



Showtime Follies

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The PowerPoint road show presentation lives on, despite maltreatment of the art form by occasionally clueless presenters. By comparison, an all-video presentation is too costly to create for all but a handful of high-value events. At the other extreme, winging it in public without any visuals could cost you a chance to underscore your important points.

A great presentation won't sell a terrible idea, but a good idea may never take flight if the audience dozes off because the presentation was nothing more than you droning on in a large, ill-lit room.

Here are some thoughts on using presentation technology to your benefit.

When in doubt, use visuals. Even in a room of a dozen people where you're just sitting around a conference table, putting your key points on-screen helps to reinforce them. The exception is when a group is so small and informal that it might seem pretentious to see a long slide show. If the conference is important to you and no LCD projector is available from your company, rent, borrow, or consider buying one. (Remember that it can double as a big-screen TV projector.)

When in doubt, go low-key on the visuals. Microsoft PowerPoint, the default standard for presentations, has dozens of transitions and sound effects for one noble reason: Darwinism. Fools abuse them and shortly thereafter die off—careerwise—or so we hope. In a 20-slide presentation with no other special effects, if your one key point simply flashes once or fades in, it's all the more effective. (There's no need for it to make a 360-degree loop first.)

Know the technology. You'll likely be the one disabling pop-ups, changing the resolution to match the projector (1,024-by-768 is safest), switching to an external display (usually a function key and one of the top row keys), and starting the slide show (F5 or the lower-left-hand-corner projector screen icon). Some laptops allow you to put all this in a single Presentations button.

Carry a presenter's remote. Unless it's a small room (you're sitting around a table, perhaps), you want the audience to see you standing near the screen, not tethered to your notebook. If you get a radio remote control (not infrared), \$50 to \$200, from Interlink Electronics, Kensington, Keyspan, or Targus, you can be 50 feet away from your laptop. Most remotes are preset for PowerPoint with Forward, Reverse, and Menu buttons and a laser pointer.

Have a backup plan. LCD projector doesn't fire up? Lots of notebooks output to TV as well, so carry a laptop-to-TV video cable with you. Most hotels can scare up a 27-inch TV on a cart in 10 minutes, and you can often daisy-chain TV sets. Conference room doesn't have a pull-down screen and the hotel can't find one? Bedsheets are white. You would have known all this if you had checked out the conference room the night before. As a fallback, before you go, print all your slides on 11- by 17-inch paper and work next to an easel.

Don't skimp on lighting. The keynote speaker at a recent conference flew in from England. The audience couldn't see him in the dimly lit ballroom, because the nonprofit organization, which collected \$20,000 in registration fees, didn't want to spend the extra \$150 to have a couple of spotlights illuminating the podium. And the speaker couldn't read his notes, because the podium light was burned out, as it too often is. Good thing he could ad-lib.

Try a little video. Although a 30-minute video presentation could take 25 hours to put together, you can embed a video that lasts a couple of minutes showing the product in action or a customer testimonial (it better be good). You can click to that and when it's over resume the slide show.

Personal preferences. I use PowerPoint's highlighter feature with a remote mouse, rather than a jiggly laser pointer, to underscore key ideas. I don't use PowerPoint's presenter features (a slide show on an external monitor, speaker notes and upcoming slides on an LCD panel), because they're too small to read comfortably. I have a spare copy of the presentation burned onto a USB key in PPS (PowerPoint Show) format, which can run from any available notebook (PowerPoint not required), and a third copy with speaker notes removed that can be given to the audience. I have a small cue card with the name of the group, the president, the person who introduced me (Robin, not Roberta, right?), and the conference name: the things that would be mortifying to forget. And 20 minutes before I speak, I hit the restroom.

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