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# Don't force PowerPoint to do another program's job

The voice on the other end of the phone line was an anxious senior executive. His problem was that an employee in the training department who was "pretty good with PowerPoint" had produced a training presentation that needed to be sent to hundreds of customers. This person had spent the better part of two months creating a the presentation, but it wasn't working right.

It didn't take long to figure out why. We weren't simply talking about one presentation but rather 10 separate PowerPoint presentations, all interactively hyperlinked. Hundreds of links zigged back and forth in a navigational maze connecting no fewer than 150 screens of training information, complete with voice-overs. The resulting file was larger than 350MB.

I come across similar scenarios more than I would like to admit. Because we have PowerPoint on our desktops and are familiar with it, the temptation is to use it to solve all our communication issues. True, it's sometimes possible to repurpose an existing PowerPoint presentation, but too often the original presentation is beaten to a pulp in the attempt to provide a one-size-fits-all solution.

Unfortunately, PowerPoint is not the right tool for every job, and it's important to know in which situations it works and in which it doesn't. After much trial and error, I've come up with a few helpful guidelines.

## PowerPoint on the Web

Many companies like to convert PowerPoint files to HTML and



When converting slides for the Web, use the smallest file size possible for graphics, and don't leave the same slide hanging on the screen for very long.

move them to the Web for a quick, easy presentation. Sometimes the files convert OK and the results are satisfactory. More often, the graphics and effects get hammered in the translation. The SAVE AS HTML function can create mincemeat out of good presentations.

If you choose to take this path, following some basic points will help to produce better results. First, avoid full-color backgrounds and use templates with more white space. Viewers using low bandwidth will appreciate the faster download and display times. Heavy text is also a bad idea. Audiences have even less inclination to read long-winded slides in a Web presentation environment. Keep the text succinct and pay attention to better quality supporting graphics.

In general, keep the file sizes as small as possible. Use Adobe Photoshop or other digital-imaging programs to optimize the graphics for Web use. Also, create a slideshow that will move quickly.

Pacing becomes a major issue in Web presenting, so keep the imagery and messages moving at a pace in line with other Web-based presentations' speed.

To aid in the transition to HTML, software tools, such as Impatica ([www.impatica.com](http://www.impatica.com)) and others, make this conversion process better with drag-and-drop simplicity. Automatic compression features can crunch a native PowerPoint file down significantly (for example, from 2MB to 200KB). But keep in mind, one way PowerPoint compresses files is to thin the color palette to 256 colors, which means unavoidable color compromises.

## Interactive PowerPoint

On the surface, navigational freedom is an enticing way to spice up a PowerPoint presentation. Instead of clicking through a linear chain of slides, using hyperlinked pages and other nonlinear options provides a more spontaneous,



interactive environment. This aids the presenter in pulling up points as needed.

Although PowerPoint provides this freedom, it is not without hazards. Presenters must be careful to keep elements organized. The program can become a bit clunky when you begin hyperlinking to multiple areas within the same presentation. Uninitiated viewers may not always know when they've reached the end of a section and may not figure out how to get back to the main set of slides. Or worse, the presenter forgets how to get back as well.

To avoid these problems, some people resort to providing a "click here to return" button. But, it's better to hyperlink to a separate presentation that contains the subset of topic slides instead of trying to squeeze all the slides into one document. If you are frequently hyperlinking back and forth during a presentation, make sure that what you're creating is appropriate and sensible. Also, if smoother, more elegant interactivity is required, check out other options, such as Macromedia Director or another multimedia-authoring program.

### PowerPoint on television

How do you move a PowerPoint presentation to videotape? This is a request I get all the time. If you handle them correctly, PowerPoint slides transfer to videotape with sound, video and animation cleanly intact. That doesn't always mean the slides will look as good as they do on a laptop screen, though. The biggest challenge isn't the technology, it's the medium itself. Video is very low-resolution and provides a number of obstacles. The conversion process can severely crop the image you see



Because of differences in the RGB-to-NTSC conversion process, a PowerPoint slide converted to video risks being cropped and losing some content.

on your computer monitor. This challenge is complicated by hardware difference and pixel distortion issues when going from RGB to NTSC.

To avoid any cropping surprises, create a temporary video-safe frame in the masters that keeps your content 20 percent away from the edges. A test transfer will confirm what's really safe. Also, thin line widths or small text can disappear completely in a transfer to video, so exaggerate the size of these features and keep everything larger than normal.

PowerPoint can produce video presentations, but they will be very low-end. I don't usually recommend this method, but in some nonprofessional situations it may be acceptable. To create a video presentation with some quality, you'll have much better luck with professional tools, such as Adobe After Effects or Premiere or other video-creation and -editing programs.

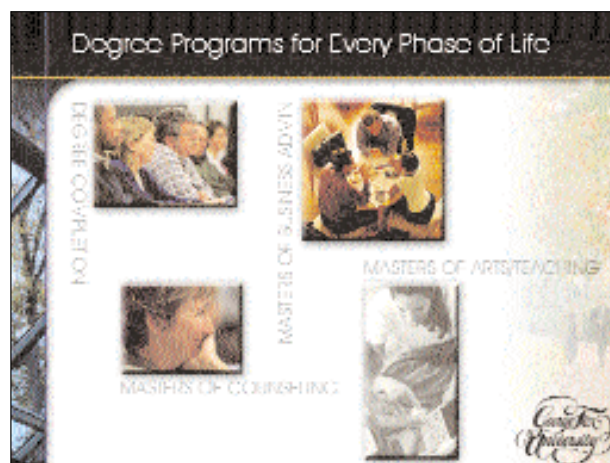
### When to use, not abuse, PowerPoint

PowerPoint's capabilities can be stretched in many ways. The acid test for appropriateness, however, can be distilled into this simple question: If you're trying to convey an

important message, does the caliber of your final PowerPoint product reflect the real stakes? If you're in the running for a big sales contract or important partnership, it doesn't make sense to take a poorly created PowerPoint presentation, convert it to Flash and post it for an audience to view without

you. Bad layout and design in any form always creates marginal impressions.

At some point, using a single tool to solve every business communication challenge becomes ridiculous. There's nothing wrong with being frugal — I try to get as much mileage out of PowerPoint as the next person. If you want your communication graphics to reflect a high level of professionalism, though, you must understand the program's design limits and be aware of other options to make good decisions. Before you try to save a few dollars by forcing PowerPoint to do the work of some other software application, take a moment and consider the *real* cost-to-benefit equation. ■



Hyperlinks provide easy interactivity, but make sure the built-in links are easy to navigate.