

Storytelling: PowerPoint's New Best Friend

Jay Cross

Slide after slide of bulleted sentence fragments is an awful thing to sit through. If the speaker giving the presentation reads them to you word for word, it makes a bad spectacle even worse. Regardless of these unpleasanties, PowerPoint has become the language of business.

PowerPoint also happens to be learning's most popular authoring tool. Many software packages enable learning and development leaders to narrate a PowerPoint presentation and upload it to the Web. The problem is that if live lectures are ineffective, prerecorded ones online are going to be even more ineffective. Unfortunately, being a subject-matter expert doesn't necessarily make someone an expert public speaker. Sadly, many experts think the purpose of a PowerPoint presentation is to expose the audience to content and pure information—as if emotion plays no part in getting a message across.

However, it makes no more sense to blame PowerPoint for boring presentations than to blame fountain pens for forgery.

Steve Denning, the author of several books on storytelling, recalls not being able to get fully engaged into someone's PowerPoint presentation. He recognized that PowerPoint can be too concrete, and therefore, he abandoned PowerPoint in his own presentations in favor of telling stories. No one missed it. When you hear a powerful story, you internalize it. Your imagination makes it your story, and that's something that will stick with you.

Cliff Atkinson's book "Beyond Bullet Points: Using Microsoft PowerPoint to Create Presentations That Inform, Motivate and Inspire" shows how to use Hollywood's script-writing techniques to focus your ideas, how to use storyboards to establish clarity and how to properly produce the script so that it best engages the audience.

Atkinson recently told me the story of a presentation that made a \$250 million difference. Attorney Mark Lanier pled the case against Merck in the first Vioxx-related death trial, brought by the widow of a man who died of a heart attack that she believed was caused by the painkiller. Before preparing his presentation, he read "Beyond Bullet Points," and invited Atkinson to Houston to lend a hand in putting his presentation together.

"We used the three-step approach from the book," Atkinson said. "Then (Lanier's) flawless delivery took the experience beyond what I imagined possible. He masterfully framed his argument with an even flow of projected images and blended it with personal stories, physical props, a flip chart, a tablet PC, a document projector and a deeply personal connection with his audience."

Fortune magazine's coverage of the trial describing Lanier's presentation said, "The attorney for the plaintiff presented simple and emotional stories that strongly contrasted with Merck's appeals to colorless reason." Fortune reported that Lanier "gave a frighteningly powerful and skillful opening statement. Speaking...without notes and in gloriously plain English, and accompanying nearly every point with

imaginative, easily understood (if often hokey) slides and overhead projections, Lanier, a part-time Baptist preacher, took on Merck and its former CEO Ray Gilmartin with merciless, spellbinding savagery.”

Lanier’s technique was persuasive and aimed to get the jurors to believe in his “simple, alluring and emotionally cathartic stories, versus Merck’s appeals to colorless, heavy-going, soporific reason. Lanier is inviting the jurors to join him on a bracing mission to catch a wrongdoer and bring him to justice.” The Texas jury awarded the widow \$253.4 million.

You may be thinking, “I don’t have time to do something that elaborate.” Put that in perspective: If you spend months on a complex project, isn’t it worth a few days to wrap up the results into an effective presentation? If you’re using PowerPoint as an authoring system, remember this: A presentation and self-directed learning are two totally different experiences, and the fact that they both may be in PowerPoint doesn’t change that. For compelling presentations, follow the advice in “Beyond Bullet Points.” And for training that works, follow the tenets of sound instructional design.

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