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# The Undeclared War Against “PowerPoints,”

(or)

*How Dodging Bullets  
Became a Favorite Pastime  
for the Profession*

By Eric Krell

# Quotation

- Tell a personal story

- **Ask: In What Ways Can We ...?**

Address the Sales Challenge

- Note areas of growth

- Read a testimonial

After Resources Connection's Chris Hagler has broken the ice with a roomful of prospects,

she pulls out her PowerPoint presentation and announces that she will read through each slide, bullet point by bullet point. The executives freeze — before it dawns on them that she's kidding. "I always get a laugh," says Hagler, the firm's national managing director of strategic services.

Such is the challenge consultants confront at a time when Microsoft's presentation software — a crucial component of a consulting firm's communications with clients and prospects — is a magnet for parody, sharp criticism, and habitual misuse. Consultants who defuse the causes of PowerPoint backlash stand a better chance of successfully transmitting their ideas, analyses, advice, and sales pitches.

Satirical presentations such as the "Gettysburg PowerPoint Presentation" (bullet point: "What makes nation unique"; sub-bullet points: "conceived in liberty" and "men are equal") and "Yours Is a Very Bad Hotel" generate heavy Web traffic. The world's top information design expert, Edward Tufte, derides the tool as a "prankish conspiracy against substance and thought." Musician and visual artist David Byrne suggests that

- Identify Skills

- Assess the

Opening

# Have impromptu reports on success

- Identify the need or opportunity
- Conduct a Creative Thinking Session

the software's sinister auto content wizard tool transforms free-thinking individuals into "pod people." And critical articles with headlines like "PowerPoint Is Evil," "Does PowerPoint Make Us Stupid?", and "Absolute PowerPoint Corrupts" are appearing with greater frequency.

PowerPoint has managed to withstand the parody and censure. The software first appeared in 1984 when a former Berkeley Ph.D. student and a software developer unveiled a prototype called "Presenter" at a small firm in Silicon Valley. Microsoft snapped up their company three years later, and PowerPoint's first Windows and DOS versions appeared in 1988.

The application now sits on the desktops of 400 million Microsoft Office customers, far too many of whom continue to assault audiences with garish color schemes, grainy logos, baffling charts, and cheesy clip art. Count consultants among the application's chief power users — and regular abusers.

## *The "Currency" of Client Communications*

Jon Faucette, the manager of Sibson Consulting's desktop media (DTM) department, recently attended a conference on board governance. A presenter's slide shows featured a piece of animated clip art on almost every other slide, says Faucette, who can recall little else about the presentation. His focus and the rest of the audience's attention were glued to the clip art that gyrated incessantly on the large screen in front of them.

In too many PowerPoint presentations, the medium is the message. When that message is weak, it poses serious risks to consulting firms that place sizable bets on the success of their communications with clients and prospects.

Faucette regularly scrutinizes the PowerPoint presentations contained on the take-away CDs from the conferences at which Sibson consultants regularly present to strengthen the firm's brand and thought leadership. "The vast majority of the presentations are just awful," he notes. "There is a huge opportunity to differentiate yourself and your firm by doing a good slide presentation."

Sibson's DTM staff aims to do just that with the "scores" of slides they churn out daily. Each slide, Faucette emphasizes, reflects and communicates his firm's brand.

PowerPoint presentations also mark the key component of Mercer Management Consulting's communication with clients. Each progress report and intermediate result in a client project is documented in presentation form, and all project meetings are supported by slides, notes Karen Mazur, a Munich-based production manager with Mercer Management

Consulting. "Slide presentations are particularly suitable to the concise presentation of complex arguments," says Mazur, who emphasizes that the presentations must be visually sophisticated to succeed.

Bain and Company's Stephen Marquart describes PowerPoint as his firm's "primary currency" when communicating with clients. That importance motivated the firm to hire Marquart, formerly the COO of pioneering business-presentation firm Communispond, as the company's director of client communications five years ago. Other large firms, including Mercer and Sibson, operate similar graphics shops staffed by design and communications experts.

