

An Interview with Cliff Atkinson

Interviewed by Geetesh Bajaj

As an independent management consultant and president of [Sociable Media](#), **Cliff Atkinson** (pictured to the right) advises the senior leadership of some of the world's largest companies on how they can engage the organizational phenomenon called PowerPoint. These companies are beginning to understand PowerPoint as more than just a presentation tool, and are seeking answers to deeper questions about its organizational use: How well does PowerPoint articulate and retain intellectual assets? Do organizational policies help or hinder effective PowerPoint communication? Are the right tools, resources and training in place to support a healthy communications ecology?



Cliff Atki

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Geetesh: Cliff, tell me more about yourself and what you do.

Cliff: Many organizations are at the point where PowerPoint has been completely absorbed into their cultures, yet, as with any technology, problems always arise from its use. I help organizations identify and fix those problems as an independent management consultant. In a recent engagement, the board of directors of one of the world's biggest companies realized that the PowerPoints they were seeing were too complex and overwhelming. They recognized that as a strategic problem, because they want their organization to be more transparent and simpler to understand. So they asked the CEO to fix the problem, and the company then hired me to help out. I wrote a white paper that analyzed their situation and made recommendations, and then created a new system of tools, resources, training materials and guidelines that has improved the way the company uses the tool. The program actually won an award for the improvement it brought to the organization.

Geetesh: Many organizations consider creating PowerPoint presentations as easy as creating a Word document - many times, it is not feasible to get a presentation designed professionally because it's needed in another hour. How can one balance these unseemingly related issues?

Cliff: We all have to grow as people and organizations, and PowerPoint calls on all of us to develop skills that nobody may have taught us. Just as learning the alphabet and writing a paragraph are part of everyone's basic communications skillset, today's skillset includes the basics of design, composition, color theory, and using a grid. And beyond that, we need to learn the art and science of using projected media as a tool to awaken understanding and facilitate conversation. All of this is possible, just not "easy", and that's a core behavioral problem with PowerPoint.

Because everyone is busy, we all understandably want the path of least resistance, and "easy" in PowerPoint means we default to the template approach. But that "easy" hour of work often produces PowerPoint that is very

"hard" for audiences to understand. We actually need to do the reverse: We have to work "harder" to make PowerPoint "easier" for audiences, which in turn makes it "easier" for us and our organizations to achieve our goals.

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Geetesh: How do you typically use PowerPoint?

Cliff: I use it as a hybrid media tool, to write, design, speak and listen.

I force PowerPoint to do things it wasn't designed to do, and stretch myself to learn skills I don't know. I've used the tool to write business proposals, create print and projected training materials, and produced a music video. At the moment I'm writing a book about PowerPoint, in PowerPoint: the end product will be available in print, projector and browser forms. I can't believe how much fun this software can be.

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Geetesh: Death by PowerPoint - you have so much content on your site with comments from experts. How do you feel about the whole thing?

Cliff: The experts I've interviewed all agree that the current PowerPoint approach has problems, but that the criticism that has been voiced by the writer Edward Tufte in his essay "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint" also has its problems. The fact that the whole issue of PowerPoint has been gaining attention is a good thing, because the first step in solving any problem is to recognize you have it in the first place. The second step is to analyze it, and the third is to solve it. We're still in step 2. The solutions to the problems will emerge from thinkers who accept PowerPoint as a significant communications tool, that there are many smart people who use it, and that we have the capabilities to learn and do better.

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Geetesh: PowerPoint gets into the epicenter of the presentation sphere - all sorts of media emanates from it including online rich media, Dynamic HTML, multimedia CDs, kiosk style presentations and more. How well placed is PowerPoint to accept this challenge?

Cliff: PowerPoint is a versatile tool with a set of qualities that no other media has. It even extends unwillingly into the realms of print and live corporate event productions. The fact that it is so easy to use, and that everyone has it, will continue to force its evolution. Its core potential is actually not on its visual side - its future lay in innovations that force visuals and the written word to integrate more tightly together.

Geetesh: How important are presentation skills beyond PowerPoint - does one need professional training to enhance skills?

Cliff: It is against life to stay stagnant. And that applies to PowerPoint too. We have to continually learn, adapt, and expand ourselves in the context of our circumstances. Today that means moving beyond a "presentation" mindset into a "facilitation" mindset. Yes, even PowerPoint can be a tool that can inspire dialogue, break down old thinking, and create a constructive context for debate and resolution. We all have to figure out how to break outside of our current thinking and develop these new skills.

And if no one has a training program developed yet, we have to figure out how to do it ourselves. We can't wait another 16 years to innovate.

Geetesh: You are involved with Toastmasters - how much can a presenter

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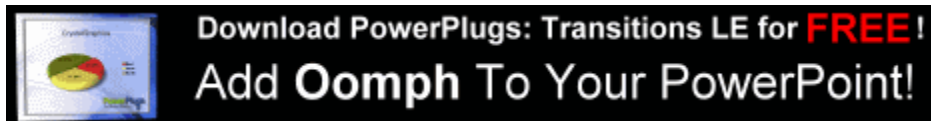
benefit from being a member of an organization like Toastmasters?

Cliff:

PowerPoint desperately needs Toastmasters, and Toastmasters desperately needs PowerPoint, and I hope the two will come together at some point because the union would be quite productive. Toastmasters can provide PowerPoint with a context where you regularly meet with your peers and get constructive feedback on how you're doing as a communicator.

We all need to hear "your PowerPoint was boring" from other people who want to help you figure out how to improve it. And it's better to hear this from friendly colleagues than from your boss or your clients. Toastmasters also needs PowerPoint because the ethos of the organization remains in the 1970s, and incorporating effective use of PowerPoint into its central methodology could quickly advance it to the 21st century.

It wasn't until recently that the Toastmasters basic manual even included mention of computer-aided presentations, let alone specifically introducing exercises that teach people how to use it well. Although a new Toastmasters brochure includes pictures of computers on the cover, there are few if any Toastmaster clubs that accurately reflect the degree to which PowerPoint is actually used to communicate in the corporate world. There is an opportunity here for Toastmasters to skip beyond all of the PowerPoint mistakes we've made the past 16 years, and adopt state-of-the-art practices that will evolve both speaking and the organization itself. There's no doubt that the combination of PowerPoint and Toastmasters would be much greater than the sum of its parts.



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