

Death by PowerPoint or Twelve Steps to Better E-Presentations

PowerPoint has become a ubiquitous part of professional life. E-Presentations are used to assist in the communication process whether face-to-face or on-line. All too often presenters can't discern when "enough is enough." This session will take you down the road to better presenting including dos and don'ts for graphic design, audience consideration, form and structure.

Introduction

In the Dark Ages of Presentation-lore, a program called *PowerPoint* was born to save presentations from the servants of the dreadful overhead projector. The engineers at Microsoft were trying to create a program that would help people communicate more effectively and more efficiently. Little did they know that they were creating a program that would cause more people to communicate *less* effectively and *less* efficiently.

As we move into an enlightened age, we can stop the regression that PowerPoint abuse has caused for audiences everywhere. However, to stop the regression, we must put our presenters through a simple twelve-step program. Consider me your sponsor. I won't be asking you to confess your wrongs to others, but I will be asking you to focus your attention on adapting your preparations on the twelve steps and repeat from the beginning where you find yourself faltering. I realize this will be a challenge, but you can overcome this affliction if we stick together. Here are the twelve steps:

1. Know your audience
2. Get a tattoo that says: "Content is King"
3. Purchase a color wheel
4. Use your new color wheel
5. Buy a paper weight that says "Keep it Simple Stupid"
6. Fonts are like donuts: you really shouldn't have more than three at a time
7. Friends Don't Let Friends Use the Laser Typewriter
8. Think before you use the header.
9. Stop. Look. Dial-up.
10. Presenting in person: Combating Murphy's Law
11. Presenting on-line: Combating Murphy's e-Law
12. Repeat

Step One: Know your audience

This should go without saying. Your first step should always be to define your audience when developing a presentation. Determining your audience will help you develop the directions in which you take your content. For example, let's say you are presenting George Washington as a topic to a group. If your



audience consists of first graders at Wurtland Elementary School, (three guesses on who went to school there...) your message might take you down the paths of the cherry tree and wooden teeth fallacies, being the first President, and his presence on Mount Rushmore. If your audience is a local Rotary Club, your message would be more on Washington's leadership, his presidential doctrine, or maybe the *why* his face appears on Mount Rushmore and the dollar bill. Know your audience and think about what interests they have in the topic you're presenting.

Step Two: Get a tattoo that says: "Content is King"

Don't worry so much about how your presentation is going to look. Design should be the last step in the presentation creation process. If your message doesn't have clarity, you could use works of art from the greatest artists in history and your presentation will not communicate the message to your audience. In this aspect, content is truly king. For your audience, it would be more acceptable to watch a presentation with a simple white background and black Times-Roman text with a clear, concise message, than the slickest PowerPoint with all the bells and whistles and no clear message.



Step Three: Purchase a color wheel

A color wheel is a beautiful thing. Understanding what colors look good together is of great benefit when designing a presentation. Red, Yellow, and Blue are your primary colors, while Green, Orange and Purple are your secondary colors. In the middle of all this color business is complimentary colors, or colors that look nice when used with each other. You also have aggressive or warm colors (red, orange and yellow) and receding or cool colors (blue, green and purple).



Understanding the psychology behind colors is important as well. Each color has a meaning. In finance, red usually denotes negative numbers, otherwise not something good for people crunching numbers and taking care of accounts. So, if you are presenting to a group of accountants and want to make a point about something positive or uplifting, you probably want to steer clear of the color red in your presentation.

Step Four: Use your new color wheel

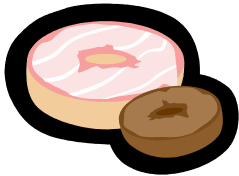
You spent all of two dollars on a color wheel. Don't waste your money...keep that color wheel where you can see it and remind yourself of good color management. Look at the wheel and notice what colors compliment each other and what colors just detract from each other.

Step Five: Buy a paper weight that says "Keep it Simple Stupid"

Display the information on your slide in a way that makes it easy to read and understand. Three is a good number to keep in mind when adding bullet points to a slide.

There's plenty of *white space* available and the slide won't look overly crowded. Unless you really need it, don't crowd the screen with clip-art. Also, keep the transitions and animations simple and discreet. You aren't the only one that knows how to use the laser typewriter preset animation.

Step Six: Fonts are like donuts: you really shouldn't have more than three at a time



I really don't know who could eat three donuts at once, as in cram them in their mouth at once. Well, fonts are kind of like donuts in that way: you just won't like the results if you have too much of a good thing. Keep fonts consistent. Use the same font for all of your titles and maybe use a second font for your text on the page. Each line on the slide does not have to use a different font. Also, overuse of non-standard fonts (fonts you download from the Internet for example) may not be on the user's computer or the computer you will be presenting on. If that is the case, PowerPoint automatically displays a font in its place by selecting one close to it. The results of this are not generally very predictable and not very visually pleasing.

