Section One
PowerPoint

PowerPoint is evil – or not!

To a man with a hammer every problem is a nail.

Confucius

Death by PowerPoint

The 'normal' approach to presentations using PowerPoint (30 slides, blue background, yellow text, all the same layout, a heading and five bullet points) is so prevalent, and so universally ill-received, that it has recently become the subject of considerable academic and journalistic comment, and it is the slides that come in for the greatest criticism.

For instance, in America a well-known and respected academic, Edward R. Tufte of Yale, who is an acknowledged corporate communications expert, has written a strong condemnation of PowerPoint in *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (which you can read in full by accessing www.edwardtufte.com). One fascinating example he uses concerns the Columbia space shuttle disaster. In a slide presentation – which Tufte calls 'an exercise in misdirection' – a crucial piece of information about the foam section which detached and crippled the craft, is described as 640 times larger than ones which reassuring pre-flight advice described, was buried in small type several layers down in a busy PowerPoint list. Though the danger this might pose was actually flagged, the warning was not noticed. The main heading on the slide indicated a positive outcome to tests, saying: 'Review of Test Data Indicates Conservatism for Tile

Penetration'. One might criticise the language too, but the point remains – the key information was passed over unnoticed, seemingly mainly because of the way it was presented.

Other authors have taken issue too; another example is in the book *The Presentation Sensation* by Martin Conradi and Richard Hall.

Additionally, to reinforce any lingering feelings you may have that traditional PowerPoint style and practice are fine, try looking at www.norvig.com/Gettysburg where Peter Norvig has posted a wonderful spoof of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address:

> *'Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.'*

Such stirring language and thoughts are reduced to banality by a visual presentation that is not visual, and which uses bullet points such as 'Met on battlefield (great)'. As an example of how to reduce a powerful and memorable message to insignificance; this is a classic.

In Britain, a feature by John Naughton in a serious newspaper, *The Guardian*, addressed the same issue, quoted Tufte's American article and added its own despairing spin: 'Power corrupts. PowerPoint obfuscates. Next time you have to give a presentation, leave it at home'. A similar article appeared in the *Financial Times* in January 2005.

The reason why such comment is made is obvious: the prevailing style of PowerPoint driven presentations, while they are something audiences expect and so often tolerate, do not really satisfy audiences as they should. A good, stylish presenter, with presence and panache, may be able to make up for this, but only in part. The criticism comes because this kind of PowerPoint use is worldwide and large numbers of people notice that it fails to do a complete job, though that might be better worded by saying that presenters allow it to do a poor job.

The solution

So are these pundits right? Is PowerPoint intrinsically evil? Not so. Edward Tufte *et al* certainly have a sound argument based on what the vast majority of the world's 450 million PowerPoint users (yes, there really are that many) are doing with it. But this is the issue; it is *how it is used* that causes the problem and the audience abuse. The PowerPoint system itself is not to blame. Transform its use and you transform its effect.

Consider a 13th century Samurai sword, crafted by someone who dedicated their life to perfection, creating a blade so sharp it can cut falling silk, so strong it can slice through trees. In the hands of the Samurai the sword represents justice, protection and a way of life based on simplicity and harmony. To many people it is a thing of beauty. Yet not so long ago in the UK such a sword was used to kill innocent passers-by, by a man clearly unhinged. Does that make the sword evil? Does it diminish its beauty or its usefulness? Clearly it does not. PowerPoint is the same: just because many of its 450 million users use it badly, that does not make it a bad piece of software. It simply exposes some inadequate communication skills.

The solution is apparent: we need not change the tool[*], merely change the way we use it. A change in thinking is required: that paradigm shift we have referred to. The way many people need to think about PowerPoint must change. If we reassess the manner in which we use it, and perhaps accept that it has its uses and its limitations and that it is not the perfect medium for all forms of communication, it will work better for us.

How well do you really know PowerPoint?

