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IBM Can you see it?

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Countering `death by PowerPoint'

Basic rules: know the technology, don't read screen

Keeping people awake calls for poise, preparation

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

There's a scourge upon the boardrooms and conference centres of the corporate world. It's sucking the life out of meetings, inflicting boredom and confusion on audiences large and small, and leaving wasted productivity in its wake. The sickness is all too well-known: the dreaded PowerPoint presentation.

We've all been there, sitting in some dark, airless space, straining to keep our eyes open during a presentation that drones on and on. A screen glows with a seemingly endless series of slides and charts, bullet points and words streaking and spinning round. But it's all in vain. Befuddled by the barrage of information, you fail to glean anything of use. The presentation ends, the lights come up, and you stumble away in a haze, thirsty for comprehension.

What's gone wrong? Since Microsoft released its first version of PowerPoint 16 years ago, some 400 million copies have been installed around the world, and experts figure the software is employed in — get this — some 30 million presentations each day.

It's the second-most-used corporate communication tool after e-mail. People are so accustomed to working with PowerPoint, in fact, that it's no longer just getting the big-screen treatment — they're using it in ways Microsoft developers never intended. For instance, PowerPoint files are increasingly being distributed as self-published reports to colleagues or via the Web to the public.

But critics — and there are many — argue that few people use PowerPoint effectively even in speeches, let alone in print form. Perhaps it's easy to take something so ubiquitous in the corporate environment, and seemingly so simple to learn, for granted. Despite its popularity among speakers, though, audiences often end up giving PowerPoint presentations failing grades.

Everyone has his or her own horror stories. "I've been a recipient of a board paper that was 124 PowerPoint slides long," recalls David Beatty, the head of the Canadian Coalition for Good Governance, who says the presentation was even described as a "core dump" by the presenter himself.

"I've been on many boards over many years and, generally, people who use PowerPoint cannot make their point and, in the end, do not look good." Beatty calls PowerPoint-ing "the dark force that frustrates strategic discussion and productive communication between consenting adults." Ouch.

So why are so many PowerPoint presentations a bust, and how can you avoid the pitfalls? Beatty teaches a course in strategy in the executive MBA program at the University of Toronto's Joseph L. Rotman School of Management. His first class is a daylong seminar on effective communication — as

he describes it, how to make your case in a clear, memorable and compelling way. His lesson includes PowerPoint, but he asserts its use is never necessary and rarely improves a presentation.

"There are very few people who can use the medium to communicate effectively," Beatty says. In fact, some corporations, like 3M, are banning PowerPoint from their offices. But Cliff Atkinson, who runs Los Angeles management consultancy Sociable Media, argues that's throwing the baby out with the bathwater. His take on PowerPoint is that its true value as a visual medium isn't being fully tapped.

"We've become such a visual culture, with film and television, people want to communicate visually, and this is the most accessible media-creation tool that's available," Atkinson says.

"For better or worse, we've fully adopted this as one of the primary ways of communicating."

Trouble is, most corporate cultures place no emphasis on teaching people how to use PowerPoint effectively, and give little thought to the image it presents. "PowerPoint is a mirror that reflects organizations and individuals," says Atkinson. Often, it's not a pretty sight. Many companies set strict templates to maintain consistency; some insist on putting a prominent corporate logo on every slide. In Atkinson's view, the pre-defined borders and logos of PowerPoint templates are the source of many problems.

"It forces communication within that box, and minimizes the amount of real estate I have to creatively express my message," he explains. "It's like giving someone a paint-by-numbers palette, and it completely ignores the fact that people need to know how to communicate visually."

Atkinson advocates training, supported by hiring professional graphics designers to remodel corporate PowerPoint libraries with pre-formatted but flexible layouts, charts and style guides. "There are things an individual can do to presentations, but all those things are constrained by what the culture will allow," he notes. Some companies are catching on.

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Atkinson cites one corporate client that came to him after its board of directors mandated an audit of PowerPoint policies to improve external and internal communication. It wasn't the marketing department, though, trying to make presentations flashier; instead, it was a strategic plan by investor relations to encourage simple, clear messages.

Paradi recently ran an informal poll on his Web site, communicateusingtechnology.com, to find out what annoys people most about bad PowerPoint presentations.

Topping the list were complaints about presenters simply reading slides, text that was too small, and poor use of colours. "I had one person write in that they actually scan their Word document in, put those graphics on to PowerPoint slides, and then stand there and read them," says Paradi. "Just brutal."

Of course, at the other end of the spectrum were complaints that presenters liked to use special effects too much. "Most of the training that goes on for PowerPoint is simply how to use every feature," says Paradi. "People know how to click all the buttons; they just don't know what to put on a slide."

Want to deliver a stellar presentation? Here are some basic rules from the experts:

★Get comfy with the technology. Nothing is more irritating than watching a presenter fuss with cables or advancing to the wrong slide. You'll look foolish, and it will suck the wind from your sails.

★Know what you're talking about — cold. This will help keep you from committing the cardinal PowerPoint sin, which is simply reading bullet points to your audience. "Unfortunately, PowerPoint gets used as a TelePrompTer," complains Paradi. "It was never intended to be that way." Paradi recommends that for every hour of speaking time, you spend between three and six hours preparing.

★Instead of squeezing your speech into bullet points on slides, use the "Notes" view. It gives you room to write out what you'll say in a space below each slide. Then, says Atkinson, you can figure out what image would be appropriate to accompany that part of the presentation, as a memory tool, but also for the good of your audience. (A plus: it preserves your presentation for another time, or as a more complete package to share with others.)

Studies, including one by 3M published in the Harvard Business Review, have shown that bullet points merely fragment your message, because they are devoid of context and don't link to anything else. Says Atkinson: "Bullet points were the right answer to the wrong question: How do I squeeze all this information on this limited blank space?"

★Know how to use multimedia. If you don't, either get help or don't bother. Be careful with getting creative with even the simplest graphics. Most people wouldn't dare publish a brochure without subjecting the material to the deft touch of a design professional, but millions toil late into the night creating hideously ugly PowerPoint presentations. Don't waste your time. If you're an effective speaker, a plain white background won't hurt how you make your case.

★Know what information works on a slide, and what's better presented in another medium. Be wary of overloading your audience with information that distracts from your key message. If it's complex, give it to them on paper afterward. "If you need to give a detailed handout," says Paradi, "then give a detailed handout — don't just print your slides." Paradi has even started burning CD-ROMs that will self-load a Web-based version of his PowerPoint presentations into a browser, including the text of his speech. If he gets really ambitious, he can add an audio file to it, or supporting Adobe Acrobat documents and Internet links. "They can now take you home and refer to it any time they want," he says. "It's a great way to enhance your impact beyond just the 45 or 60 minutes that you spend with the audience." Moreover, it maximizes the time you have with your audience.

★Finally, know the most powerful button on your laptop — the "B" key. This blacks out the screen during a PowerPoint presentation.

Don't be afraid to use it so the slides won't compete with what are ultimately your most effective communication tools: your voice, mannerisms and facial expressions.

Remember, PowerPoint doesn't kill presentations: people kill presentations. Do yourself a favour.

From this day forward, vow that you won't make the mistake of subjecting your audiences to any more death by PowerPoint than they've already had to endure.

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