



PDF of this article // 

print this article // 

Bullet Points Kill (Effective Communication)

By Cliff Atkinson (published April 22, 2003 at www.MarketingProfs.com)

Guns don't kill communication. Bullet points kill communication. And when you use bullet points in a PowerPoint, you're shooting yourself in the foot.

Why do people use bullets? Bullet points do a great job of taking lots of text and turning it into less text. Given a choice between reading a 120-page business plan or a 12-page bullet point summary, most would choose the bullet points.

When it comes to presentations, the problem is that bullet points are the right answer to the wrong question. If the question is, "How do I condense 120 pages of text down to 12 pages of text?" then bullet points are the right answer. But in a visual presentation environment, that's the wrong question.

The right question is, "How can I distill my complex information into a visual form that will help me communicate more effectively?" You can begin asking the right question with a simple shift of orientation in your thinking.

Landscapes: the Best Formats for Portraits

In a Microsoft Word document you work in a portrait orientation, meaning your working space is vertical. It's the customary format for keeping text in easy-to-read columns of long vertical boxes.

But in PowerPoint you work in a landscape orientation, meaning your working space is turned on its end and is now horizontal. Not by coincidence, that's the same shape as television and movie screens.

The written communication of a portrait orientation happens in a 1-to-1 mode. When you gaze at a single written document, your goal is to absorb the information into your own individual mind.

However, visual communication in a landscape orientation is 1-to-many. When multiple people gaze at a screen in a social context, your goal as a presenter is to extract understanding from the entire group, not just a single mind. And images, rather than bullet points, are simply the best tool for that job.

Bringing it All Back Together

Besides just being in the wrong place at the wrong time, bullet points don't belong in a PowerPoint because they just don't deliver what they advertise. Bullet points on a screen make information harder to understand, not easier.

The core purpose of communication is to cohere: to coalesce fragments of information back together into a single understanding. That's the most difficult task of communicating. And it's actually the origin of the word communication: to "make common", or to bring together.

Bullet points can do many things, but they do not cohere information. In fact, they do the opposite-- they fragment understanding into little pieces. Break any topic into a title, sub-headings and bullet points, and you're de-communicating, because you're not helping to bring a single idea together.

1 + 5 = 1

So how do you begin to spin bullet points into effective PowerPoint images? The next time you find yourself facing a title and bullet points, apply this "1 + 5 = 1" exercise. Take a sheet of paper in landscape format, and draw a line down the center. On the left side, write your 1 heading and 5 bullet points.

Pause for a second, and ask yourself if you can somehow cut through all of this information, and get right to the heart of it. On the right side of the page, write down the thought that came to you.

After all, the goal of a good presentation is inspiration, not information. Books, white papers and spreadsheets are great at documenting large quantities of information. Presentations are the appropriate place for inspiration. They are an opportunity for you to awaken passion in your audience about your topic and engage you and each other in further conversation.

Join the Revolution

When you pivot from portrait to landscape orientation, you're shifting from the rules of written communications to the rules of visual communications. And that happens to be the same shift revolutionizing our world from a text-based culture to an image based-culture. Every time you open PowerPoint, you have an opportunity to be a part of this visual revolution.

When you use bullet points straight out of your Word document, you have yet to join the revolution. When your PowerPoint resembles a brochure, you're making a step in the right direction, although you're still not there because a brochure is a brochure, not a presentation. When your slides start to look like television or billboards, you're joining the revolution and are beginning to unlock the visual power of communication.

And yes, this is a revolution you can win without a single bullet.

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant specializing in organizational issues related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at www.sociablemedia.com or contact him at cliff.atkinson@sociablemedia.com.

© 2003 Cliff Atkinson

sociable media®