What are the two most useful features within PowerPoint?

At seminars when I ask this there is no single most common answer. People mention all sorts of things: being able to change the order of slides, being able to use a variety of typefaces, etc. Those most in for ridicule will say 'the ability to add clip art' as if this is somehow the panacea to all presentation ills! What is very rarely mentioned is either of our top two.

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[*] Although there is one feature of PowerPoint that to my mind ought to be removed and that is the presentation wizard – less hocus-pocus and more mumbo jumbo to my mind.

The use of the 'B' key

What happens in show mode (i.e. during a presentation) when the presenter presses the 'B' key? Do you know? I ask this during seminars that I have now given to probably 10,000 people. Only a handful have known, and yet I think it is probably the most important feature of PowerPoint. Why?

Because a presentation is delivered by a living, breathing person, the contribution they make to the totality of a presentation is crucial. Sometimes the full attention of the group must be on them, on what they are saying and how they are saying it. Steps need to be taken to make this so. Press the 'B' key and the screen goes blank, so that attention necessarily must then focus on the presenter. Too often, audiences are left staring at an image on a screen that is, for the moment, irrelevant to what is being said. The facility to blank out the screen is invaluable. Press the 'B' key again and the blanked image lights up again. So simple, yet relatively few people seem to know or use it. You might also like to try the 'W' key which turns the screen white.
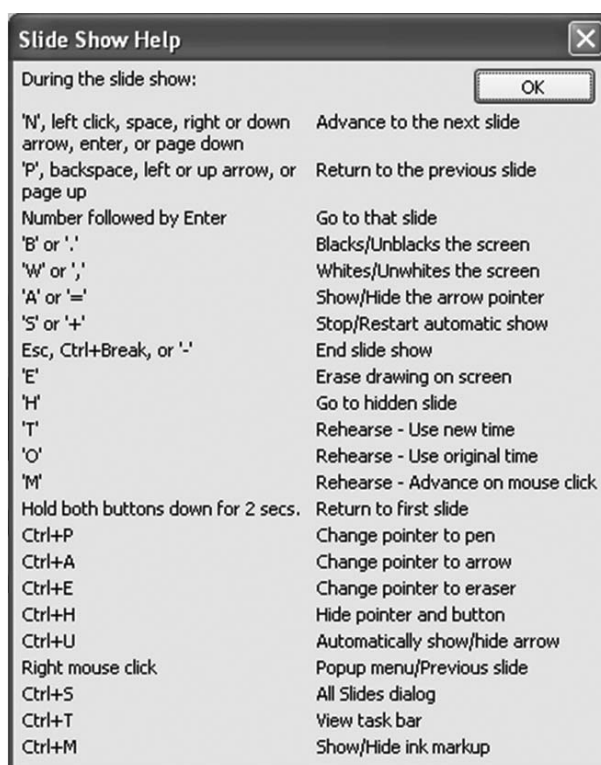
The ability to locate a particular slide

I am essentially a salesperson (coin-operated!) and have spent many years 'carrying a bag' as they say in the US; here is a scenario that has happened to me countless times. I am in the middle of a pitch to the Marketing Director when the CEO walks in and says 'So what is this all about?' CEOs have, in my experience, many common attributes, the most significant being their attention span (shorter than a gnat's) and their ability to influence a sale by giving their approval. If you have ever been a salesperson then you have been in this situation: you have two minutes to convince the CEO, two minutes that will probably decide the sale.

So, somewhere in your presentation you have a killer slide (see later); the slide that summarises the value proposition; the one slide you need to show the CEO, after which they will be interested, or not! How do you get there?

If you think that the process is 'Esc', followed by *Slide Sorter*, scroll down, double click the slide and then press *Slide Show*; then you don't really understand PowerPoint.