"The kind of analysis our firm conducts is very, very powerful," Marquart notes, "but it also must be very clearly and passionately presented. My job is to make sure that the complex analyses our partners present reach clients in a way that is easy for them to understand, but to do so without dumbing down the analysis."

Bain presenters who use PowerPoint, and most do, tend to use the application's electronic slide-show functionality. Resources Connection presenters, on the other hand, rarely present slides electronically. Instead, they use the software's format to organize their thoughts and then print out and leave behind the documents. Still, Hagler emphasizes that the software is well used and well liked at her firm, as long as it "helps guide a meeting without becoming the meeting."

But presentations overshadow presenters and trenchant analyses when consultants fail to resist the tug of the software's potent capabilities and obliging interface. Sibson Consulting principal Peter LeBlanc uses PowerPoint in each of the 15 or so presentations he performs at international conferences each year. One of his main objectives when developing or massaging his slides, he says, is to resist the software's powerful functionality.

"I once met with an HR vice president, a client, who walked over to his bookshelf, pulled out a bound version of a PowerPoint presentation, and said to me, 'Do not bring back a presentation that looks like this,' LeBlanc recalls. "The report was produced by one of our competitors. My client said, 'I paid for this, probably too much. I've never read it. It's too dense.'"

## *Stop Making Slides*

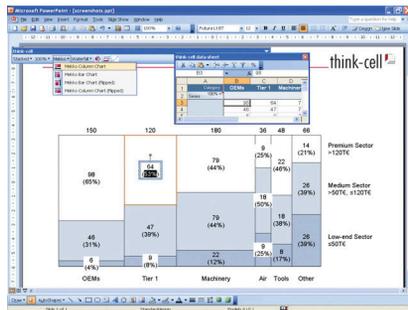
Tufte, who has achieved Drucker-esque status in the design community, makes the same point in his 28-page essay, "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint" (Graphics Press, 2003). He dismisses hefty PowerPoint reports as "physically thick and intellectually thin."



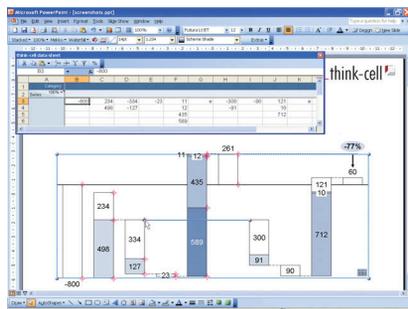
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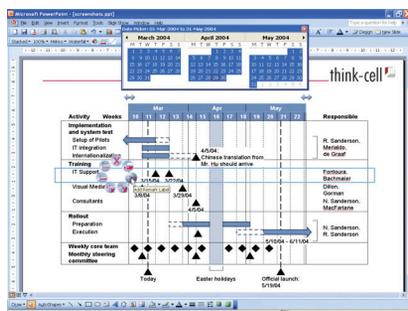
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A presenter's slide show featured a piece of animated clip art on almost *every other slide.*  
— Sibson's Jon Faucette

Much of Tufte's strongly supported, well-written criticism has a sharp edge. He denounces the tool's "poverty of content," "obnoxious transitions," and "relentless sequentiality." He depicts tacky graphical examples of PowerPoint "Phluff," warns against "witless" PowerPoint pitches, and takes issue with the tool's "attitude of commercialism that turns everything into a sales pitch."

Byrne uses the phrase "planet of salesmen" to describe the biases and tendencies of the software in his PowerPoint artwork, which is animated and set to music. "Microsoft would like us to think — as would almost all software vendors — that their product is merely a neutral tool," Byrne writes in the notes that accompany his slide show. He writes that PowerPoint users who rely on the auto content wizard are "subtly indoctrinated into a manner of being and behaving, assuming and acting, that grows on you as you use the program."

Microsoft does not respond directly to these barbs, choosing instead to point out through a spokesperson that plenty of PowerPoint assistance and other resources are available on the company's Office Online service. While that bridge to a sales pitch might reinforce Byrne's point, his creative, entertainingly trippy, and slightly self-deprecating application of PowerPoint also calls into question whether it is the tool that is responsible for sucking the life out of a conference room, as he and Tufte suggest, or the presenter.

