

Power corrupts: Power point corrupts absolutely — Part 2



Part 1 of this Editorial, in the previous issue focused on “What not to do” while communicating through the formal presentation medium in professional interactions. In this part, we focus on the attributes of powerful communications through effective presentations. To put it simply, these are those lectures at conferences, the “memories of which linger a lifetime!”^[1]

As I flash down memory lane, a statement that I heard during a sightseeing excursion to the Sears Towers in Chicago, IL, USA, is something that has stayed with me. It’s a philosophy proposed by the German Architect to inspire the architectural design of the tower. The Philosophy was “Less is More!”. This is a phrase from the Robert Browning poem “Andrea del Sarto, also called “The Faultless Painter”” published in 1855.^[2]

It might sound shocking to many, and a cliché to the rest: The biggest secret to an awesome presentation is simplicity! The most complex concepts should be packaged in a manner that they are simple for audiences to comprehend, and yet take home! You can still challenge your audience. You can also deliver presentations that have the depth of meaning and feature complex designs.

The challenging material, depth of meaning, and sophisticated designs are all vital to the success of a presentation. Clement Mok nails it when he says, “very often, people confuse simple with simplistic. The nuance is lost on most.”^[3]

Successful presentations are simple and utilize simplicity, without being simplistic.^[4]

THE ONE-SENTENCE THEORY

Conversation science talks about “a governing thought,”

behind every successful communication. The supporting elements/statements can augment the thought, but the clarity of this governing thought is paramount. As a planner for professional meetings, I sometimes cringe at the comment made by colleagues lobbying for greater time slots, “How can I present years of research in 20 min or 30 min?” This question clearly indicates that the potential presenter has still not understood the “governing thought principle” or simply what the ‘soul’ of his/her own research/clinical material is.

Simplifying a presentation topic to a one-sentence summary before beginning designing your presentation, is extremely important. If one cannot explain a presentation in one-sentence, one is not ready to create a presentation. Many presenters lose their overall message because they were too focused on weaving together the supporting elements, and forget to just get to the “governing thought” of the presentation. They could not land the plane. Instead they were in the clouds, circling the governing idea. Luckily, this problem has a simple solution: The one-sentence theory. The one-sentence description serves as a compass, making it easy to explore ideas without getting lost in the land of possibilities.

If you think your research is too big for a one-sentence summary, reading the works of Daniel Pink, an author of three New York Times bestsellers, who suggests writing a “one-sentence description” of the purpose of your life, is a revelation.^[5]

SIMPLE IS STYLISH

Once we’ve decided to build a presentation around that one-sentence, and the “less is more” on the slide, the next question is how big should that sentence be, and

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what are the “words” you will use in them? Pretend your presentation will be delivered to an audience of children. Albert Einstein, a genius who gave us complex theories of physics, puts it brilliantly “If you can’t explain it to a 6-year-old, you don’t understand it yourself!”

Steve Jobs’ success as a presenter can be attributed to his ability to use simple words and short sentences to describe big ideas. A study revealed that during one presentation in 2007, Jobs spoke at approximately a 5th grade level. In 2007, when Steve Jobs spoke at the Mac Conference and Expo, he used an average of 10.5 words per sentence. The percentage of difficult words was 2.9%, and the school grade level that could comprehend him was 5.5. Bill Gates in the same year spoke at the International Consumer Electronics Show, using 21.6 words per sentence, with 5.11% difficult words that could be comprehended at a mean grade level of 10.7. At the same show, Michael Dell used an average of 16.5 words per sentence, with a 6.4% of difficult words that could be comprehended at a mean grade level of 9.1.

Coming home to orthodontics, I recollect the 2009 AAO Congress at Boston, where the Late Vince Kokich, probably the best teacher, orthodontics has ever been witness to, was to deliver, what was announced as his last lecture at the AAO Annual Session. For an 8 am lecture, the auditorium at 7:30 am had no seats left, and there was a queue for even standing positions in the room, outside in the prefunction area. I was in the queue, patiently waiting for my turn to possibly get in. One of the gate marshals, actually equipped “What’s so special about this guy, that we’re witnessing a crowd like this. Is he giving out free gifts?” I smiled, as I barely made it to the packed room. The lecture was phenomenal, and it was an emotional moment for the orthodontic fraternity to hear the legend for the last time on this podium. On my way out, I saw the Marshall at the gate again. I asked him jokingly, “So did you get the free gift?” He said, “This guy is really special. I don’t know any orthodontics, but he still connected with me.” This statement has stayed with me since. Champions and experts have one ability: To make their craft look simple and easy!

Simple language never diminishes the quality of your content. Your audience will appreciate the ease of listening to your talk. By eliminating unnecessary technical jargon and opting for ordinary language, you are simplifying the listening experience for your audience.

THE THREE POINT SOMETHING

With the purpose of your presentation simply stated in one-sentence, you can start to develop your presentation content by creating an outline. When constructing your

outline, edit your material until you have no more than three main ideas supporting your overall message.^[4]

Remember, great presentations are simple to understand and enjoy. By building the message of your presentation on a foundation of three key points, you are simplifying the experience for your audience. In addition, you are making it easy for your audience to recall the flow of your presentation.

Consider the Latin Phrase “Omne Trium Perfectum.”^[6] What this implies is that everything that “comes in sets of three is perfect” or that “every set of three is complete.” Steve Jobs in 2011 described the new iPad as “thinner, lighter, and faster.” The rule of three is all around us, as it works! The human brain remembers with ease one, two, and three.

The 4th, 10th, or 47th point is rarely remembered. To get started, the classic three act story telling structure is the best way to begin. Build every story around (1) a set up: The clinical issue or the research question, (2) a struggle: The process in research or the clinical case progress, and (3) a resolution.

The resolution aspect in a clinical presentation is extremely critical. The audience wants to know what’s in it for them, and how can they take the contents of the talk back home, to the floors of their clinical departments or chair side to patient care.

FAILING TO PLAN IS PLANNING TO FAIL

A classic piece of literature on “planning an orthodontic lecture is a two-part series by Kokich and Kokich.”^[7,8] Selecting a “theme” appropriate to an audience is extremely critical. Imagine lecturing to a group of referring dentists about, “torque efficacy of various prescriptions.” It would be such a waste of an opportunity! The audience and forum should dictate the topic and content, and never vice versa.

The second important decision is deciding the amount of material to be showcased and whether the “breadth or depth” of a topic needs to be covered.^[7] I answer this dilemma often by referring to the “three-point” protocol. It’s bizarre that novice presenters want to use presentations as a mode to disseminate all that information they have on a particular topic. A colleague once said and I agree, “a good presentation is the one that keeps you hungry for more!”

Good records, a smooth flow of the clinical or research story with well-defined sign-posts and transitions are inseparable parts of a good orthodontic lecture. All these can enhance the “take home” of a presentation, but never replace the “soul” or that “one defined message” that needs to be thoroughly planned before any execution is deliberated!

This two-part editorial has looked at common errors that occur in presentations, incorrect, and correct use of presentation software, and the values that go into a “wow” presentation. In an era where effective communication forms the essence of a successful professional’s life, imbibing these skills into our fold is what will define the “tomorrow” of the specialty and its teaching protocols!



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