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Too much of a good thing

INSIDE TRACK

Microsoft's PowerPoint software is used in 30m presentations every day. But rather than helping speakers the effect of fancy graphics and animated lettering can be tedious and off-putting, says John-Paul Flintoff after interviewing Alastair Grant of GPB Consulting and others.

A few months ago, Steve McDermott arrived at a breakfast meeting in Harrogate's Majestic Hotel to teach presentation skills to the northern region of the Institute of Directors. He opened his laptop and attempted to launch PowerPoint, the ubiquitous presentational software from Microsoft. After two minutes of fumbling, he looked flustered. Members of the audience shuffled uncomfortably, or coughed with embarrassment. A voice from the back called out: "Bloody hell - I thought you would be better than this."

So he stopped what he was doing and addressed his audience. "You've probably all experienced death by PowerPoint. I don't know which is worse - when it works or when it doesn't." Then he walked out of the room, returned with a baseball bat and smashed the computer to bits.

Mr McDermott, a Leeds-based consultant who styles himself "Europe's funniest, most insightful motivational speaker", insists that his routine, though contrived - and expensive - serves a useful purpose. It teaches the audience that, contrary to popular opinion, presentations need not always be delivered through the medium of PowerPoint.

At a conservative estimate, PowerPoint can be found on 250m computers worldwide. According to Microsoft, 30m PowerPoint presentations take place every day: 1.25m every hour. A spokesman for Office Angels, one of London's larger recruitment agencies, says PowerPoint ranks second only to MS Word among the programs with which temporary secretaries are expected to be familiar -just ahead of Excel.

The program is not restricted to office use: PowerPoint has also appeared in churches, at schools and colleges and even for use at family occasions. But business presentations account for the greater part of its commercial success. That is because many executives are expected to use PowerPoint as a matter of course, whether they are addressing colleagues or clients.

Alastair Grant, another consultant who advises on presentation skills - through his London-based company, GPB Consulting - says managers are sometimes regarded with suspicion if they do not do that: "They're worried that people might think, 'This person hasn't prepared lots of visuals. That's a mark against them.'" Mr Grant has coined a term to describe this corporate malaise: visual aids disease.

Brendan Barns, founder of Speakers for Business, believes that many people use the program as some kind of comfort blanket. Watching them, he says, can be like watching classical actors perform Shakespeare with the script in their hands. Rather than preparing audiences for the slide they're about to show, these presenters typically use slides as prompts, reading aloud whatever appears on screen. Since this often consists of bullet points, the process renders speakers unappealingly robotic - and redundant, since members of the audience could just as well read the slides in their absence.

The only time it is worth reading slides aloud, says Mr Grant, is when speakers address an audience more familiar with another language: the words on screen help viewers to follow what is being said. Otherwise, he says, "Senior executives should never be narrators at slide shows. Can you imagine Tony Blair using PowerPoint at the Labour party conference? Of course not."

To be fair, PowerPoint does have its uses. It is generally acknowledged - even by Mr McDermott - that speakers, no matter how eloquent, cannot compete with slides that present graphical information. A map is generally easier to grasp than spoken directions and the same applies to financial data in graphs or engineering solutions presented in technical drawings.

More generally, graphical effects can be overused. Jim Carroll, London-based deputy chairman of the advertising agency Bartle BogIe Hegarty, says he has endured more than enough from "clip-art fiends" who pepper their presentations with the "not-very-amusing cartoons" pre-supplied by Microsoft. Another facility that is often overused combines visual with sound effects: a key word whizzes into place on a slide, halting to the sound of screeching brakes.

PowerPoint was designed so that the originators of content could forgo the services of graphic designers but to prevent excesses, says Mr Carroll, Bartle BogIe Hegarty retains a one-man unit to improve its presentations. ("My job is to tart them up," says his colleague, Philip Kendrew.)

Mr McDermott, who previously worked in advertising, remembers that before PowerPoint became widely available it was necessary to make real slides. Each slide cost money and that helped to keep the numbers down.

"But with PowerPoint," he says, "any idiot sitting at a PC can decide, 'Oh, I'll have another 50.'"

He is not the only one who looks back favourably on life before PowerPoint. The writer Ian Parker offered the following observation in The New Yorker magazine recently: "Before there were presentations, there were conversations, which were a little like presentations but used fewer bullet points, and no one had to dim the lights."

Mr Parker's thesis was that PowerPoint produces a deadening effect on thought itself. Fancy graphics whiz past audiences at speed, in darkness that encourages people to nod off: altogether, the process encourages users to pass off badly constructed arguments and hackneyed ideas. At worst, he says, middle managers can simply add their own company's logo to ready-made presentations, which are provided as part of the software package under the rubric of "AutoContent". "A rare example," Mr Parker concluded, hardly less fierce than Mr McDermott with his baseball bat, "of a product named in outright mockery of its target customers."

Make it work

The best use of PowerPoint can be summarised in bullet points:

- Reduce your use of slides to a minimum
- Don't compete with your slides. Explain first then show them
- Use graphs, sketches and maps to convey complex data
- Avoid fancy effects which only distract
- To keep the attention of your audience, use blank slides
- You don't need a slide to announce "The End"