of a particular result, the effective use of visuals is pretty straightforward.

Presenters the world over try to reinforce everything they say with some sort of graphic support. This creates a logical problem: if you are trying to reinforce *everything* with the same type of visual support, then you end up reinforcing *nothing*! A lone stalk of corn in a big field is a beautiful, singular miracle of nature. A field of corn is, well... yellow and green. If each visual is not a *critical* part of the process of moving a listener to an action, then it is probably just a foe vs. a friend (i.e., a distraction).

One more case in point: once while attending a huge venture forum in San Francisco, I witnessed a technology company executive go through an incredibly complex, artistic, and downright entertaining PowerPoint presentation on his product about which I, tellingly, can't remember a thing. The lights were low, and no one could really see the speaker, but everyone was mesmerized by the "show." Afterward, in the breakout room, there was a line of seemingly motivated potential investors waiting to talk to the speaker. The first question asked seemed to be on the minds of everyone in the queue. With each time that same question was asked, the speaker seemed more and more deflated. Were these people challenging him on market size? No. Were they grilling him on systems architecture? Nope. Questions about the team? Sorry, no. So, what then was the common burning question? It was this:

"How did you make that little bear dance on the screen?"

Stick to the Basics

As a business leader, you are not talking in public forums to entertain, to look smart, to inform, or even to educate. Start with the action you want others to do, analyze the needs of the people you talk to, *advocate* a solution to a problem in your message, and let your ideas convince them that you can deliver that solution.

Last—and maybe least— let the reality of the people you are talking to drive what, if any, visual support you use.

Communicate with empathy, power, and influence, and communication will become a strategic process, too. When you do that, you will be a part of making this nation economically great once again!