

## Poor Presentation Skills Lead to More Than Just Bad Meetings

In my position as Executive Director of the LIC, I have had to do a fair amount of public speaking. I also get to attend a number of conferences and have therefore had the opportunity to listen to a variety of different speakers. As a result of this “speaker saturation” or “plethora of presentations” I have come to a couple of conclusions. First, a good professional speaker is still far better than a very good amateur. There is a very specific skill involved in holding a room, capturing the attention of an audience, evoking emotions from a group, and leading meeting participants down a very clear and intentional path.

The value of this ability isn't limited to professional speakers. Anyone with any leadership responsibilities in an organization would be better served to learn how to communicate effectively to a group whether it's to agents, policyholders, AM Best, regulators, your Board, or just your peers. Yet how many of us have sat through a company meeting cringing because we're subjected to a boring, disjointed, and ill conceived presentation?

PowerPoint is often cited as the chief culprit for any barrage of bad babbling, but that's a bit like blaming the car for the bad driver. That's not to say that PowerPoint doesn't contribute to the problem – but I'll speak more about that later.

Many professional speakers use PowerPoint and use it very effectively, although they follow a few strict rules. First, no more than 10 words on a slide – but even better is no words at all. Most professional speakers use a lot of images to reinforce their message, while most amateurs use lots of busy bullets to help keep their talk on track. This brings up another advantage that professionals have over the rest of us – they practice. A lot. Most of them have coaches and have spent hours perfecting their presentations while continuing to critique and cultivate them incessantly. All of this redundancy gives rise to the oxymoron of “intentional spontaneity” where something as casual as removing a jacket or making a hand gesture becomes as rehearsed and rigid as Dick Clark on New Year's Eve.

I used to think that the rest of us were doomed to cling to the memory crutches embedded in busy slides simply because we didn't have the benefit of performing the same presentation hundreds of times a year. However, everywhere I turned, I was reminded of the same cardinal rules of good slides – few words and lots of images – and resolved to try to emulate that same formation in my own speeches. Over time, I found that if I selected my images carefully, I could actually use the detail in the pictures to remind me of the points I would otherwise have made with bullets.

And this brings me to my second point: most of us are fairly conversant with the rules of good presentations but choose to ignore them. Even people who should know better still opt for complex slides that are illegible without a telescope so they can do us all the favor of reciting information we would otherwise just read ourselves. In the world of presentation fashion, this has got to be an even bigger faux pas than white pants after Labor Day! We tell ourselves that our message is complicated and therefore requires a deluge of detail but don't you believe it. If the topic is that dense then a series of simpler slides that supported rather than restated the message would be more effective.

Frankly, I think the truth is that it's nerve wracking to speak in front of an audience. We would willingly trade the sanctity of good presentation protocol for the comfort of having every aid imaginable to keep us from making a mistake. That's why so many of us hide behind a podium, read from our notes, use busy slides, convey far more detail than is necessary, and wear a belt with our suspenders. But is fear a reasonable rationalization for poor communication?

And this brings me to my final point: even if executed correctly, how effective is PowerPoint as a tool for transferring ideas? An April 26, 2010 NY Times article titled “We Have Met the Enemy and He Is PowerPoint” does a good job of chronicling the military’s obsession and discontent with the ubiquitous software <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.html?hp> and contains the succinct summation by Joint Forces commander Gen. James N. Mattis: “PowerPoint makes us stupid”.

Despite the military’s dissatisfaction with PowerPoint, they use it extensively for daily briefings but astutely observe that “some problems in the world are not bullet-izable”. The article states rhetorically, “imagine lawyers presenting arguments before the Supreme Court in slides instead of legal briefs”. In fact, military senior officers conceded that “the program does come in handy when the goal is *not* imparting information, such as in briefings for reporters”.

