PDF of this article //
print this article //

Is Your Own PowerPoint Quality Really Meaningless?

By Cliff Atkinson (published May 13, 2003 at www.MarketingProfs.com)

How much potential business will you lose if you blow your next sales pitch? How long will your venture survive if you miss the mark in your investor presentation? What will it cost if your employees don't understand an important new policy?

Take a second to write down an answer to one of these questions. If the number you just wrote is meaningful to you, then so is the question of the quality of your presentations. This number quantifies for you what you have at stake as you figure out for yourself whether PowerPoint quality is meaningless.

As with any other important question of business strategy, I recommend getting a full spectrum of opinions and advice on the matter at hand--rather than relying on any single book, writer, research report or even a MarketingProfs writer, including me.

I know I'm especially interested in the question of PowerPoint quality myself, so I set out to do a little searching around to find out what other people had say about the topic:

What the Research Says

A study conducted by Lee and Bowers (1997) reported that hearing spoken text plus reading printed text resulted in 32% better learning over a control group of university students. Listening to spoken text, reading text, and looking at graphics resulted in 46% better learning. And hearing spoken text and looking at graphics resulted in 91% better learning.

How do these results compare with the current research you're using to build your presentation strategy?

As with any research, it's up to you to directly examine a study's hypothesis, methodology, statistical analysis, and conclusions to confirm their validity and figure out whether or not the findings apply to your situation. But the way I read it, if you're looking for ways to reduce the risk that you'll lose business because of a presentation, the safest thing to do is to speak using the highest possible quality PowerPoint, which would have only images.

If you want to raise your risk by half, lower the quality of your PowerPoint experience by adding text to your slides. If you want raise risk by two-thirds, lower your PowerPoint quality even further by removing the graphics altogether.

What a Leading Usability Expert Says

Next, I asked Don Norman about his thoughts on PowerPoint. Don is a leading authority on usability and author of the influential books "The Design of Everyday Things" and "Things That Make Us Smart." Norman is a former Apple fellow and Hewlett Packard executive, co-founder and principal of The Nielsen Norman Group , professor at Northwestern University, and professor emeritus at the University of California, San Diego.

I asked Don why the word "PowerPoint" is a synonym these days for low quality presentations.

"It's been used so badly, we needed a word to describe these horrible, overly dynamic bullet point slides," he said. "So we used the name of the tool: PowerPoint. But you are right: we shouldn't blame the tool--it is still the speaker's responsibility."

What's Don's idea of high quality PowerPoint from his own experience?

"I am now doing a lot of talks on product design," he said, "and although I don't like to use slides, it is essential to show the products I am talking about. So I have a bunch of photographs. No words--just photos of products."

It's not surprising that Don's own intuitive approach to high quality PowerPoint is a match with the research results: spoken word and images alone result in the most effective learning experience.

What an Investment Banker Says

The results of academic research and the opinion of usability experts might not impress the folks who just want to know: Does PowerPoint quality really make a difference to my bottom line?

So I turned to Jay Turo, managing director of Mayfair Associates , a Los Angeles investment bank that buys, builds and sells companies as owners, operators and retained advisors. Mayfair's principals have completed over 70 transactions, aggregating over $1 billion in invested capital.

As a middle market investment banker, Jay reviews two to three new PowerPoint presentations on an average day. So at that rate, he sees from 500-750 different PowerPoints a year.

Does the quality of a PowerPoint play a role in Jay's decision to recommend to his partners whether to invest in, buy, or sell a company?

"Yes. But I don't look at these as PowerPoints," said Jay. "These are a company's pathway to raising money." Jay said that in spite of the size of the stakes on the table, most people blow it.

"Listen, you have a phenomenal opportunity if you can get people in a room and pitch to them," he said. "You're losing out if you don't do it right. Anything less than the 'wow' factor will not reach your investors, internal audiences, or anyone else you're trying to reach these days."

To Quality or Not to Quality, That Is the Question

The question about the meaning of PowerPoint quality is yours to answer for yourself. You don't have to believe the research. You don't have to believe a usability expert. You don't have to believe an investment banker.

You have to make your best strategic call based on the best advice you can get, and the stakes on your own table. Just look again at the value of the number you wrote down at the beginning of this article. Is your own PowerPoint quality really meaningless?

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