

PowerPoint at 20: Back to Basics

Let simplicity inspire, and resist the lure of unreadable fonts, stock clip art, sound effects, and flying bullet points.



Most presenters, and most presentations, should focus on straightforward content. The fancy effects offered by today's presentation software should be used only when they contribute more to the message than they might

distract from it. Traditional pre-computer formats still point to effective ways to use modern presentation technology.

Presentations were nothing new when PowerPoint appeared 20 years ago. Most complaints we hear about presentations today were current then, too: ambiguous and repetitive bullet points, speakers reading their slides, no proper audience handouts, and more. PowerPoint didn't create any of these familiar ways to fall short. But I also hear a complaint that really is new with PowerPoint: that more and more business and academic talks look like poor attempts at sales presentations, swamped by gaudy visual ornamentation with no purpose or benefit related to the presentation. This has come about not simply through a mass failure of taste but as a result of a change in presentation technology made possible by PowerPoint.

In 1987, when PowerPoint was first introduced as a commercial product, a presenter could choose among overhead transparencies, color 35mm slides, and something called a "multimedia" slide show.

These formats were prepared in different ways, with different equipment, and reflected orders-of-magnitude cost differences in terms of time, effort, and money (see the sidebar "Presentation Formats and PowerPoint").

Overhead presentations were used for "talking in meetings," designed for a fully lighted room (hence black letters on a clear background) where the speaker and others could see one another and interact. Transparencies were not a performance in and of themselves but a focus point. They were put on the projector manually one by one, and it was easy to leave the screen blank (lighted) to talk about something else or to answer a question. Overheads could be clear and elegant but couldn't have fancy decorations because none was practical.

Color 35mm slide presentations were used for more finished "performances." The artists who produced them added drawings and graphic decorations. Slide projectors required a darkened room, hence light text on darker subtly shaded backgrounds. Not only were the listeners in darkness, the presenters were often there as well. It was nearly impossible to leave the screen blank (making the room pitch black), so discussion and questions were discouraged. The presenter's slides had to carry the entire show while the lights were down, so they needed higher finish and greater entertainment value.

Multimedia shows were so costly that many peo-

ple never saw one. With up to two dozen projectors synchronized to a sound track to create the illusion of motion, a live presenter had to be rigidly scripted and had no way to tolerate interruptions. The purpose was to amaze the audience with technical and visual wizardry; content was largely secondary.

Among these options, overhead presentations, with the lowest level of finish, were appropriate for internal meetings (especially with executives), for academic talks, and for classroom use, as well as for almost any everyday purpose. Color 35mm slide presentations, with a higher degree of finish, were appropriate for formal sales calls or for speeches to large audiences, where time and budget were available for their preparation. Multimedia presentations, with the most polished finish, were appropriate for only highly theatrical occasions with large audiences where entertainment was the main goal.

Against this background, we conceived PowerPoint to give control to the presenter by taking advantage of graphical personal computers, specifically Macintosh and Windows. We introduced three major versions over its first five years, 1987 to 1992, corresponding to the three kinds of presentations: PowerPoint 1.0 made black-and-white overheads; PowerPoint 2.0 added color 35mm slides; and PowerPoint 3.0 added video effects to replace multimedia shows.

By 1992, PowerPoint could make presentations in all three styles, but there was no confusion because physical media still imposed strict distinctions: overheads had to be black-and-white to be laser-printed and photocopied onto transparency film; color 35mm slides were sent over a modem to Genigraphics and returned in two-inch mounts; and multimedia shows (from PowerPoint) were delivered by connecting a computer directly to a video projector. Presenters used PowerPoint to make overheads and occasionally to make color 35mm slides; initially, most didn't have the chance to try video because video projectors were of such unsatisfactory quality.

CONVERGENCE AND CONFUSION

From 1992 to 2002, the combination of powerful laptops and small, bright, inexpensive video projectors displaced all previous projection devices. Overhead projectors disappeared from conference rooms and classrooms, and in mid-2003 Kodak made the stunning announcement that it would stop manufacturing slide projectors the following year. In their place you could use a laptop to project video.