You need to be familiar with your slides, but if you want to jump to, say, Slide 24, perhaps to answer a question, hit the numbers '2' and '4' and then the 'Return' key, and up comes Slide 24. Again this is an invaluable, and often little used, feature. Also try the 'Home' key for going to the first slide or the 'End' for the last slide (try pressing F1 whilst in show mode and PowerPoint will bring up a list of in-show commands).

Slide Show Help	
During the slide show:	OK
'N', left click, space, right or down arrow, enter, or page down	Advance to the next slide
'P', backspace, left or up arrow, or page up	Return to the previous slide
Number followed by Enter	Go to that slide
'B' or '.'	Blacks/Unblacks the screen
'W' or ','	Whites/Unwhites the screen
'A' or '='	Show/Hide the arrow pointer
'S' or '+'	Stop/Restart automatic show
Esc, Ctrl+Break, or '-'	End slide show
'E'	Erase drawing on screen
'H'	Go to hidden slide
'T'	Rehearse - Use new time
'O'	Rehearse - Use original time
'M'	Rehearse - Advance on mouse click
Hold both buttons down for 2 secs.	Return to first slide
Ctrl+P	Change pointer to pen
Ctrl+A	Change pointer to arrow
Ctrl+E	Change pointer to eraser
Ctrl+H	Hide pointer and button
Ctrl+U	Automatically show/hide arrow
Right mouse click	Popup menu/Previous slide
Ctrl+S	All Slides dialog
Ctrl+T	View task bar
Ctrl+M	Show/Hide ink markup

PowerPoint is surely something that must be regarded as an essential working tool. As such, we must be familiar with it. This is especially so for sales people and their sales pitches. Most sales people are drivers (that is a comment about owning cars not a personality type, although…!). There will be few, if any, buttons on the dashboard of their cars for which they do not know the function. Maybe PowerPoint should be regarded in the same way.

Having described PowerPoint as a tool, perhaps the following analogy brings the point to life. Consider PowerPoint as comparable to a pencil. Most people can write and draw using a pencil (though if asked to draw a cat, some may put down something more like a stick insect having a bad hair day). But only after some consideration and practice, and perhaps training, can they execute something more artistic. Many can 'write with it' as it were, but it contains the potential to be used as an artist would use it. You just have to know how to do so.

PowerPoint is surely the same. Indeed when we interview for graphics staff for our team, part of the process involves giving them a piece of paper and a pencil and asking them to sketch 'customer service'. Those that can produce something good enough to hang on the boardroom wall stay for the rest of the interview – those that don't, do not.

The full extent of the possibilities PowerPoint harbours is considerable. One of the limitations of presenting these ideas in book form is that it is difficult to do justice to the visual nature of some of what we are trying to describe. However, it would be unrealistic to expect you to have read to this point without having at least flipped through the colour plates, which form part of the book – so you will have an idea of how slides can look. In order to provide the opportunity for a more extensive demonstration, we have an extensive web site on which examples of what is being described here can be viewed. At various points in the book a link will be flagged and you have the opportunity to see things illustrated in more detail, if you wish, as you read.

Tried and tested

Before getting into more detail about what we believe PowerPoint can do when used in the right way, let us be clear that no simple cosmetic change is being advocated here. The reasons for any change must be tangible. And here they are certainly that. Judged in a harsh light of measurable results, and focusing on sales presentations and pitches where such measurability is in no doubt, the approach we advocate and employ works.

Simplistically, one might look at the success rate for sales pitches as being linked to the number of potential suppliers competing: if three companies pitch then a simple rule of thumb suggests that, given that they put over their case in broadly comparable ways, there is a one in three chance of success, of getting the business. An organisation operating professionally and feeling they have an edge, might judge their success against a betterment of these basic odds. Perhaps on such a basis anything over a 30% success rate might be judged acceptable.

Since 1997 we have been involved in creating over 3,000 PowerPoint presentations for clients. The vast majority of these were sales presentations. These typically fall into two different categories that we call *Generic* and *Specific*.