Because PowerPoint is the weapon of choice for the vast majority of consultants who conduct presentations, criticism of the software, particularly when it comes from an authority like Tufte, is worth considering. Marquart, for example, describes Tufte as an "intellectual guru" and echoes many of Tufte's points. But he also believes that the design expert sometimes glosses over the "furious pace with which one often has to generate slides in the business climate." PowerPoint is built for speed, which is a mighty valuable capability when the tool is in the right hands.

The remedies Tufte suggests for PowerPoint's inherent ills — replacing most slide shows with well-written, carefully designed reports, for starters, or a worldwide product recall for the program — might sound extreme to an audience that counts on PowerPoint so heavily to communicate with clients and land new business. Yet, consultants who tune-in to Tufte's message will find highly useful PowerPoint insight nested, if not exactly bullet-pointed, in his essays and books.

For example, he explains that the software is much more geared to meet presenters' needs than to improve the audience's experience. Tufte reports that people read at a rate of 300 to 1,000 printed words per minute, so even a text-rich slide containing 40 words can be absorbed in roughly eight seconds. "People can quickly look over tables with hundreds of numbers in, say, financial or sports pages in newspapers," Tufte writes.

That information does not translate to a convenient word-per-slide rule, but it should encourage presenters to be more respectful of their viewers' ability to absorb data.

Tufte also explains that the "deeply hierarchical, nested, highly structured, relentlessly sequential, one-short-line-at-a-time" framework of PowerPoint influences the presenter's style. A much better guide for presenters to follow, he asserts, is good teaching, which emphasizes explanation, reasoning, questioning, content, and evidence.

Consultants themselves acknowledge PowerPoint's inherent or potential flaws to varying degrees. Those who admit that they use the tool in a reluctant, careful manner sound a bit like middle managers who are all too familiar with the ring of truth in Dilbert cartoons.

Other consultants say that they have never encountered PowerPoint backlash. "I do not think that there really is a negative perception of PowerPoint," says Mazur. "Our consultants can still arrest our clients' attention when making a well-thought-out argument and underpinning it with a number of well-prepared slides."

That said, Mazur also points out that PowerPoint is far from perfect. The tool encourages users to create unstructured lists of bullets, which “are easiest to make, but carry very little relationship information,” she explains.

Even the most reluctant users recognize that PowerPoint, like the office cubicle, is likely here to stay. They also agree with Mazur on the importance of well-crafted presentations. The largest firms have graphics shops and design experts at their disposal to assist with the design process. Smaller firms must rely more on their individual consultants’ PowerPoint proficiency and presentation decision-making skills.

### Shop Sense

The design groups at Bain, Sibson, and Mercer create PowerPoint presentations based on their internal clients’ specifications, provide design and communications training, and develop PowerPoint templates so that consultants can create their own presentations while adhering to their firm’s visual standards. Sibson Consulting maintains five slide templates that reinforce its brand while remaining “flexible enough to allow for a great deal of tailoring to a particular client or theme,” says Faucette. “Ideally, the consultant should focus on content and then work with someone with a design sense to enhance the presentation.”

He has made that collaboration as efficient as possible by equipping his design specialists, who are “as flexible and mobile as our consultants,” with souped-up laptops and high-speed Internet access. Sibson consultants can e-mail a

request for slide-show help, and a DTM specialist will respond “within minutes” to anywhere in the country.

At Mercer Management Consulting, consultants sketch visual representations of their findings, which often include Excel data, and then fax them to the production staff. The designers create PowerPoint slides from the notes and then send the slides back to consultants, who make changes. “Over the lifetime of a slide,” Mazur explains, “the slide content often changes to incorporate new findings. There may be several such correction cycles before we arrive at the final version.”

Mazur, Faucette, and Marquart dissuade their consulting partners from relying on PowerPoint’s auto content wizard, even in a pinch. Bain has developed its own PowerPoint slide-creation tool, which is customized to address the complexity of its consultants’ analyses. The client communications group also provides classroom and Web-based training. Sessions and modules include lessons on audience analysis, how to use the slide-creation tool, how to use color, how to visualize an insight, presentation structure, and other topics.

