

Using PowerPoint ® Wisely

In the past decade, dietitians have witnessed an amazing proliferation of technology. Software and computers now drive office management, information management and project management. Many tasks are now automated and more efficient. However, many professionals also observe that the use of technology does not always contribute to effective communication. Ian Parker, in his 2001 essay “Absolute Powerpoint”, identifies cultural changes, which led to the current debate about the use of PowerPoint ® in professional communications. Citing changes in the business culture, the demand for more meetings, and swift advances in technology, including the bundling of office software, Parker contends that professional business people quickly integrated Microsoft PowerPoint® into their everyday communication, drawn by the thinking that if they did not use electronic media to communicate their ideas, they would be perceived as backwards, or worse, poorly prepared. Still, as many business people consider presentations using PowerPoint® the gold standard for business meetings and presentations, instead of inspiring audiences, electronic presentations often alienate them, reducing the speaker’s effectiveness.¹

It is safe to say that the creation and evolution of inexpensive, easily accessible software has quickly out-paced the general population’s knowledge of various programs. Software instruction has become its own industry. Multiple versions of instruction manuals abound, filling dozens of shelves in bookstores, computer outlets, and libraries. Software education classes are not only found in schools, but also within continuing education programs for professionals. Debatably, educating a user about the tools of a software program does not necessarily comprise instruction of using it effectively.

Complaints about PowerPoint® are often criticisms about its use, not the software itself. A quick exploration of the popular press, web-based opinion articles, and academic papers illustrates that the list of critical errors in the implementation of PowerPoint® is proliferating almost at the rate of new users. Categories of complaints include poor working knowledge of the product, concerns about the overall effectiveness of using electronic media in an instructional setting, and weak speakers in general.

Frequently, objections to PowerPoint® reflect the audience’s discontent with a presenter’s overuse of features originally intended to create interest and variety in a program. Text can be too much, too little, or too hard to

¹ Parker, I., Absolute Powerpoint: Can a software package edit our thoughts? (From the New Yorker – May 28, 2001) Retrieved: September 26, 2003 from website: <http://www.physics.ohio-state.edu/~wilkins/group/powerpt.html>.

read. Overlays (one slide building upon the previous one) do not always increase comprehension of a concept. Graphs, bar charts, and organizational charts are simple and fun for the presenter to create, but may bore the audience if the graphic does not meet their personal learning objectives for the presentation. Similarly, slide transitions or text animations can add interest to an otherwise dry lecture, but its use can be intoxicating to some novice slide show designers who overuse the features, leaving their audience feeling dizzy. Graphics present a dilemma as well. Mixing different styles of graphics, mixing black and white pictures with color, and using inappropriate art for the audience are cited as common errors.

Commonly, speakers believe that using PowerPoint® will veil their communication weaknesses. On the contrary, poor technique is often magnified when people hide behind their presentation. Speakers who do not use good techniques to connect with their audiences are unlikely to connect better with this tool. Inexperienced presenters are easily seduced into using more slides than necessary to help make their points. At times, the same text on the screen is spoken aloud by the speaker and distributed as a handout to the audience. This is described as the “sin of triple delivery”.² The slideshow becomes a crutch, and often devalues the very information the presenter worked so hard to display. Even proponents of PowerPoint® draw careful conclusions about its use to educate. For example, Dina Aronson, a registered dietitian and graphics expert, feels that a speaker should only give a PowerPoint® presentation that he or she has created or modified. Instructors who are not connected to the material they are presenting often have difficulty projecting confidence, which is essential to effective communication with the audience.

It is sensible, therefore, to pay attention to the wisdom of other speaking professionals who have evaluated the critics’ remarks and reframed the criticisms as challenges. Those who already use PowerPoint® successfully are beginning to share their experiences with others in coaching clinics, websites, and books, complementing the hundreds of computer courses and how-to manuals already in circulation. Regardless of the presentation strategy used, a great presenter must still evaluate the composition of the intended audience, then build a presentations around the material that needs to be communicated. In fact, the most common message from professional speakers is to keep the presenter as the focus of the talk; strictly using visuals as tools.

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Ten Suggestions for Designing PowerPoint Presentations ®

1. Outline your presentation first. Design the slides to highlight points or illustrate concepts that may be hard to present verbally. A good rule of thumb is one slide for every 2-3 minutes of your talk.
2. Keep the backgrounds simple; avoid using busy patterns or watermarks.
3. Keep fonts simple. Arial, Tahoma, and Verdana (all sans-serif fonts) are available on most computer/projection systems. (Serifs are the little hooks and finishes on fonts like Times New Roman. Serif fonts are more appropriate for long texts.)
4. Use a minimum font size of 40 pt. for slide titles, minimum 28 pt. for the body text.
5. Display 3-7 concepts (bullet points) per slide, using no more than 7 words per line. If you need to say more, use another slide. Better yet, consider chunking your material differently.
6. If you use WordArt, be sure the effect you want is maintained when your show is projected. Limit your use of WordArt to one complimentary style to avoid a cluttered appearance.
7. Maintain consistency of graphics' styles. If you use photographs, use them throughout. If you use clip art, learn to change graphics colors to help maintain a theme.
8. Simple fade transitions are the most professional. Complex, zippy, or fast transitions often distract the audience from your message. The same rule applies to the use of audio and video tools.
9. Consider taking a graphic arts course at your local community college to learn more about the effects of different colors, fonts, and positioning of graphics.
10. Never depend singularly on your electronic presentation. Too many things can happen. Disks become corrupted, computers break, or a site's projector may not be compatible with your program. If possible, email your presentation in advance so your contact can double check compatibility. In any case, have a backup such as overhead transparencies available, or be prepared to speak using only handouts as visuals.