Generic sales presentations are those that are used by a sales-force every day:

- Who are we?
- What do we do?
- Why do clients deal with us?

They are broadly the same and it is possible to design a presentation that allows the salesperson to *spin* (give subtle different meanings to) the presentations to suit most client-facing opportunities. We have clearly demonstrated that a consistent, well thought-out value proposition, well-articulated in a visual PowerPoint presentation can increase sales by, we estimate, at least 20%. There is an element of self-selection in the sample set, as people often don't ask for our help unless they are losing. So assuming you close 1 in 3 of your deals, which is we feel average, then you should expect to see an increase to around 1 in 2 by sorting out your generic sales presentation.

Specific sales presentations are those that see the light of day once and then are forgotten – or at least should be, as there is a saying 'sales presentations never die, they just get recycled' – regardless of impact or success. These presentations are when the contract value is so large as to warrant special attention or the client too valuable to risk losing. In these situations no self-respecting salesperson would run the risk of not making the client feel important by writing a presentation about them, what they need and how their problems will be solved. In fact, we have done so many of these that we have developed a process for producing them that we call 'm62 strategic bid management'.

If we believe, after taking a brief, that the difference between winning and losing a bid will depend in part on the quality of the communication, then we are usually confident enough to adjust our fee accordingly and share the risk with the client. As such we are careful to track the effectiveness of our approach. Each year since inception we have succeeded in helping clients win over 85% of their key specific bids, winning a total of over £500M worth of business. We have even had one year when the results were over 90%.

How is this possible? There are a number of reasons and setting them out is what this book is all about.

We have shown the following example hundreds of times at seminars and then we show a progressive improvement in layout and design from one to the next. What these slides show (albeit simply presented on the page in black and white) is an evolutionary sequence.
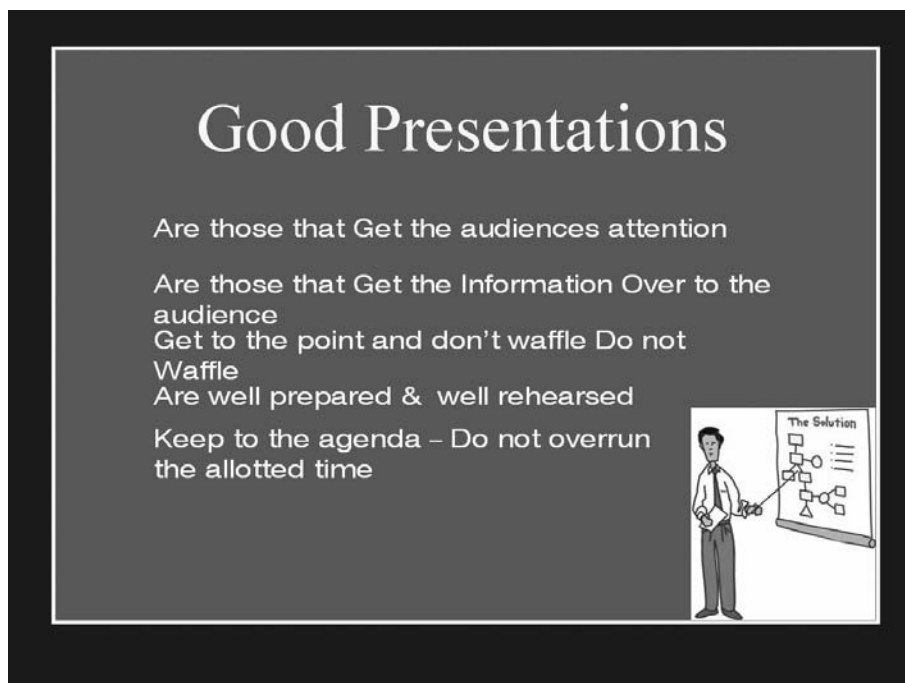

