



Jim Endicott

# For better presentations, avoid PowerPoint pitfalls

*Jim Endicott is president of Distinction, a business communications firm. He also trains and coaches business professionals on their communication skills. He can be reached at 503.554.1203; distinct@teleport.com.*

As I write this month's column, I'm on a plane to Phoenix to deliver a series of public seminars on creating and designing powerful presentation content. Unfortunately for many of us, the words *presentation* and *powerful* represent a bit of an oxymoron.

Take the guy sitting next to me — let's call him Bill. Bill just booted up PowerPoint and is in the middle of putting together some sort of sales presentation. I'm trying not to appear too curious about his use of content and graphics, but I can't help myself.

## The gratuitous use of any presentation effect is quickly identified by the audience for what it is...

Over the years, I've worked with hundreds of customers and there are certain recurring presentation pitfalls that many experience with alarming frequency. Bill is encountering a few right now.

Bill has discovered all the cool new effects that came with PowerPoint 97. Yep, there's the mission statement and every word has been individually animated — all 40

of them. (Where's that airsickness bag when you need it?) If I wait a few moments...yep, there they are: the bullet slides.

Over the drone of the jet engines I can hear the laser sound that comes with PowerPoint as Bill punctuates each of the 10 bullet points.

At one time or another, all of us have pushed the limits of good taste with regard to using the fun new features that come with our presentation-graphics software. So I'd like to provide you a few simple sanity checks to guide your use of these nifty features.

### Slide Transitions

When we started migrating toward electronically delivered presentations, we moved from a static world to the world of multimedia (connecting with multiple senses).

Movement became a novelty, so we experimented with the many available slide transitions.

Unfortunately, the notion that "if one transition is good, 10 should be awesome" does not apply. Most presenters overuse slide transitions.

■ **Stick with one or two non-distracting transitions.** Using a "wipe up" transition guides the eye gracefully back to the top of the presentation to get it ready for the next visual. Sometimes fading to black between major sections of the presentation helps signal your audience that a new topic is being addressed. Consider your target audience. In general, subtlety and consistency are best. As soon as the audience's attention is drawn to the effect, you've lost that part of the battle. In professionally delivered external presentations, there's no place

for most of these transitions. Never confuse *effect* with *affect*.

### Sound effects

As does Bill, we all want to use the tools at our disposal to grab our audience's attention. But remember, sound effects have a rapidly diminishing return. The first time, you get a polite laugh, the second and third time, you will probably get yawns or, worse yet, begin to annoy the audience. This is not good. In trying to hold your audience's attention, the last thing you want to do is use

## ...an attempt to hide low-impact content behind flashy technology.

sounds that quickly become fingernails on a chalkboard.

### ■ Use sound effects sparingly and make sure they add impact.

For example, if you had a futuristic theme and wanted to use the laser sound in PowerPoint for the initial agenda bullets, it works. If you work for the Department of Motor Vehicles, screeching tires may or may not be a good idea. The gratuitous use of any presentation effect is quickly identified by the audience for what it is: an attempt to hide low-impact content behind flashy technology.

But effective use of sound can extend well beyond the canned sounds that come with our software. Try getting a customer to record a spoken testimonial (or get your CEO to address your audience) on cassette tape. Connect your audiotape player to your computer sound card's Aux In port. (If you don't have a sound



Think of graphic ways to condense text-heavy material.



card, have someone who does give you a hand.) Use the Sound Recorder utility in your Windows 95 ACCESSORIES menu to record the sound as you play it into your computer. PowerPoint's recorder has very limited features. The biggest challenge here typically is getting the levels appropriately set. By selecting AUDIO PROPERTIES from the Sound Recorder's EDIT menu, you will reveal a playback-and-record volume-level control. Test it at various volume levels a few times. You'll probably end up throwing out the first few attempts until you get the level just right. Then you can save the resulting WAV file to your hard disk and insert that testimonial into your presentation software along with a logo or actual picture of your customer. The CUSTOM ANIMATIONS menu in PowerPoint 97 (TOOLS to ANIMATION SETTINGS in PowerPoint 95) will allow you to trigger that sound file automatically or with a mouse click. You want meaningful sound in a presentation? This is one extremely practical option.

