

AN *e*-BURST OF INSPIRATION FROM THE BEST BOOKS

Jerry Weissman

THE PROPER ROLE OF GRAPHICS IN A PRESENTATION



Press Delivers *elements*

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The Proper Role of Graphics in a Presentation

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Think about a time when you were in the audience at a presentation and the graphics didn't work. What was the problem? These are the most common answers my business clients give:

- “The graphics were cluttered.”
- “There was too much on the slide.”
- “The slide looked like an eye chart.”
- “The slide was a Data Dump.”

Now flip the lens and take the point of view of an Audience Advocate. What's the effect on you? Odds are that it's another case of the dreaded MEGO (Mine Eyes Glaze Over) syndrome: the same cause and effect as when a story is unloaded on you as a Data Dump.

The main reason this happens is that presenters fail to distinguish between a document and a presentation. They treat a presentation as a document. This is the *Presentation-as-Document Syndrome*, in which the presenter uses the graphics as both a display and as a record, as both show and tell. This is the vestigial legacy of the ancient origins of presentations, the flip chart.

Business documents include:

- *Annual reports*, filled with dense text and highly detailed tables, charts, and graphs

- Cram a plethora of *details* on the slides, as if to demonstrate legitimacy.
- Fill the slides with enough information so that anyone else in the company using the same slides will maintain the *uniformity* of the message.

But the name of my company is *not*:

- Power Handouts
- Power Notes
- Power Details
- Power Uniformity

It is Power Presentations.

A presentation is a pure play. It must serve only one purpose. Remember these words of Dan Warmenhoven, the CEO of Network Appliance, in the Opening Gambit of his IPO road show: “Do one thing and one thing well.” If a presentation tries to serve two or more purposes, it dilutes both purposes. The presentation itself is neither fish nor fowl.

A presentation is a presentation and *only* a presentation . . . *never* a document. After all, Microsoft provides Word for documents and PowerPoint for presentations. *And never the twain shall meet.*

Be sure to distribute the handouts only *after* the presentation. If you distribute them before or during the presentation, your audience members will flip through them as you speak, and they won’t listen to what you have to say.

If you’re asked to provide a copy of your presentation for a conference so that the slides can be printed in book form, use PowerPoint’s Notes Page view. That way, you’ll maintain the integrity of your slides as purely presentation material.

If you're asked to provide a copy of the presentation in advance, as so often happens, especially in the venture capital and financial sector, politely offer to provide a business plan or executive summary . . . as a document. And create that document with Microsoft Word, *not* PowerPoint.

Presenter Focus

An extension of the Presentation-as-Document Syndrome is what happens to the audience when the screen lights up with a slide filled with dense text and highly detailed tables, charts, and graphs. The focus of the audience immediately, *and involuntarily*, goes to the graphics, and they start to read. When they start reading, they stop listening. The graphics then become the center of attention, and the presenter becomes subordinate to the slide show, serving, at best, as a voice-over narrator and, at worst, as a ventriloquist.

This problem is compounded as the presenter becomes a reader, too. The reading often fails to rise above the level of a verbatim recitation. Reciting the slides verbatim is patronizing to the audience. They think to themselves: "I'm not a child! I can read it myself!" The results are a failure to connect, a failure to communicate, and, most likely, a failure to persuade.

An even worse variant is when the presenter rambles, talking about subjects that have nothing to do with the slide. This disparity jams the audience's eyes and ears, producing confusion and annoyance. It's like crossing a DVD player's video and audio cables, producing a scrambled image and static.

This Presenter Focus/Graphics Support relationship is the only effective model for a presentation. The presentation cannot serve as a document unless it is complete in itself, in which case the audience wouldn't need the presenter. They could sit in silence and read the slides to themselves. On the other hand, if the graphics constitute a