1. A very traditional slide presenting a list of points in full. Put up as one unit, it is clear what it means and it can be read more quickly than a presenter can read it aloud, leaving the audience bored and with people's minds wandering until the speaker catches up and moves on.
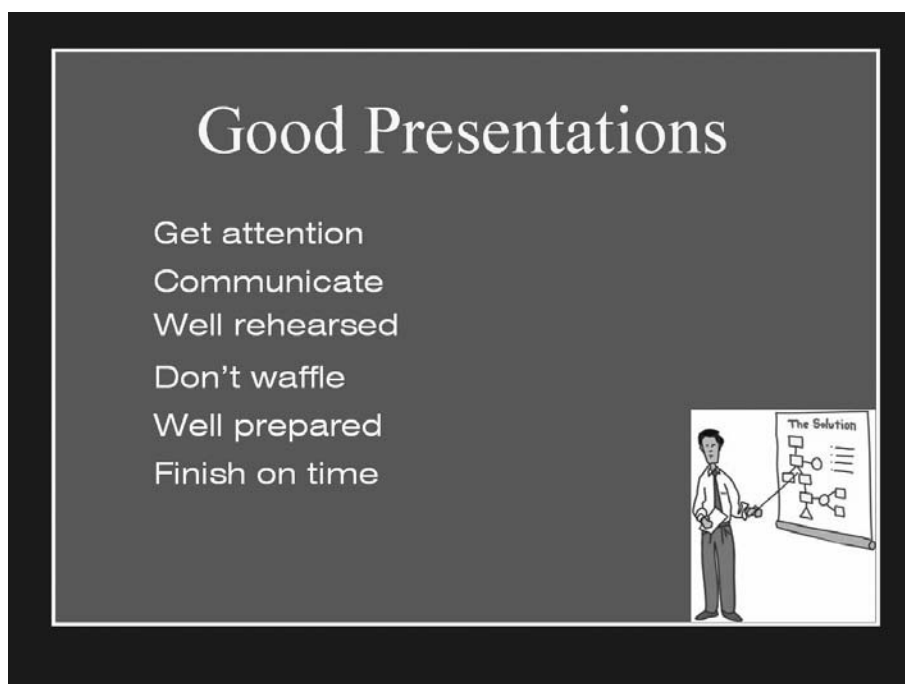
2. The second slide reduces the text and looks better because of it, the audience have less to read, and so may listen to the presenter. But as they still know what is going to be talked about, they may tune out anyway until the next slide is delivered. It is still a list.

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3. The third slide is laid out not as a list but as a Mind Map™ type layout, with the central idea in the centre of the screen and the bullet points laid out around it. To improve the slide further, it is built up with five CLICKs, preventing the audience members from reading ahead and so forcing them to listen to the presenter. Most people agree that this third version is a significant improvement on the first; however I still don't like it too much. It is still self-explanatory. What is the purpose of the presenter if the audience can discern the information on their own by simply reflecting on the completed slide? There is a better way.