Peter Norvig’s website famously boiled Lincoln’s Gettysburg address down to six slides as a satirical example of how limiting PowerPoint’s structure is as a means of communication, especially if the PowerPoint auto content wizard is deployed <http://norvig.com/Gettysburg/index.htm>. An even more amusing example reduces the close of Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream” speech to three slides titled *Some of my Dreams*, *Strategy for Realizing Dreams*, and *Expectations*, with the final bullet dryly advising “Song’s inspirational tagline: Thank God almighty we are free at last”. <http://www.aaronsw.com/2002/classicPowerpoint>.

For sure, the strict organizational structure of a carefully crafted and well executed PowerPoint presentation can be a useful, practical, and informative means of conveying certain information. In fact, it’s possible that the main reason for the intense dislike of PowerPoint isn’t so much the software’s misuse or limitations but the fact that for many years it has been our only alternative. It’s a good example of the old adage about when your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. In the same way, every solution delivered via PowerPoint ultimately has the same structure. Apple’s Keynote software may be slicker and more user-friendly, but in the end, we’re all stuck using the same title, bullet, graph, chart, and photo features to make our points.

Until now. We finally have something so completely different that it has the potential to change the way businesses communicate, process information, and make decisions. Prezi is a new presentation software tool that is available free on their website. <http://prezi.com/>, or for an incredibly cheap \$159/year you can purchase their “professional” version.

What makes Prezi so different? Most of all, it’s completely unstructured. With Prezi, rather than a standard set of prepackaged templates to build your presentation in a uniform manner (i.e. the same as everyone else’s), Prezi begins with what can best be described as a giant whiteboard. You can toss your ideas up in any order, in any configuration, and in any scale. Layout is irrelevant. Size is irrelevant. Orientation and direction is irrelevant. You have complete freedom to create.

Once you’ve laid out your ideas, putting them together into a presentation is a lot like being the director of a movie. You direct the camera to focus on different parts of the white board in a specific order and zoom in or out in order to highlight different aspects of your concepts. When you’re done, a Prezi presentation looks a lot more like a movie than a slide show with the camera panning and zooming to showcase your ideas in the order you’ve predetermined. I know – it’s hard to imagine -- but that’s why the Prezi website has a showcase page with numerous presentations that illustrate the best and most creative applications of the software.

I used Prezi for the first time last month in Atlanta for my opening presentation at the LIC's 100<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. Right from the beginning, I found that I approached my presentation from an entirely different perspective than I ever have in the past. For example, I used a very casual hand-written font that I would never have previously considered for such a formal event. There's just something about the freedom involved in the creation of a Prezi presentation that makes you want to try new things. I also had a lot of fun playing with the flexibility of scale and orientation that Prezi provides. I intentionally positioned some of my slides upside down as I laid them out in order to indicate contrasting views and I buried images deep within individual words so that they were invisible to my audience until Prezi zoomed in to bring them to life. Bottom line: by using presentation software so completely different from the standard templates we're all used to with PowerPoint, I actually found myself thinking differently about what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it.

Could the solution to inspiring creative thinking in your company be as simple as adopting new software? Probably not, but it's certainly worth taking a look at the tools your company uses to communicate because the same factors that contribute to poor presentations are the same flaws that support faulty decision making. As Clifford Nass stated in *The New Yorker*, "PowerPoint lifts the floor by allowing some main points to come across even if the speaker mumbles, forgets, or is otherwise grossly incompetent. But it also lowers the ceiling by making it harder to have an open exchange between presenter and audience, to convey ideas that do not neatly fit into outline format, or to have a truly inspiring presentation".

Is this the foundation you want to build your company's decision making process upon?

Train your managers to communicate like professionals rather than amateurs. Coach them on the rules of effective presentations and drag them out from behind the metaphorical podiums that encourage timidity rather than tenaciousness. Strip them of the standardized templates that reduce every solution to a series of bullets, graphs, and charts. Encourage them to think differently by imposing entirely new rules for addressing your next corporate initiative such as video, Prezi, or even the restrictive 140 character format of Twitter.

And most importantly, if you still feel that you must use PowerPoint, make sure not to wear white pants after Labor Day when doing your presentations.