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## **A Story that Hunts: Q&A with John Seely Brown**

By Cliff Atkinson

*As former chief scientist of Xerox Corporation, and director of Xerox Palo Alto Research Center for 12 years, **John Seely Brown, Ph.D.**, is one of the world's most innovative thinkers at the interesting intersection where technology and people meet. Now a visiting scholar at the Annenberg Center at USC, his personal research interests include digital culture and rich media, ubiquitous computing, web service architectures and organizational and individual learning. The co-author of **The Social Life of Information** and the author of countless articles and **papers**, John brings an impressive background to bear on the critique of a social technology called PowerPoint.*

**Cliff Atkinson:** *John, what is your assessment of PowerPoint today?*

**John Seely Brown:** One way to look at the standard genre of today's PowerPoint slides is as a sequence of sound bites. Sound bites can be great if they carry meaning, or they can be awful if they're expressionless. The trick in knowing how to make a sound bite, is the trick that makes somebody famous, or not.

Part of the problem is that we have the PowerPoint tools that encourage you just to lay out the first set of points that come to you. There's very little emphasis in how you tune the points so they become evocative, rather than just descriptive.

**CA:** *You're saying that most PowerPoint slides today are really unfinished works in progress?*

**JSB:** Worse than that, it's work in progress with no understanding of what communication is about, no understanding of what design is about, and no understanding of the genre. Otherwise, it's fine.

**CA:** *Where are we headed with PowerPoint?*

**JSB:** We're just at the beginning of the process of developing new genres. One of things that has worried me is that the main PowerPoint genre has stabilized and become sterilized, and now people react almost emotionally against any kind of PowerPoint slides.

**CA:** *Has the sterilization of the PowerPoint genre resulted in organizational problems?*

**JSB:** Absolutely. It's reduced organizational strategy to sound bites that don't hunt. Often the key part of a presentation should be the argument, which unfolds in transitions. Very seldom do you see the logic of the argument, which is often in the glue between the slides.

**CA:** *Are you referring to the story being told?*

**JSB:** Absolutely the story. The conflict, but also the notion of the argument itself. PowerPoint slides are very, very bad, as currently used, to tell good stories, and they're very bad in terms of laying out a complex argument. Complex arguments are often non-linear. The beauty of the well-structured office memo is that you can start to see different pieces of the argument and how they come together. You may want to go back and review some of the assumptions that went into that line of the argument. Often an argument has 3 or 4 lines that come together – it's called *proof by case* in mathematics. Very few interesting mathematical proofs are ever linear arguments.

**CA:** *But isn't a story structured in a linear way?*

**JSB:** A story is more than an argument. A story is an argument that understands not only logic –

*denotation* – but also *connotation*. Stories are interesting vehicles for carrying very complex arguments. The plus of the story is you remember it, but the minus is that it does turn on rhetorical power. I can tell you a story that, because of the emotional side, will overwhelm your ability to really examine the logic. What you ideally want is to understand the logic, understand the data, and understand the stories that can carry the logic and data together.

I could argue that I couldn't make this happen with PowerPoint. You *don't* make it happen by using the tools PowerPoint uses to structure. The first thing to do is turn off everything – I work only with blank slates and none of their wizards – I wouldn't touch any of that stuff.

**CA:** *How does our PowerPoint approach need to evolve?*

**JSB:** You're going to see PowerPoint evolve as people discover the ability to enact sub-genres. It is also the opportunity to make these things much richer in terms of their media, to use a sequence of images with a very small amount of text. I was recently at a board presentation at a company that always used the old PowerPoint slides, or didn't use slides at all. A subgroup experimented with using images that told the story. They had images with very, very simple titles on them, and they had very interesting, well-thought through text that they spoke, and improvised. So suddenly these images were the backdrop that set the context.

When I say my slides are *evocative* objects, they're meant to be the background. I will take the same set of background slides and improvise completely different stories around them. But just like you know in normal text, there's an artwork in terms of having the graphics support the text.

A lot of people just throw in random graphics like clipart. That's part of the idiom that drives people crazy – no one has tailored the graphics to help support the argument. Few people understand how to have the text and the graphics really interact right. In the design of a magazine, there should be a tremendous amount of care to have the graphics support a scaffolding that helps support the text.

**CA:** *What will it take to change our PowerPoint culture?*

**JSB:** People need to know design. Communication is not a simple act. You don't have to go to community college, although that's a good way to learn the stuff. There's almost nothing more important than corporate communications, and nothing less attended to than that.

**CA:** *If it's so strategic, why don't organizations invest the resources to improve the situation?*

**JSB:** I don't think people yet understand what could really be done. All they do is bemoan the fact that having the CEO communicate the strategic intent to the troops is nearly impossible. Then they wring their hands and that's it. They don't get the power of story in its own right. They don't have the story of what they have to do. Corporate communications could profit more from understanding storytelling.

**CA:** *What's the difference between the words "story" and "strategy"?*

**JSB:** A strategy to most corporations is something that fits on a 3x5 card. A story never does. A story touches me emotionally; a story I can't forget. A story carries nuances in the *particular* that help portray what the *general* is. Strategic positioning inverts almost every one of those. And in fact the most common thing we hear in an organization is that those who worked on the positioning statement see tremendous meaning in those words; but those who receive the corporate positioning statement see only B.S.

**CA:** *Do branding and identity agencies understand how to unlock corporate stories?*

**JSB:** It's about understanding what kind of story hunts. What is the real value proposition about? How does it create meaning, besides profit? What's the latent glue that pulls everything together? People who understand how to construct and co-construct an identity understand the power of story completely. And the power of images. If you see an identity agency making a presentation, you'll often see a different use of PowerPoint.

**CA:** *I've found that agencies that understand identity often don't understand how PowerPoint extends through the social life of an organization, and how it is often the critical place where people "live the brand", or don't.*

**JSB:** One of the problems is that they construct an identity without involving the people within an organization, so there's no sense of ownership. There's a huge desire for people to be involved if they feel they will be listened to, and if they think it's an authentic activity.

The problem is that corporations in general undervalue their people. Take for example a graphic designer. An executive will say, "Go create me a poster." But the designer asks, "Can you help me understand what this is really about?" The executive is shocked when the designer wants to go to the core of what they really want to achieve.

This results from a fundamental misunderstanding of what communication is, and a misunderstanding of meaning. If you look now at most magazines, you'll find almost no real deep thinking about how to capture an image, how the caption under an image helps the image, and how the caption plus the image helps the text. It's almost like a rote activity. People don't understand how the reader has to construct an understanding for him or herself, from the bits of information on the page, or on the PowerPoint slide.

*Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant who helps organizations solve problems related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at [www.sociablemedia.com](http://www.sociablemedia.com), read more articles and interviews [here](#), or email him [here](#).*

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