4. I want you to look at the fourth slide. I introduce this to the audience as articulating the same information as the last three slides but in a visual manner, then I CLICK and two balls appear labelled *Presenter* and *Audience*. I pause, look at the screen and then look at the audience. They all follow my gaze to the screen and then look at me expectantly, sometimes with a confused look on their faces. The incomplete diagram does not of itself articulate my point, they know that *something is missing* and they want to know what I have to say over this diagram that makes the point. Stop for a minute and examine the last sentence '*they want to*
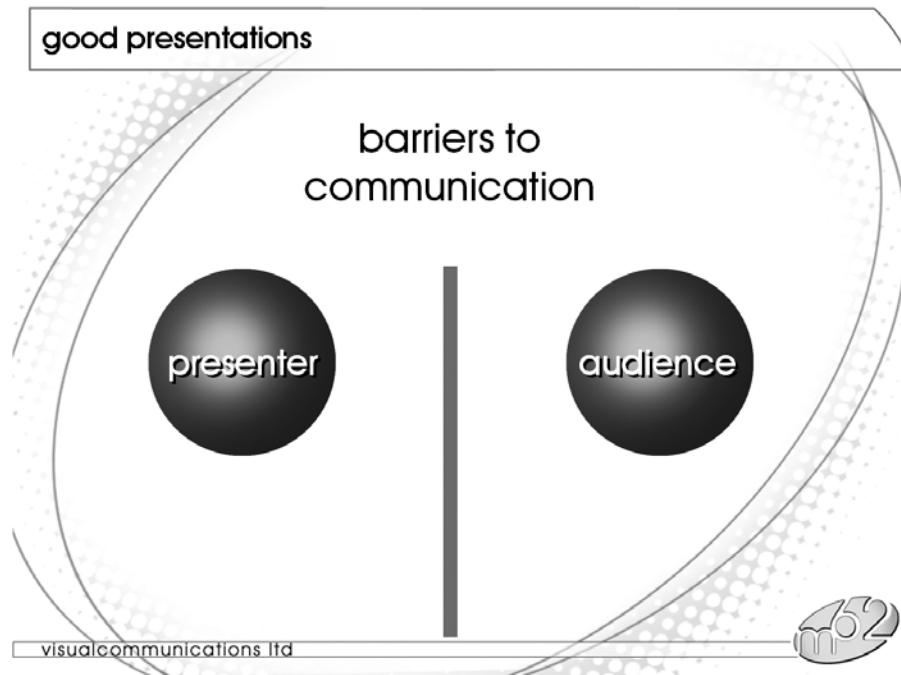
know what I have to say'. When was the last time you were in a presentation and *actually wanted to listen to the presenter?* More importantly, how much more effective would your presentations be if your audience listened to every single word you said? The audience are at this point utterly engaged in communication with me, I have their rapt attention and usually you can hear a pin drop. I point this out to them and then say 'there are three essential ingredients to an effective presentation', I look at the screen (still two balls) – I have done it again in a different
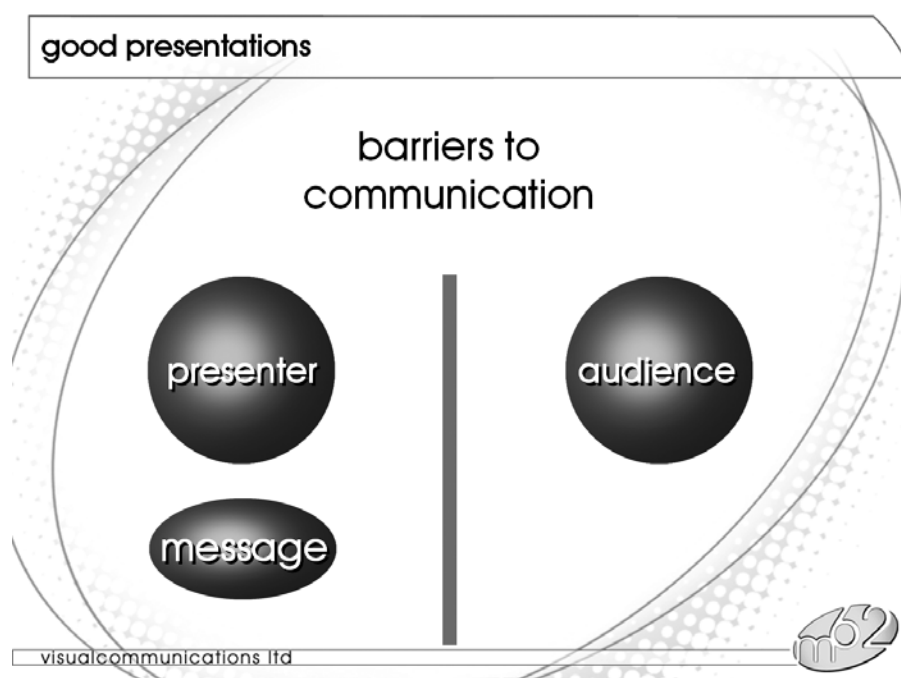
way. They have just been told there are three things, but they can only see two. This creates something we call *visual cognitive dissonance* (apologies to the psychologists reading this for bastardising a proper term). The beauty of dissonance is that it compels a resolution; in this case the resolution is to watch and listen, which, let's face it, has got to be the Holy Grail of presenting. CLICK

