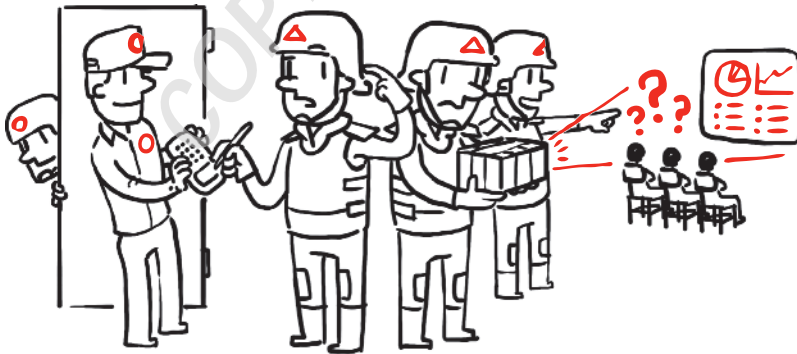


CHAPTER 1

The Role of Presentation Slides in Today's Sales Culture

The best way to paralyze an opposition army is to ship it PowerPoint and thereby contaminate its decision making.

—Robert Gaskins, co-creator of PowerPoint



The term “death by PowerPoint” is so prevalent that it is now firmly entrenched in corporate culture. In fact, as of this writing, if you Google this term and look at the Google Images search results, you will see 50,000 images (many of them great comic relief) related to the term. The phrase was actually first coined by Angela Garber in 2001.¹ It was a good article. But like thousands of other articles and books on how to continue to use PowerPoint while avoiding its pitfalls, Garber’s piece was just that—suggestions on how to put lipstick on a pig. We ask, “Why not just fry up some bacon?”

So we know that slides are the predominant way organizations communicate internally and between buyers and sellers. But there is now data that shows there are significant, quantifiable costs associated with their use. Right around the twentieth anniversary of PowerPoint, a study cited in the *Wall Street Journal* conservatively estimated \$252 million in lost productivity *per day* due to bad slide presentations.² The calculation is based on Microsoft’s 2001 estimate of 30,000,000 slide presentations in existence. That’s in 2001, during PowerPoint’s infancy or, at best, its adolescence. How many hundreds of millions of presentations could be out there now? Today’s daily PowerPoint productivity drain could be measured in the tens of billions of dollars!

How Did We Get Here?

Something momentous happened in the mid-1980s. Yes, it was the advent of the personal business computer, which was first manufactured by IBM. But more important than that, slide presentation software

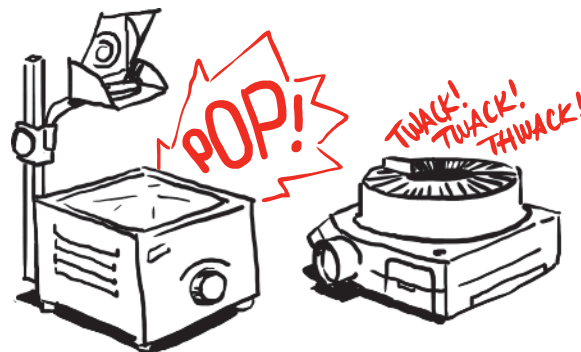
¹Angela R. Garber, “Death By PowerPoint,” April 1, 2001, www.SmallBusinessComputing.com.

²Jared Sandberg, “Tips for PowerPoint: Go Easy on the Text—Please, Spare Us,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 14, 2006.

was invented. Word processing, spreadsheet, and slide presentation software promised businesses of the 1980s an immense increase in productivity. They have no doubt reshaped corporate communications. Whether they increase productivity and effectiveness of high-dollar salespeople in the twenty-first century is debatable.

From Foils to Slides

Before slide presentation software existed, the notion of using a foil to communicate a singular idea within a larger presentation was not new. During the two decades prior to the 1980s, we first had the overhead projector with transparencies and then the slide projector, both of which were ubiquitous in college classrooms, government agencies, and corporate meeting rooms. The “pop” of an overhead’s worn-out light bulb and the audible “thwack, thwack, thwack” of the stuck projector slide are to some people fond (and to others not so fond) sounds of a bygone era.

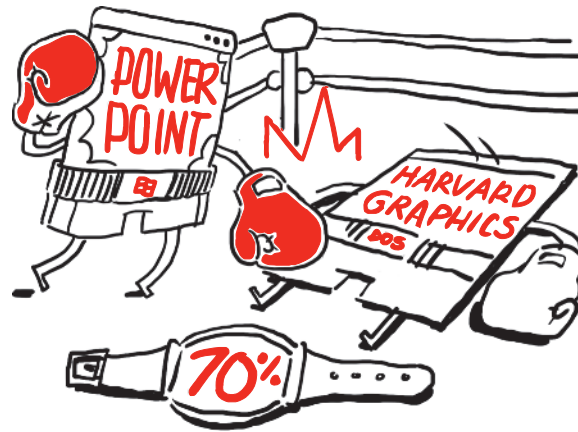


When electronic slides arrived—which are, strictly speaking, computer-generated images that include text, graphics, and charts in

one program—they were a powerful change in communication. Now the presenter could seamlessly move forward or backward between slides, insert multimedia elements, and integrate with other software programs. The widespread addiction to slideware quickly took hold.

