Presenting with PowerPoint: 10 dos and don'ts

(Jeff Wuorio)

Cherie Kerr knows how PowerPoint can be both provocative and persuasive in a business meeting. She's also aware that precisely the opposite can occur. "It can be the very best friend you have," says the Santa Ana, Calif., public relations consultant. "But you have to use it right."

➔ **10 ways to use PowerPoint to help make your presentation look brilliant:**

1. Hold up your end with compelling material.

The audience has come to hear you, not merely to stare at images tossed onto a screen. Build a strong PowerPoint program, but make sure that your spoken remarks are no less compelling. "PowerPoint doesn't give presentations — PowerPoint makes slides," says Matt Thornhill, president of Audience First, a Midlothian, Va., business that offers presentation training. "Remember that you are creating slides to support a spoken presentation."

2. Keep it simple.

The most effective PowerPoint presentations are simple — charts that are easy to understand, and graphics that reflect what the speaker is saying. Some authorities suggest no more than five words per line and no more than five lines per individual slide.

3. Minimize numbers in slides.

Leave those for a later, more thorough digestion in handouts distributed at presentation's end. If you want to emphasize a statistic in PowerPoint, consider using a graphic or image to convey the point. "For instance, when I once was talking about the prevalence of Alzheimer's patients, I used a photograph of an old woman rather than just throwing up a number on the screen," Kerr says.

4. Don't parrot PowerPoint.

One of the most prevalent and damaging habits of PowerPoint users is to simply read the visual presentation to the audience. Not only is that redundant — short of using the clicker, why are you even there? — but it makes even the most visually appealing presentation boring to the bone. PowerPoint works best with spoken remarks that augment and discuss, rather than mimic, what's on the screen. "Even with PowerPoint, you've got to make eye contact with your audience," says Roberta Prescott of The Prescott Group, a Connecticut-based communications consulting firm. "Those people didn't come to see the back of your head."

5. Time your remarks.

Another potential land mine is a speaker's comments that coincide precisely with the appearance of a fresh PowerPoint slide. That merely splits your audience's attention. A well-orchestrated PowerPoint program brings up a new slide, gives the audience a chance to read and digest it, then follows up with remarks that broaden and amplify what's on the screen.

6. Give it a rest.

Again, PowerPoint is most effective as a visual accompaniment to the spoken word. Experienced PowerPoint users aren't bashful about letting the screen go blank on occasion. Not only can that give your audience a visual break, it's also effective to focus attention on more verbally-focused give and take, such as a group discussion or question and answer session.

7. Use vibrant colors.

A striking contrast between words, graphics and the background can be very effective in conveying both a message and emotion.

8. Import other images and graphics.

Don't limit your presentation to what PowerPoint offers. Use outside images and graphics for variety and visual appeal, including video. "I often have one or two very short video clips in my presentations," says New York technology consultant Ramon Ray. "It helps with humor, conveys a message and loosens up the crowd."

9. Distribute handouts at the end — not during the presentation.

Some people may disagree with me here. But no speaker wants to be chatting to a crowd that's busy reading a summation of her remarks. Unless it is imperative that people follow a handout while you're presenting, wait until you're done to distribute them.

10. Edit ruthlessly before presenting.

Never lose the perspective of the audience. Once you're finished drafting your PowerPoint slides, assume you're just one of the folks listening to your remarks as you review them. If something is unappealing, distracting or confusing, edit ruthlessly. Chances are good your overall presentation will be the better for it.

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