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Say It (or Don't) With PowerPoint: Q&A with Gene Zelazny

By Cliff Atkinson

*As author of the classic, **Say It With Charts**, and its sequel, **Say It With Presentations**, **Gene Zelazny** can easily be called the godfather of visual business communications. Based on his experience as director of visual communications for a major consulting firm since 1961, and as a presenter at all of the major business schools around the world, Gene speaks with authority when it comes to the way organizations and individuals use PowerPoint.*

CA: *In Say it with Presentations, you wrote that business presentations are different from other presentations. How and why are they different?*

GZ: Business presentations usually have an action objective in which we want the audience to do something as a result, vs. say, a course in school, which is meant to educate.

CA: *You recommend that presenters begin with their recommendations, then spend the rest of the time supporting them. Why shouldn't people begin with their support and then lead up to a recommendation?*

GZ: Start with recommendations 90% of the time. Too often, speakers feel that if they re-create the problem-solving approach they followed to surface the recommendations, the audience will then be convinced. BBBOORRIIINNNGGG. Save me the pain of mystery stories, and give me the answer up front, and then spend the rest of time letting me know how you got to it. I'm giving you a 10% margin of safety when the audience is incredibly left brained, or if they won't like the recommendations.

CA: *When do charts help communicate something, and when do they stand in the way?*

GZ: They help when they demonstrate relationships more quickly and more clearly than leaving the information in tabular form. They don't when they are data dumps or so complex that they detract from the flow of the presentation since the speaker needs to take the time to explain how to read the chart, which is too often the case.

CA: *The CEO of a 100,000-person company obviously cannot process every piece of data the company produces -- she has to rely on her staff to select and present only the most information she needs to know. How can an organization get better at this process of distilling information from its most complex, at the operational level -- to its most distilled, at the executive level?*

GZ: Hmmm, no easy answer. What we've done here is to retain the services of communication specialists or editors, who are as professional in their field as the presenters are in theirs, who sit together to review the important messages and how they should be structured. Otherwise, the speaker often gets too close to his or her material and fails to synthesize it as it needs to be. Probably the best book on the market is that of Barbara Minto, ***The Minto Pyramid Principle***.

CA: *What do you make of the recent criticisms of PowerPoint by Edward Tufte?*

GZ: With incredible and due respect to Edward Tufte, and I mean incredible and due respect for his books, his role as a teacher, his ideas, I disagree with his criticisms of PowerPoint. Going back some 45 years, and having lived through the eras of producing visuals with pencils and varityping machines and India ink and ruling pens and protractors and slide rules and zip-a-tone and Dr. Martin's washes and speedball pens and ..., PowerPoint is one of the most advanced and sophisticated production tools on the market, which deserves a standing ovation.

One area Edward is arguing against is its misuse and abuse in terms of the animations that have been built in. Here I'd have to agree with him. As I state in one of my 10 commandments of onscreen presentations: "Thou shalt not use animations unless it helps to make a point." Otherwise, it runs the

risk of the audience wondering if what they're paying for the presentation is being wasted on being gimmicky, as well as running the risk of appearing to speak below the level of intelligence of the audience. That said however, it doesn't mean we should abolish the tool as Edward would have us do. It's like blaming cars for the accidents that drivers cause.

Therein also lies one of the major changes of business presentations; they've become visual/oral presentations where I continue to argue for oral/visual presentations where the audience appreciates that it's the speaker who's the presentation, and the visuals are secondary -- they're visual *aids* as the term describes it.

CA: *When someone presses the "b" key during a PowerPoint presentation, the screen blacks out until the "b" key is pressed again. How should people best use this feature?*

GZ: The use of the letter "b" or of the period "." on the laptop quickly focuses the audience on the speaker and what he or she has to say without the distraction of the image on the screen. I marvel at the number of audience members who feel that this one recommendation that I make in my presentations on the subject is worth the price of admission.

CA: *What is the role of silence in a presentation?*

GZ: Listen to the silence. It shows respect for the audience. It gives you time to think and the audience time to reflect. It gives the audience a chance to be heard. Wait till the end of the question before jumping in; the speaker may come up with his or her own answer, or it may be the setup for the real question that's coming up.

CA: *What will your new book Say it with Imagination be about?*

GZ: It's going to be a show and tell for all those presentations that use visuals other than the traditional charts and text pages, such as famous paintings, music, metaphors, analogies, themes, etc. My next book, *Say It with Charts Workbook*, will be published in the fall. I've included charts that belong in the Hall of Shame and ask readers to draw their improved version before showing and discussing the idea I came up with. I invite readers to visit my **website** which includes reference to my professional books, as well as my personal book of essays, *In The Moment*.

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 interviews [here](#), or email him [here](#).

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