



PDF of this article // 

print this article // 

Really Bad PowerPoint, Revisited: Q&A Interview with Seth Godin

By Cliff Atkinson

Seth Godin is the author of five books that have been bestsellers around the world and changed the way people think about marketing, change and work. He was recently chosen as one of "21 Speakers for the Next Century" by Successful Meetings and is consistently rated among the very best speakers by the audiences he addresses. As you can expect, Seth has a few things to say about PowerPoint, especially since his 2001 e-book Really Bad PowerPoint (and How to Avoid It), was an Amazon bestseller.

Cliff Atkinson: *Seth, what prompted you to publish your e-book Really Bad PowerPoint?*

Seth Godin: As a public speaker, I see far more than my fair share of presentations. Worse, a lot of them are from people getting paid to give them — and they're horrible. Horribly produced, horribly ineffective. "What," I asked myself, "if I could help these folks fix 'em?" I figured that not only would it make my afternoons a little saner, but it would help the millions of beleaguered folks out there who have to watch them.

CA: *Were you surprised that the e-book became the #1 bestseller on Amazon's e-book store for about a year?*

SG: Well, it's a pretty small pond (a lot of re-purposed junk is available as an e-book) but given the promotion through my site, I sort of figured that it would do pretty well. What has really and truly amazed me, though, is how 25% of the readers just don't get it. Read the [reviews](#) on Amazon and you'll see what I mean. They either don't get the point I'm trying to make (which seems too simple) or they have a visceral, emotional response to my persuasion-based thinking.

CA: *In your e-book you dared people to try your approach "without compromise". What were the results from those who tried it? Did they encounter any obstacles or challenges?*

SG: True story: A woman stopped me at my son's fencing class on Saturday. She had seen me working on a presentation one day as I was killing time waiting for class to end, and we ended up spending 30 minutes talking about PowerPoint. On Saturday, she reminded me of our earlier encounter and then said, (I'm not making this up), "I love you! You made me millions of dollars. MILLIONS! I redo my presentations and people can't sign up as clients fast enough. It works. It works. It works." So, I'm not sure that everyone has had the same results (your mileage may vary) but for \$3, that's a pretty good return on investment.

CA: *What do you think of Edward Tufte's booklet, The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint?*

SG: Edward and I disagree. He thinks people are a lot smarter than I do. He likes packing a ton of information into a slide and letting people tease it out (same as the Napoleon graph in his first book). I go in the opposite direction. If you can get the info across at first glance, you win. I'm in awe of his marketing abilities, though!

CA: *In Really Bad PowerPoint you wrote, "the reason we do presentations is to make a point, to sell one or more ideas". In The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint, Tufte complains of "an attitude of commercialism that turns everything into a sales pitch". What role should persuasion play in a presentation?*

SG: What's a sales pitch? Is church a sales pitch? What about trying to get the city council to approve your zoning variance? It seems to me that if you're not wasting your time and mine, you're here to get me to change my mind, to do something different. And that, my friend, is selling. If you're not trying to persuade, why are you here?

CA: *You recommend using "No more than six words on a slide. EVER." Tufte analyzes PowerPoint in*

terms of character density, comparing the number of characters per page in a list of books, a list of web pages, and a list of PowerPoint reports. He writes, "In terms of character density, printed reports in PP format typically perform at 2% to 10% of the typographic richness of nonfiction bestsellers!" What is the appropriate role for words on PowerPoint slides? Are more words better?

SG: Why would you use words on the screen when they do just fine in your mouth? Powerpoint allows you to augment a verbal persuasion approach with memorable graphics, giving you an unfair advantage. It also makes it clear (because you've got the clicker) that you came to sell something, not just have a conversation. Those two things are the reason to use it. If you want information density, leave a memo behind.

CA: *You give practical examples of how presenters can communicate effectively by simply narrating an image on a PowerPoint slide with no text — the principle that "less is more." Tufte says "Often, the more intense the detail, the greater the clarity and understanding — because meaning and reasoning are contextual. Less is a bore." What is the appropriate amount of data and detail to display in a presentation to communicate rationally, and how do you balance that with emotion?*

SG: I can only tell you that every time I give one of my "less is bore" presentations, I'm consistently the highest-ranked speaker at whatever conference I attend. Maybe it's cause I'm so good looking. I doubt it. The CFO of Oracle, on the other hand, did the densest presentation I'd ever seen a few years ago. Half the audience literally walked out before it was over.

CA: *It turns out that your key PowerPoint recommendations are actually supported by **research**: people learn better when words are narrated rather than presented on-screen, when extraneous material is removed, and when pictures and words are presented rather than words alone. Do you think the research findings might help persuade the 25% of people who resisted what you had to say?*

SG: I think there's no way in the world actual data or real life success is going to change the minds of the 25%. We have to remind ourselves (we being the vanguard of change, the folks who want work to matter) that a lot of people go to work hoping it will be just like it was yesterday — but shorter. Doing PowerPoint right is easy. But it's hard work because it involves change.

CA: *You donated 100% of all publisher and author proceeds from your PowerPoint e-book directly to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. How much have you raised for them?*

SG: Not as much as I need to.

Special offer for Sociable Media subscribers: Buy a copy of Seth's new book *Free Prize Inside*, **email him** your receipt, and he'll reply back with a FREE copy of *Really Bad PowerPoint*.

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant specializing in organizational issues related to PowerPoint. You can visit his website at www.sociablemedia.com, read more articles [here](#), or contact him at cliff.atkinson@sociablemedia.com.

© 2004 Cliff Atkinson

sociable media®