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Beyond Bullet Points:

How to unlock the story buried in your PowerPoint.

by Cliff Atkinson – *Executive Travel* – 03/01/05

If you use bullet points in your PowerPoint presentations, it's probably because writing bullets helps you to build slides quickly and reminds you to cover all the points you want to make. But although bullet points may help you to do many things, one thing they cannot do is help you to tell a story.

Some of the world's largest organizations have adopted the word "story" as their new mantra for corporate communications. Marketing messages should tell a story, corporate strategy should tell a story, mission statements should tell a story, and even Web sites should tell a story. Why the sudden interest in stories? For one clue, look no further than the approach you may be applying to your own PowerPoint slides, which locks out the possibility of telling a story in the first place.

Bullet points

The origin of bullet points in presentations is actually clearly visible on most PowerPoint slides—a type of outlining approach that everyone uses, yet no one questions. This approach always begins by placing a category heading at the top of a slide—such as Our History, Challenges, Outlook and Lessons Learned. It is remarkable that you see exactly the same headings in every presentation, across organizations, professions and even cultures.

These headings do nothing more than establish a category of information, which you then explain with a bulleted list below it. Although this approach can help you create slides quickly, it also guarantees that you never do anything more than present a series of lists to an audience. When the primary way we communicate is by presenting lists to one another, it is no wonder that the phenomenon of story is gaining momentum, because a story is the opposite of a list. Where a list is dry, fragmented and soulless, a story is juicy, coherent and full of life. Presented with the choice, any audience will choose life.

So, that leaves us with the essential problem: If we can agree that the era of the story is dawning, and that bullet points are standing in our way, how do we unlock the power of a story in our PowerPoint presentations? This is becoming an issue of strategic concern to major players by large organizations where PowerPoint has replaced the written word as the predominant way of communicating information.

What kind of a story?

The concept of a story may be new to the boardroom, but storytelling is at least as old as the person who defined it as an art 2,400 years ago: Aristotle. If you think Aristotle's ideas on story are no longer relevant, look no further than a movie screen. Hollywood screenwriters still credit Aristotle with writing the definitive elements of story, including action, a plot, central characters and visual effects.

But even Aristotle knew that not all stories are created equal. So, the natural question arises, "Exactly what kind of story is appropriate for a presentation?" For example, a story can take the shape of a Hollywood blockbuster meant to entertain, or a story can be a colorful anecdote about something that happened on vacation. Although both are stories, neither is complete enough to fulfill the complex needs of presenters and audiences today, both of which need much more than entertainment or personal anecdotes in order to make fully informed

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decisions.

Instead, we now need a specific type of story that blends a classic story structure along with classic ideas about persuasion. Again, Aristotle adds a great deal to the discussion, because he wrote the book on persuasion, in addition to the book on storytelling. In order to bring Aristotle's ideas up to date in a media-savvy world, you need to blend one part storytelling, one part persuasion and one part Hollywood screenwriting to create a powerful approach for your PowerPoint presentations.

Unlocking the secret code of a persuasive story

A persuasive story uses the structure of a story, but spins the story in a particular way that ensures it aims at achieving results we need in presentations: by using persuasion. You can apply this fundamental structure to any type of presentation. Using a visual medium such as PowerPoint gives you additional levels of communicative power, the same ones that Hollywood shows us every day.

For example, let's see how a persuasive story looks in the form of the first five slides in a PowerPoint presentation to a board of directors, where the presenter is seeking approval for a new product. Instead of using a category heading, the top of each slide features a simple statement that addresses each category of information that the board needs to know about, as described here.

Slide 1: Establish the setting. The headline of Slide 1 reads: Our sector of business is undergoing major change. The subject of this headline establishes the common setting for the presentation and relates the "where" and "when" for everyone in the audience.

Slide 2: Designate the audience as the main character. The headline of Slide 2 reads: Every board faces tough decisions about what to do next. The subject of this headline establishes the members of the board as the main characters in this story, establishing the "who" of the story.

Slide 3: Describe a conflict involving the audience. The headline of Slide 3 reads: Six new products have eroded our market share. The subject of this headline describes a conflict the board faces that has created an imbalance. This explains "why" the audience is there.

Slide 4: Explain the audience's desired state. The headline of Slide 4 reads: We can regain profitability by launching a new product. The board doesn't want to stay in a state of imbalance, so the subject of this headline describes the board's desired state, describing "what" the audience wants to see happen next.

Slide 5: Recommend a solution. The headline of Slide 5 reads: Approve the plan to build Product X, and we'll reach our goals. This final headline recommends a solution, describing "how" the audience will get from its current state of imbalance to its desired state of balance.

Reading these five headlines in succession reveals an interesting and engaging story that will be sure to capture the board's attention. And when you add an illustration to each of these headlines, you open up the power of projected images, including full-screen photographs, clip art, or even simple animated words.

The rest of the story

The five slides in this example form the backbone of Act I of a persuasive story structure. Act II then spins off of the pivotal fifth slide, explaining the various reasons why the audience should accept the solution. Act III frames the resolution, setting the stage for the audience to decide whether to accept the recommended solution.

With the solid structure of your first five slides in place, your presentations will

move well beyond the stale world of bullet points, and into the lively world of a persuasive story. By blending together the classic concepts of story and persuasion with your PowerPoint software, you are sure to engage your audience and make things much more interesting—and productive—for both you and your audience.

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant and author of Beyond Bullet Points.

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