Power corrupts: PowerPoint corrupts absolutely!: Part 1

As one boards the flight back from a conference, you take back knowledge and experience. And experiences come in all forms: The good, the tolerable and the unmentionable! Imbibing good lectures are memories that linger a lifetime while the unmentionables sometimes inspire editorials, especially this one!

"Death by PowerPoint "is a phenomenon caused by the poor use of what is essentially great presentation software. Key contributors to death by PowerPoint include confusing graphics, slides with too much text and presenters whose idea of a good presentation is to read 90 slides out loud.

Death by PowerPoint can be easily characterized by a few of these…
• Observing the audience members' glazed eyes
• Snoring audiences
• Murmurs and buzzing
• Furtive use of smartphones and trips to the bathroom.

When an audience remains emotionally disconnected from the content that is being presented, there is a good chance that the speaker has either not spent enough time and effort thinking about which key points he wants the audience to take away, or has spent entirely too much time and effort setting up the presentation in PowerPoint, incorporating every feature and display option the software provides. Every Orthodontic resident, clinician or an academic is either a presenter or a potential presenter, and this skill today is almost as important as our domain skills.

The rule of the game is simple! Technology is a visual aid to enhance what is being said, "not" the focal point of the presentation!

This editorial is a two part series. Part 1 focuses on common errors that kill audience interest during a lecture. Part 2 will dwell on tips tricks, and experience mantras that enable presenters to make presentations that leave a lasting impression.

The "PowerPoint" software is a generic name that I'm using for presentation software. I'm a passionate "Key Note" fan, and the "Prezis" are also gaining popularity recently. We don't mean to compare the three at all! The point is, as an application, they all allow you to do everything you need to do in creating an effective presentation. Unfortunately, they also come with enough bells and whistles to lead you down the path to presentation hell.

To be known as someone who does presentations right, here are six pointers of things that are on a *"Must Not Do"* list:

1. **Use your slide as a storybook page**
   Too much matter on a slide, which dissuades readers from reading it, is frustrating, and the best way to lose an audience. Spreadsheets, charts, and complex formulae should never be crammed into a single slide. The rule is to use a font not <30 number in size and *convey only one important message* per slide. Section your information into multiple slides for effective communication.

2. **Use the jazziest fonts in town**
   Every font communicates in a manner different from another. Fonts that make the audience search for letters or convey a casual approach often obscure a message. Bold should be used sparingly, and italics preferably never. Using too many fonts on a single slide also is a distraction. My recommendation would be fonts like *Gill Sans, Tahoma, Futura or Calibri.*

3. **Talking to/reading your slides**
   The best and surest way to create a rebellion in your audience is to reproduce your whole talk on slides. Within minutes, everyone will zone out. I recollect as a graduate student, going to a dental congress, and have a chairperson ask a presenter to stop his presentation mid-way and remark "If we have to read on your slides, what you are saying verbatim, then we can see it for ourselves, we don't need you to speak!" I was shocked at the chairperson for being so direct, but the audience applauded him!
   Aside from making oneself superfluous as a presenter, one also tends to have way too many slides, if one follows this approach! In the age of social media, where everybody wants slides of lectures to be put up on such

forums, for the benefit of people who couldn't attend a congress or a symposium; my simple question to these requests is, "If a handout can replace the experience of listening to a speaker, then the speaker is either too bad, or the audience is really too uninterested!" Lecture slides augment the lecture. They can never replace it!

4. **Create a discotheque on your slides or their background**
   Colors add value and cheer to everything in life! But there is a place for everything and yet, everything has to be in place. While there may be situations when neon green, electric orange and psychedelic pink probably convey a message in a presentation, at most places they don't. Choosing colors that don't leave a retinal after-image or make content difficult to read, is imperative. Sometimes colors appear different on the screen and the computer. It's better to test you're your combinations on the screen beforehand. Background templates that change with each slide, include complicated images or patterns, or display themes that have no connection to the content of your presentation are definitely not helpful.

5. **Over or underutilizing animations/transitions**
   Conveying the entire message at once in a slide is not an effective use of the presentation tool. A well-crafted presentation has to have a distinct flow and contain a few deliberate surprises or structured revelations. Within each slide, you can do this by using various masking, slide-building, or animation techniques. The gradual revelation of information has greater impact and keeps your audience with you, not ahead of you! While using animations to one's advantage is a huge asset, sometimes overuse can create "unwarranted sci-flicks." Different animations from one slide to the next will make your audience cringe. This is especially true for animations that involve a lot of movement; for example, one slide has each bullet point spiral in and the next slide has each bullet point fly in from a different side of the screen. You're probably only two slides into your presentation, and half of your audience would already be suffering motion sickness! Use animation sparingly and stick with only a few moderate ones in any one presentation.

6. **Not realizing man-made technology, and not vice versa!**
   Videos and Sounds on transitions are great tools. One quotation that types itself onto the screen, accompanied by the clicking of a keyboard, might be entertaining. When every bullet point is ushered in by the same sound effect, teeth will start to grind. The same applies to bells, swooshes, and camera shutter sounds. Even music can become an irritant if used inappropriately. Using sound effects sparingly and only to enhance the meaning of the content are the way to go about it.

Videos again are a great way to enhance presentations. They engage an audience, provide entertainment value and help make a difficult point. However, if your video starts playing automatically before you've had a chance to set the stage, it may lose the intended impact. Also, autoplay doesn't always kick in right away. When a video stalls, most presenters try to click play, and that advances the slide. Your best bet is to set up the video to be started on a click. The key is to be in control of audios and videos embedded into the lecture.

Communicating through presentations should ideally serve to *Inspire, Influence and Inform* an audience, and exactly in that order of importance. Technology today forms an excellent resource to enhance, what essentially is a "human to human connect". By using it inappropriately, we are contributing to the dying art of "Lecturing"! Preparing slides are a small but important part of getting a lecture ready, but not the only part. Understanding this phenomenon is critical to disseminating knowledge through this medium.

It's interesting here, to recall an anecdote that is attributed to President Woodrow Wilson. "How long does it take you to prepare one of your speeches?" asked a friend of President Wilson?

"That depends on the length of the speech," answered the President. "If it is a 10-min speech it takes me all of 2 weeks to prepare it; if it is a ½ hour speech it takes me a week; if I can talk as long as I want to it requires no preparation at all. I am ready now." Irrespective of slide software, it's the "preparation and planning," that are the core values that go into building "great lectures" and "wow presentations" that convey specific messages in a given time frame.

The Orthodontic Professional of today has "PowerPoint" to empower his message to be conveyed. And power of any kind, if used inappropriately, corrupts!

The Part 2 of this series in the next issue will discuss the making of meaningful presentations that capture audience imagination.

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