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A Haiku Kind of Guy: Q&A with Guy Kawasaki

By Cliff Atkinson

Where entrepreneurship, evangelism and presentations come together, you'll find none other than a guy named Guy. A legendary figure in Silicon Valley, **Guy Kawasaki** is a managing director of **Garage Technology Ventures**, an early-stage venture capital firm and a columnist for Forbes.com. Previously, he was an Apple Fellow at Apple Computer, Inc. where he was one of the individuals responsible for the success of the Macintosh computer. Guy is the author of eight books including his newest **The Art of the Start**, and as a professional presenter, has some sage advice for those studying the art of presentation.

Cliff Atkinson: *Guy, what's your impression of most PowerPoint and Keynote presentations you see?*

Guy Kawasaki: They suck: too many slides, too much information on the slides, too small font, and "read" not "spoken."

CA: *What needs to change in order for the general quality of presentations to improve?*

GK: Speakers should limit themselves to 10-20 slides, use no font smaller than 30 points, and incorporate diagrams more and text less.

CA: *You frequently make use of a simple "Top 10" list concept in your presentations, presenting a series of witty truisms about a particular topic, each on its own slide. Why and how does this approach work for you?*

GK: I like to give the audience a sense of where I am in the speech and how much longer it will last. Limiting yourself to ten key points is very good discipline. Most speakers would do themselves a great favor by adopting a Top 10 format.

CA: *It seems like there's a great deal of information in your slides, yet there are so few words that they're almost like poetry. When it comes to communicating, what is the distinction between making something simple vs. simplistic?*

GK: I'm a haiku kind of Guy. Without hearing me, my slides are almost useless. However, if you heard my speech, then my slides contain enough to help you remember the key points. The distinction between simple and simplistic is that simple helps you understand; simplistic confuses you further.

CA: *What role did you play in the use of "bullet charts" in presentation software? What was your reasoning behind them?*

GK: As Dave Winer kindly **credits** me, I suggested it to him during the design of ThinkTank because they were such a pain to create in MacDraw.

CA: *Why have bulleted lists become the overwhelming standard in presentations today?*

GK: Audiences need to receive information in digestible sizes. A bullet point is a "tidbit" that's just the right size. Think of a bullet as a chocolate covered macadamia nut. Unfortunately, most people try to give the audience a slab of chocolate. It's too much.

CA: *And why don't you use them in your own slides?*

GK: I do use them but not very often. I only have one concept per slide, and I support this concept with 5-10 minutes of talk. By contrast, many people have to present "facts" (as opposed to concepts), and there are multiple facts to communicate.

CA: *How would you describe the inter-relationships among your live presentations, your slides and your books?*

GK: I work in the opposite order of most people. First, I make the slides. Then I give the presentation many times. Then I write the book. I like to perfect the slides and presentation first and elaborate on them to write a book. If your speeches work, then your book will too. The opposite is not true.

CA: *Your vocabulary includes words and phrases such as "evangelism", "sell the dream", "create a cause." What is the appropriate balance of emotion and reason in a presentation?*

GK: This varies. I like to stay at an extreme using mostly use emotion and humor because I believe that speaking is 80 percent entertainment and 20 percent information. If you entertain people, they will retain information. If you only inform them and bore them, they will retain very little.

CA: *Why don't you use graphs in your slides?*

GK: Because I don't have to because my topics are concepts. I do use one graph in my slides: a 2 x 2 matrix to explain creating a niche.

CA: *You say that a key technology "Then" was PowerPoint, and the key technology "Now" is Excel. What do you mean?*

GK: The PowerPoint vs. Excel illustration is a metaphor for how the world has changed. During the dotcom days, as long as you could boot PowerPoint, you could raise money. No one cared, or paid much attention to, financials. Now everyone cares more about financials, so Excel has zoomed forward in importance.

CA: *A venture capitalist recently **blogged** about "The Torturous World of PowerPoint", describing the experience of seeing thousands of bad PowerPoint presentations over the years. If any group has the power to create and enforce PowerPoint standards of clarity and focus, it seems VCs do -- why don't they do something about it?*

GK: Two reasons. First, most VCs couldn't give a PowerPoint presentation to save their lives. Second, why should a VC coach an entrepreneur to be a better presenter? They're going to reject the entrepreneur anyway. When a woman turns you down for a date, she doesn't then tell you how you could have improved your pitch.

CA: *One of your pieces of advice is "Be Brief", and you recommend 1-page emails, 10 slides with 30pt font, 20 minutes, 20-page business plans. Why?*

GK: Because if there's interest, more information will be requested. If there's not, heaping more crap upon the audience will not improve the situation. The way to determine if there's interest and to cause interest is to focus and simplify.

CA: *How can someone who has 50 slides turn those into 10?*

GK: Turn on a video camera and present the 50 slides. Then watch the tape. It will be a painful experience. Almost as much pain as running out of money -- which is what a 50-slide presentation will ensure.

CA: *What is your new book **The Art of the Start** about?*

GK: About 26 bucks. Here's another way of thinking of it. When you get pregnant, you read *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. When you get laid off, you read *What Color Is My Parachute?* When you get entrepreneurial, you read ***The Art of the Start***.

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant who helps organizations solve problems related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at www.sociablemedia.com, read more articles and

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