5. Then I finish the diagram off, I explain that the line in the middle represents barriers to communication and that the third element has to be a message (SMART, see later). The definition of a good presentation is this and only this: 'To what extent do we manage to get the message…' CLICK (message begins to move to the right) '… across to the audience'. Nothing else matters – they don't have to like it, agree with it or enjoy the experience; they just have to understand the message.
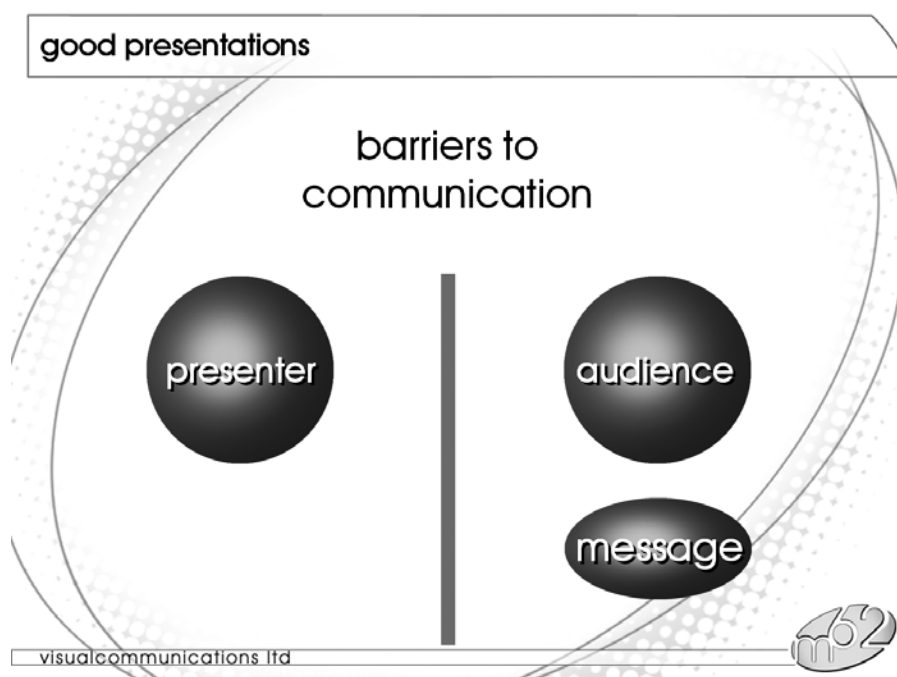
Again this is best seen presented and can be viewed on www.killer presentations.com/cuecards.html

This demonstrates two more of our 'killer ideas'.

Killer Idea   Slides should be non self-explanatory

By designing slides that do not present an instant message but initially intrigue and then help the audience to visualise the argument, you encourage the audience to pay attention and, by increasing their engagement with you, make it more likely that they will retain more of the message for longer. In this way what the presenter says – *patter* – becomes an integral part of the overall flow of information; a seamless part of the whole.

Killer Idea   Visualisation

A picture really does paint a thousand words; certainly it does a better job of communication than words alone. Until recently I thought that psychologists said people process images four times faster than text, however I recently found a reference to visual processing being 400 times faster[*] than hearing spoken words – images are 'language independent' and can add an element of emotion as well as conveying the core content of a message.

We dislike headings and bullet points so much we do not charge for their production, preferring to assume that as they add no value to the presentation we will extract no value for their production. We reserve a special place of hate for Clip Art but that is another story.