Have We Moved Forward or Backward?

This era of electronic slides created a new communication superpower: PowerPoint. Microsoft PowerPoint quickly became the dominant player in the computer-generated slide market, displacing Harvard Graphics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Harvard Graphics never gained much traction when the market shifted to Microsoft Windows from DOS, where it had owned almost 70 percent of the market. PowerPoint, with its form and flash, quickly became the software of choice for corporate use, education, and increasingly, in the home.



Since then, PowerPoint has been widely (or should we say “wildly”) adopted as *the* way to execute a sales presentation in the corporate

office or meeting room. While bad sales presentations have been around almost as long as the sales profession, PowerPoint amplifies bad habits by eliminating the need to think on your feet, study your message, and prepare it diligently. “They tried adding elements from multimedia shows (such as sound effects, attention-grabbing transitions between slides, moving text, and bullet points that flew to their places from somewhere off screen),” says Gaskins. “Much of this was novel and interesting the first few times, but virtually none of the extraneous entertainment had any purpose or benefit in the kinds of meetings where overheads had been used.”³ Not only do these flashy features serve little purpose, they are so overused and badly used that sales presentations become a distraction and even an obstacle to the core purpose of any meeting.

This massive and lightning-fast adoption of the electronic slide has been a step backwards in how sellers communicate the business value of their products and solutions to corporate decision makers. In fact, it can be argued that the move from overhead projector and transparencies to a slide projector was itself regressive. What was gained in form, factor, and flashy visuals was lost in the free form of hand drawing with a grease pen that is actually more like whiteboarding than any technology-based mechanism.

How Slides Harm the Sales Process

While we agree there is a role for slides inside an organization, they become a disaster for big sales opportunities. Having a salesperson plug in a projector and go through an hour-long slide presentation during a first sales meeting doesn't inspire a buyer's confidence. In fact, it could actually damage the salesperson's ability to properly interact

³Robert Gaskins, 2007, www.robertgaskins.com.

with the client and communicate the business value of a product or solution. Using a slideshow ultimately jeopardizes a sales professional's credibility.



Overwhelming with Slide Candy

With PowerPoint's ever-increasing feature set for animations and other flying eye candy, slide presentations of all types more and more resemble TV commercials. Watching a car commercial is one thing. Feeling sold to in the context of the sale of a product or service that can make or break somebody's job is another.

Many of these problems were echoed by those surveyed by PowerPoint expert David Paradi in 2011.⁴ Of 603 respondents, the following reasons were given for why slide presentations are not well received:

The speaker read the slides to us	73.8%
Full sentences instead of bullet points	51.6%
The text was so small I couldn't read it	48.1%
Slides hard to see because of color choice	34.0%
Overly complex diagrams or charts	26.0%

Longer Sales Cycles

Is it possible that the use of PowerPoint can elongate sales cycles? Unequivocally, yes! When people are annoyed or distracted from your core message, they won't decide to buy.

Slides invite marketers and sellers alike to pack in product details, features, functions, schematics, architectures, and other "stuff." The format encourages leading with products and features during the first critical sales interactions, when you should be leading with qualification, discovery, and an account of how your solutions can deliver unique business value. With all the attention on products and features, presales and other technical resources are required earlier in the sales cycle, which, in turn, has unfortunate consequences:

- Added cost of sale by requiring technical resources and other subject matter experts (SMEs) on all sales calls, even calls that may not be qualified

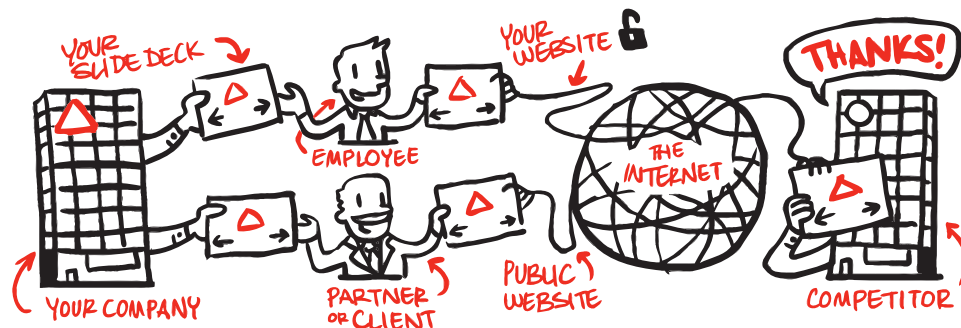
⁴David Paradi, 2011, www.thinkoutsidetheslide.com.

- Delays due to scheduling conflicts with other people involved
- Unavailability of scarce SMEs for other, better-qualified opportunities

And if a company's solutions aren't appropriately differentiated using slides, sales cycles can drag on with lengthy technical evaluations and proof of concepts.

