Presenting with PowerPoint: 10 dos and don'ts

Jeff Wuorio

edited by Ye Zhang

1. Make sure everything is legible 6 feet way when the presentation is viewed from your own PC. This includes texts in the main body and those accompanying the figures/tables.

2. Hold up your end with compelling material.

In a way, PowerPoint's ease of use may be its own worst enemy. However simple and engaging it can be to build eye-catching slides and graphics, bear in mind that PowerPoint isn't autonomous. The audience has come to hear you, not merely to stare at images tossed onto a screen. Build a strong PowerPoint program, but make sure that your spoken remarks are no less compelling.

3. Keep it simple

The most effective PowerPoint presentations are simple — charts that are easy to understand, and graphics that reflect what the speaker is saying. Some authorities suggest no more than five words per line and no more than five lines per individual slide. "Don't gum up the works with too many words and graphics," Kerr says. "Do you really need to have everything up on the screen?"

4. Minimize numbers in slides.

The most effective PowerPoint displays don't overwhelm viewers with too many figures and numbers. Instead, leave those for a later, more thorough digestion in handouts distributed at presentation's end. If you want to emphasize a statistic in PowerPoint, consider using a graphic or image to convey the point, rather than a dense table which is hard to understand.

5. Don't parrot PowerPoint.

One of the most prevalent and damaging habits of PowerPoint users is to simply read the visual presentation to the audience. Not only is that redundant — short of using the clicker, why are you even there? — but it makes even the most visually appealing presentation boring to the bone. PowerPoint works best with spoken remarks that augment and discuss, rather than mimic, what's on the screen. "Even with PowerPoint, you've got to make eye contact with your audience," says Roberta Prescott of The Prescott Group, a Connecticut-based communications consulting firm. "Those people didn't come to see the back of your head."

6. Time your remarks.

Another potential land mine is a speaker's comments that coincide precisely with the appearance of a fresh PowerPoint slide. That merely splits your audience's attention. A well-orchestrated PowerPoint program brings up a new slide, gives the audience a chance to read and digest it, then follows up with remarks that broaden and amplify what's on the screen. "It's an issue of timing," Kerr says. "Never talk on top of your slides."

7. Give it a rest.

Again, PowerPoint is most effective as a visual accompaniment to the spoken word. Experienced PowerPoint users aren't bashful about letting the screen go blank on occasion. Not only can that give your audience a visual break, it's also effective to focus attention on more verbally-focused give and take, such as a group discussion or question and answer session.

8. Use vibrant colors.

A striking contrast between words, graphics and the background can be very effective in conveying the message.

9. Distribute handouts at the end — not before or during the presentation.

No speaker wants to be chatting to a crowd that's busy reading a summation of her remarks.

10. Edit ruthlessly and practice to yourself and friends before presenting

Never lose the perspective of the audience. Once you're finished drafting your PowerPoint slides, assume you're just one of the folks listening to your remarks as you review them. If something is unappealing, distracting or confusing, edit ruthlessly. Chances are good your overall presentation will be the better for it.

Other online help on PowerPoint presentation:

http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=1134342