### Animation

It was only a matter of time. Bill is now flying objects all over the screen. Duck!

Animation can be a powerful tool. That's because animation helps us break our information down and present it to our audience visually as we deliver it verbally. And, whether it's bullet slides, bar charts or illustrations, the gradual introduction of information enhances the audience's ability to remember it.

There are many animation types you can leverage. For example:

■ **Pick one type of text animation, and use it every time.**

This is an easy one. A gradual introduction of text keeps your audience tracking with the presenter. Pick one primary transition and stick with it. I use "wipe right" a lot because it guides the eye in the direction we read. Subduing the previous bullet when the new one comes on can allow an even

stronger focus. (See SLIDE SHOW to CUSTOM ANIMATIONS in PowerPoint 97.) If you're using a dark background, select a subdued color for the previous bullet a few shades lighter than the background. Using a totally different color will have the exact opposite effect by drawing attention to the text you're trying to de-emphasize.

■ **Animate graphical images when telling complex stories.**

Because we think in terms of communicating with words, our first choice for displaying information is often text. The problem is most audiences remember more when content is graphically presented. Don't get me wrong — text is often unavoidable. But pause for a moment and think about what the text is communicating. If it's a process, steps to be taken, a time line or a similar topic, think in terms of how to make an animated progression of objects that graphically tell the story while the presenter fills in the details.

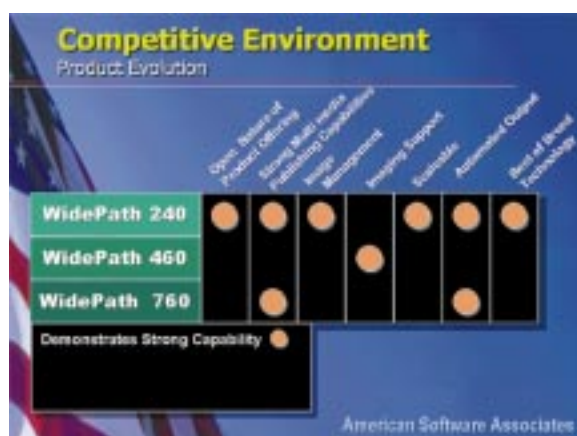
In PowerPoint 97 the AUTOSHAPES button in the lower left corner of your application window will reveal flowchart objects that often work well for describing and animating process-type steps. Use CUSTOM ANIMATIONS in PowerPoint 97 (ANIMATION SETTINGS in 95).

If you see a pattern developing with regard to the use of animation, it's no accident. That's because one of the most powerful tools available to you for telling your story is the appropriate and effective use of a staged introduction of graphical content.

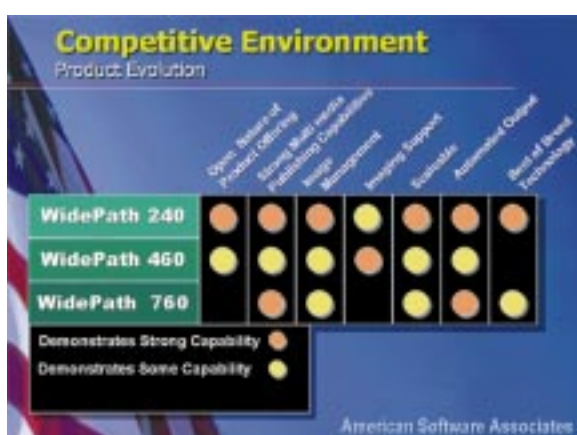
There are many other clever ways to leverage animations; we'll go into in these in future columns.

Well, the captain has just requested we turn off our laptops because we're landing soon. I've given Bill my business card and we've shared a few ideas. We're

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all at different places in this "presentation effectiveness" journey, but one thing is certain: We all want to get better at what we do and we want to be memorable for all the right reasons.

Screeeech! It's OK. This time it's just the plane tires touching down. ☐

Many topics — such as the product evolution above — are best expressed as an animated progression of objects that graphically tell the story while the presenter fills in the details.