This meant that a presentation could now mix the features of all three styles, even as it represented a new problem made possible by PowerPoint. With no constraints from physical media, presenters had no limitation and increasingly no firm intuition as to what was appropriate. Most presentations were done with overheads, and most presenters used nothing else. Presenters now began to experiment by adding features formerly used only with 35mm slides (such as vaguely related clip art, constantly repeated, or subtly shaded backgrounds). They tried adding elements from multimedia shows (such as sound effects, attention-grabbing transitions between slides, moving text, and bullet points that "flew" to their places from somewhere off screen). Much of this was novel and interesting the first few times, but virtually none of the extraneous entertainment had any purpose or benefit in the kinds of meetings where overheads had been used. Successive versions of PowerPoint made these elaborate features easier and more tempting to use, and eventually many presentations started to look like advertising.

SPARE FORMATS

Despite the lush graphics effects so easily produced through modern presentation applications, most contemporary presentations should return to formats nearly as spare as the old overhead transparencies. It's not necessary to copy their specific limitations (there's no need to go back to, say, a single-size typewriter-style font or total lack of color in charts and graphs), but the equivalent level of disre-

Audiences rarely complain about too little embellishment but are easily offended by too much.

PRESENTATION FORMATS AND POWERPOINT

The traditional pre-computer formats discussed here are no longer current, but their use was the original inspiration for PowerPoint. More on presentations before PowerPoint, along with early PowerPoint product marketing documents and business plans, is available at www.robertgaskins.com.

Overhead transparencies. These clear films were the size of a sheet of paper and projected from a lighted platform through a lens positioned “overhead.” They were usually produced by photocopying a page typed by the department secretary (the only person with a typewriter, classically an IBM Selectric with Orator font typeball) with hand-drawn diagrams. There was no color, because copiers produced only black-and-white images. A corrected overhead could be typed and brought to the meeting room “hot off the copier” in a few minutes at a cost of pennies.

PowerPoint 1.0 (for Mac, April 1987). It produced overhead transparencies on a black-and-white Macintosh for laser printing. Presenters could now directly control their own overheads and would no longer have to work through the person with the typewriter. PowerPoint handled the task of making the overheads all look alike; one change reformats them all. Typographic fonts were better than an Orator typeball, and charts and diagrams could be imported from MacDraw, MacPaint, and Excel, thanks to the new Mac clipboard.

Color 35mm slides. These transparencies (measuring 24mm by 36mm) were placed in two-inch-square mounts in a circular tray for Kodak Carousel projectors. They were photographed from hand-lettered or typeset proofs or created on minicomputer workstations. Slides had to be prepared by a corporate art department or outside service bureau for up to several hundred dollars per slide. A corrected 35mm slide could be reset, photographed, processed, and mounted in a few days or overnight if corporate lives were at stake.

PowerPoint 2.0 (for Mac, May 1988, and for Windows, May 1990). It added color 35mm slides, transmitting the resulting file over a modem to Genigraphics for imaging on Genigraphics’ film recorders and photo processing in Genigraphics’ labs overnight. Genigraphics was the leading professional service bureau, having developed its own Digital Equipment Corp. PDP-11-based computer systems for its artists. After a short time, though, Genigraphics itself switched to PowerPoint.

“Multimedia.” Multimedia was a name for slide shows that added the illusion of motion, using a bank of from three up to two dozen slide projectors, all focused on the same screen, each with an external iris to control fades and dissolves, and all controlled by inaudible signals synchronized to an audiotape. Both the technology and the professional work needed to produce and perform such shows were expensive and time-consuming.

PowerPoint 3.0 (for Windows, May 1992, and for Mac, September 1992). It added video-out to feed the new video projectors, with effects that could replace a bank of synchronized slide projectors. This version added fades, dissolves, and other transitions, as well as animation of text and pictures, and could incorporate video clips with synchronized audio. **C**

gard for extraneous decoration would be helpful, for the sake of both presenter focus and audience comprehension.

There would be no advantage in developing separate applications (such as “electronic overheads”) to enforce specific styles. An application that enforces styles cannot be used more creatively than its developers were able to anticipate; in the case of PowerPoint that would have foreclosed many of its present uses—from unattended kiosk loops at a trade show to projected translation subtitles in an opera house. The only solution is for presenters to develop a bet-

ter sense of what is appropriate. Audiences rarely complain about too little embellishment but are easily distracted and offended by too much. When in doubt, increase the quality and density of the content and reduce the level of decoration. The emphasis should be more matter with less art. **C**

ROBERT GASKINS (www.robertgaskins.com) invented PowerPoint.