### Tips and Tools

Consultants who do not have the benefit of calling on in-house designers turn to outside experts or put on their own design hats. There is a growing collection of tips and tools designed to make that process less risky.

If Tufte’s criticism is too deep, Faucette recommends



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# Set individual goals

# Set team goals

- Have an inspirational close

Design Sense ([www.designsense-cd.com](http://www.designsense-cd.com)), which he describes as one of the few instructional offerings that approaches PowerPoint from a design perspective.

Andres Echenique, vice president, interactive services, with MRA Interactive Group, develops PowerPoint slides and other presentation and Web media for clients. He says that one of the most common PowerPoint pitfalls not only drains the effectiveness of a presentation but can also have larger implications. Too many PowerPoint users, he says, ignore the standards that govern the visual presentation of the firm's identity and brand. They use the wrong colors, for example, or incorporate fuzzy versions of their company's logo in their slides.

"That's awful," he says, "but not because you've committed a heinous art crime. Clients and prospects don't walk away saying, 'That was an awful presentation because the brown on the slides didn't match the brown of the firm's brochure.' But those errors do raise subtle questions about your commitment to detail. If you don't care enough to get your logo right, how are you going to care enough about whatever you're proposing to do with or for me?"

On a more tactical level, Echenique encourages brevity and the use of professional designers, while cautioning presenters against reading from slides or using clip art. Illustrations — particularly those that represent a process or a collection of functions — are often ideal substitutes for a series of four or five text slides.

Echenique suggests that consultants who enliven their slides with animation, an increasingly common technological advancement in presentations, do so with care. The context for the animated illustration should be clearly established, and audiences should be tipped off before the animation launches. After the animation makes a point, presenters should move on. "Don't compete with the animation," Echenique warns. "Get the attention back to your message."

Other advancements seek to improve the efficiency of the slide-making process. Berlin-based think-cell has produced an interface that automates the creation of graphics, charts, and tables. The interface seamlessly integrates into PowerPoint applications and appears as a toolbar. The tool and company were created by two computer scientists, one of whom is a former McKinsey intern who very quickly recognized both the value and the limitations PowerPoint presents for consultants. McKinsey and Mercer are customers, and several other firms are piloting the tool, which will soon be enhanced so that Excel data can be directly poured into

PowerPoint charts.

"To fill in the gaps left by PowerPoint, in particular in the domain of charts, think-cell software is very helpful," says Mazur. She says that think-cell supports commonly used graphics that PowerPoint does not support, relieves her team from many manual editing tasks, and helps to enforce corporate design standards.

## *Be Like Bill Bain*

Sometimes, the best PowerPoint advice is to leave the laptop closed.

Marquart counsels partners and managers to take note of their surroundings when presenting at client sites. Study the client's office and conference rooms to see what communications tools seem to be in play.

"If you're in a client conference room equipped with flip charts or a white board, you might want to draw your messages right in front of the client, even if you have a schematic ready to go in your PowerPoint presentation," he advises. "You might say to your audience, 'Let me see if I've got what you're talking about,' and draw that out. That can be very effective."

It worked very well for the firm's founder in the pre-PowerPoint era. "Bill Bain would often sit down with a blank piece of paper in front of him and a CEO across the table and start to draw," says Marquart. "He would say, 'Tell me if this is sort of what you're facing,' as he graphically depicted that challenge."

Different audiences have different presentation expectations. Hagler finds that manufacturing-industry audiences tend to bristle if her PowerPoint presentations contain anything beyond bullets. United Kingdom-based clients, Marquart reports, seem to appreciate it when PowerPoint presentations are accompanied by well-written two-page documents. He also observes more resistance to PowerPoint among the nonprofit audiences that the firm's nonprofit arm, BridgeSpan Group, presents to. "If they haven't lived in the analytical intensity of the business world," he explains, "when people look at a PowerPoint presentation, it can be a little off-putting."

Those observations and related adjustments depend entirely on the presenter. "The person is critical in the presentation," Marquart adds, "— not just the slide."

Until a slide can walk into the room and present itself, then, it will remain up to consultants to determine whether their message can outshine the industry's medium of choice. **C**