Step Seven: Friends Don't Let Friends Use the Laser Typewriter

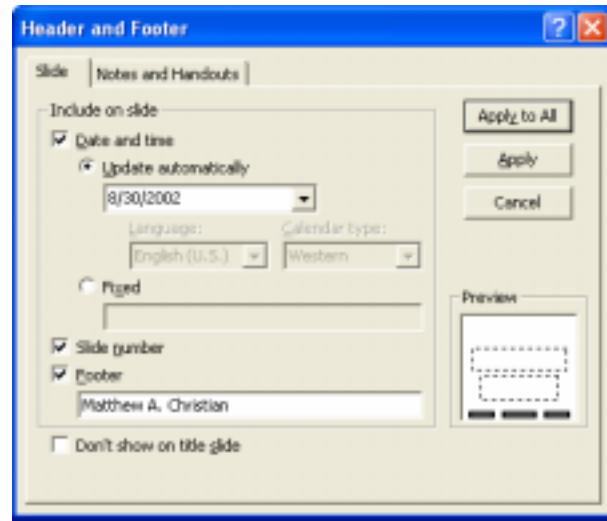
Back to what I mentioned earlier about consistency, the fewer of PowerPoint's *features* you use (preset animation, sound effects, etc.) the better your presentation will look. I'm not saying to not use sound effects or animations. I'm just saying don't use an animation or sound effect just because you can. Practice good *effect management*. Cash register *cha-chings* and laser blasts for each letter of a three line bullet can cause your audience to lose focus and interest quickly. When in doubt, don't do it...



Step Eight: Think before you use the header and footer.

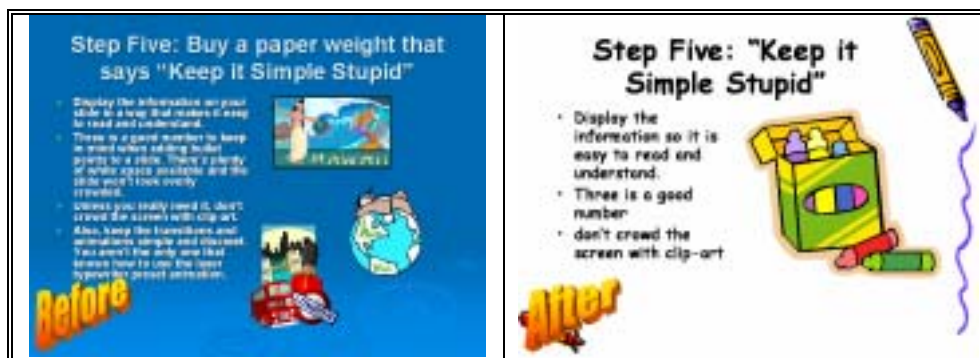
When you look at PowerPoint's header and footer information, there are lots of nifty little items that you can place on every slide: the date, the number of slides, and a blank box that you could type in your name, department, or the title of your favorite Elvis Presley song. However, think about what information you are going to place there and what it will be used for and how your audience will interpret it.

For example, let's say you are presenting updates to benefit information to a group of staff members. If you place the date on the slide that doesn't update automatically and the presentation is a year old, then even though your content is fresh, it will appear that you are using out-of-date information. If you use slide numbers on every slide and your presentation is 200 slides in length, it may not be good form to show your audience they've been setting through 175 slides without knowing how much more they have to endure.



Step Nine: Stop. Look. Dial-up.

The more complex your background and the more complex your clip-art become, the bigger your PowerPoint files become. Not only do the actual PPT file extensions bloat beyond reason, but the exported files for viewing your presentation on the Internet increase as well. By keeping the backgrounds as solid colors or simple template images, your PowerPoint files will stay lean in size.



Step Ten: Combating Murphy's Law

When presenting in person, here are a few things you should **always** do. First, **always** use your own gear. If you have a laptop and/or a projector that you develop your presentations on, you know it works. If it's portable and feasible, take it. Realize that

sometimes you have to use what is there for you, but when you can use what you know works, you'll have better results. Secondly, remember that because some guy named Murphy created a law, some things may not work. Period. To keep from having egg on your face, **always** have a back-up. Have a technology back up and a non-technology oriented back-up. Burn a CD of your presentation as well as make a copy on a Zip disk, just in case the room you are presenting in is not equipped with one of those particular removable media drives. For a non-technology oriented back-up, print out the speaker notes view within PowerPoint. The audience will still want to hear what you have to say whether the computer is working or not. Finally, after you complete your presentation, **always** take it to a presentation room similar to the one in which you will be presenting to verify how it will look on the big screen. Nothing is more embarrassing than pointing out to the audience that the numbers for this fiscal year are plainly shown in yellow, when on the screen they are seeing they are in orange. The moral of the story is: "Be Prepared."

Step Eleven: Combating Murphy's e-Law

When presenting on-line, you should also have some *Plan B* preparation done before time as well. First, do a dry run of your presentation with some willing test subjects in the office. You should know before hand if there is the potential for some technical snafus. Secondly, provide a downloadable version of your presentation, just in case. Again, no matter how advanced technology becomes, things can still go wrong. Finally, provide a low-bandwidth version of your presentation for on-line viewing. You never know when someone in the virtual audience might have decided to skip out of the safety of the office LAN and go home to view the presentation on a dial-up connection. As in step ten: "Be Prepared."

Step Twelve: Repeat

Once you have run through each of these steps, don't just do follow the steps for one presentation or an occasional speech, but make it part of the preparation process. The more times you perform the twelve step process for presenters, the more likely the steps will become second nature to you. Effective presenters are well-prepared.



Conclusion

The rule of thumb in developing presentations with PowerPoint goes back to the *Golden Rule*: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Develop presentations that you would find inviting and easy to understand. If you're developing for in-person delivery, think about how the people in the back of the room will be viewing your creation. If you're developing on-line presentations, think about how the person on the slowest connection imaginable will be able to view your work. For every minute you spend in preparation for a presentation, you will reap the greatest benefit of all: keeping an audience through the length of your presentation.