Slides Get Around

Organizations should also remember that slide presentations are so portable that “PowerPoint sprawl” can deliver your sales approach directly into the hands of your competition. While it may contaminate your competition's thinking, as Gaskins says, the more likely scenario is a loss of competitive advantage. The most common ways a company's PowerPoint and Adobe Acrobat presentations end up on the public Internet are, first, that salespeople give them to customers and partners who post them on publicly accessible websites; or that company workers post them to unprotected parts of their company's *own* websites. Search engines like Google don't really care whether your documents are intended for corporate use or not—they'll sniff them out if there are no safeguards in place.



Try the following Google searches to find out what type of potentially sensitive files are out there on the public Internet:

[your company name] filetype:ppt

[your company name] filetype:pdf

[your company name] filetype:doc

[your company name] filetype:xls

For larger organizations try:

[your company name] "sales presentation" filetype:ppt (pdf)

[your company name] "marketing plan" filetype:ppt (pdf, doc, xls)

[your company name] "sales strategy" filetype:ppt (pdf, doc)

Or try a variety of other keyword combinations. You may be surprised by what you can find out on the Internet.

The Premeeting Slide Shuffle

You know that slides are inflexible, at times annoying and difficult to view, and potentially damaging to your brand and confidential information. So sometimes you decide to customize your slide presentation. Customizations bring their own problems. What will happen when you customize slides at the last minute prior to a presentation that you will be giving to an important buyer? Let's look at a couple of different scenarios.

The Night-Before Change

Let's say you're preparing for a presentation with a mid-level manager the next day using a 30-slide deck. You get a call from your contact that their boss will be in attendance. You can merge in slides from another slide presentation, but that takes you two hours you were planning to spend updating your sales forecast.

The Five-Minutes-Before Change

You learn that the CEO is going to be joining the meeting. You can scramble to hide or reorient slides, but adding new ones from other slide presentations won't be an option. You'll appear to be unorganized and poorly prepared.

The On-the-Fly Change

The attendees in the meeting want to go in a different direction. You could open up a new slide presentation on-screen (and potentially share your client list folder structure!), skip slides, or breeze through slides.

The worst-case scenario is when you lack slides for the topics of most interest to your buyer, or unexpected decision makers or influencers join the meeting and you are not able to incorporate their needs in the presentation. There may be a whiteboard in the room. How could you use it in this situation? This book will show you.

Hey, Where's Your Projector?

Even if your slides are in order and there are no last-minute changes required, you're not out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot. Did you bring a projector? Many salespeople who routinely use slides often leave their projectors behind because most conference rooms have a projector mounted on the ceiling. This can be a fatal mistake for those with slide dependencies.

I'll never forget a sales call I had where the meeting was originally scheduled in a conference room with a ceiling-mounted projector. But a board meeting ran long, so we were moved to a smaller

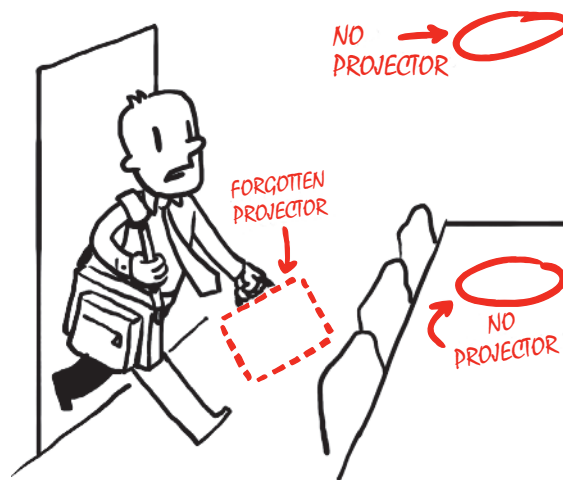
room without one. Our prospect's admin dug an 800x600 resolution relic out of the A/V closet that cut off the bottom and right side of my slides! I should have avoided the slides altogether.

—Senior Account Exec, HVAC equipment company in Texas

And who hasn't stood on at least two or three conference room tables trying to get a ceiling-mounted projector to work because the remote was either missing, broken, or out of batteries?

I was in [large telecom] presenting to the CIO and the projector mounted on the ceiling just wouldn't work. When you have the CIO in the room, the help desk people show up pretty darn fast. They climbed on the table, pushed through the ceiling tiles, and found that a rat had chewed through the lines!

—Territory Account Manager, Business Service Management Company



In the Hot Seat

Even the smallest slide projectors have the unfortunate need to cool their projection bulbs. Pity the sad sales soul who has to sit on either side of one.

The meeting room was packed and the only seat left was to the side of the projector. I soon realized why. The blast of hot air from the fan quickly soaked through my shirt and I wasn't wearing an undershirt. I joked about not letting anyone see you sweat and got up to move around in front of the screen to try to air myself out. Problem was I had to have one of the attendees advance my slides for me. That day will live in infamy.

—Presales Engineer, Medical Equipment and Devices

You've now got a sense of the history of the slide presentation and its adverse effects for sellers. In the next chapter we'll look at the impact that slide presentations have on sales training.