Distraction, the presenter's enemy

The audience can only remember that which it heard, or saw; if your listeners weren't paying attention, they will have zero retention of the information. Later we will look at the audience's attention span for this reason. Clearly then we must allow the audience to pay attention to the appropriate piece of communication.

I will mention this several times in this book as it pertains to each section. There are four sources of distraction:

◆ Content
◆ Presenter

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[*] *Emotional Branding* by Daryl Travis (Prima Tech), Chapter 6 'Right brain, left brain, no brain at all'.

◆ Design
◆ Animation.

Let's look at them in turn.

Content

The biggest problem with presentations that we encounter is that they have too much information in them, much of it interesting but irrelevant and this is then delivered too fast for the audience to cogitate much if any of it. The rule should be only to include information that is 100% strictly relevant to the arguments being made. Anything less than this encourages the inclusion of information that 'may be useful' or worse 'may be interesting'. These pieces of information have a habit of distracting your listeners and, worst of all, prompting them to stop paying attention to the presentation as their mind wanders down a path inspired by an irrelevant observation.

Presenter

Presenters distract audiences in two ways: either by saying something or by doing something inconsistent or irrelevant (or just plain annoying). For example I once watched a businessman attempt to make a serious point whilst wearing a skirt (don't ask!) – very distracting.

Design

If the audience walks away from the presentation discussing the design of the slides and not the message, then we have failed. The design needs to be good enough to allow the message through but not in any way divert attention. Irrelevant pictures in the background are one distraction, as are relevant pictures that can't quite be seen, prompting the audience to try to decipher the imagery.

Animation

This is the most frequently misused distraction technique. We use animation to draw the audience's attention to the place in the slide we want them to look at, but it is easy to draw their attention to the wrong place or to anaesthetise them by over-using irrelevant animations. Please see the

section on animation to see our objective quality rules regarding animation; these are designed to avoid unintentional audience distraction.

Each of these areas of potential distraction has its own section in the book. Much of the content is simply-applied common sense. In order to communicate effectively the audience have to be paying attention to what we are showing them and listening to what we are saying – all at the same time. The less we distract them, the more they pay attention, the more effective the presentation. What we do is not complicated, just different from the norm.

Which version?

I started m62 in July 1997 and Microsoft had just released Office™ 97 but most of my clients were still using Office™ 95 and therefore PowerPoint 95. So the first couple of hundred presentations at m62 were developed in 95. Office 97 was a vast improvement and quickly became the norm, however it failed to produce smooth text and as a result we often produced text outside of PowerPoint and inserted it as a picture file. This looked much better but made editing difficult.

PowerPoint 2000 added a much better text engine and we stopped producing text in Photoshop™. But the big change was PowerPoint 2002™. The single biggest advantage was the ability to have items leave or move on the screen. Microsoft completely redesigned the 'custom animation' and made it significantly easier to use.

We now standardise on PowerPoint 2003, in fact we insist that clients upgrade as it is so far ahead of the older versions. We now develop in 2003 and supply the PowerPoint Viewer with each presentation (not available in 2002 which caused us some problems).

We are providing suggestions to Microsoft's development team for features that would help for the next version, and if they manage to incorporate these we will dutifully upgrade and insist clients do likewise.

One addition to PowerPoint that my design team find very useful is the PptExtreme toolkit, which can be found at: www.PptExtreme.com. This

adds some time saving shortcuts that do not affect the finished file (so other users can still see all of the presentation).

Summary

1. Presentations are for the audience, not for the presenter.

2. Use non self-explanatory slides (create **visual cognitive dissonance**).

3. Remove unnecessary text.

4. Don't use complete sentences: single words or phrases will do.

5. Pictures not words where possible.

6. No complete slides, always build.

7. Don't distract the audience.

8. Upgrade to PowerPoint 2003.