



Jim Endicott

If disaster strikes onstage, stay focused and be creative

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My palms were sweating, my heart was pounding. I could only watch in horror as, one by one, the audience members focused on the proverbial train wreck behind me. I was at the podium in my trade show booth, demonstrating a projector. I was supposed to be extolling the virtues of good, creative content; my colleague, Tom Mucciolo (a nationally recognized delivery-skills coach), was at the other podium, pretending to be a customer. We were in front of our third live audience of the day, doing a five-minute pitch that had gone flawlessly the first two times. Now it had happened: In the middle of the embedded video, the computer locked up tight. The big screen behind me froze. My frantic mouse-clicks were futile. Once again, the fickle gods of technology had chosen the most embarrassing moment to amuse themselves.

Now what?

It's an odds game. If you present enough, sooner or later something unexpectedly bad will happen. And part of being a creative presenter is learning how to gracefully get out of extremely tight spots — ones that may or may not be your fault. When the presentation odds catch up with you, whether it's the laptop, the projector, the sound system or the lighting, you should be prepared. With a little pre-emptive planning, you can minimize even the worst presentation disasters. So let's take on the nightmares one at a time here.

Disaster No. 1: Locked up stone cold

The laptop froze solid without any warning. I mean *solid* — nothing, not even a mouse. All I got was that cold, hard look a computer screen gives you when it's just exercised the ultimate power play.

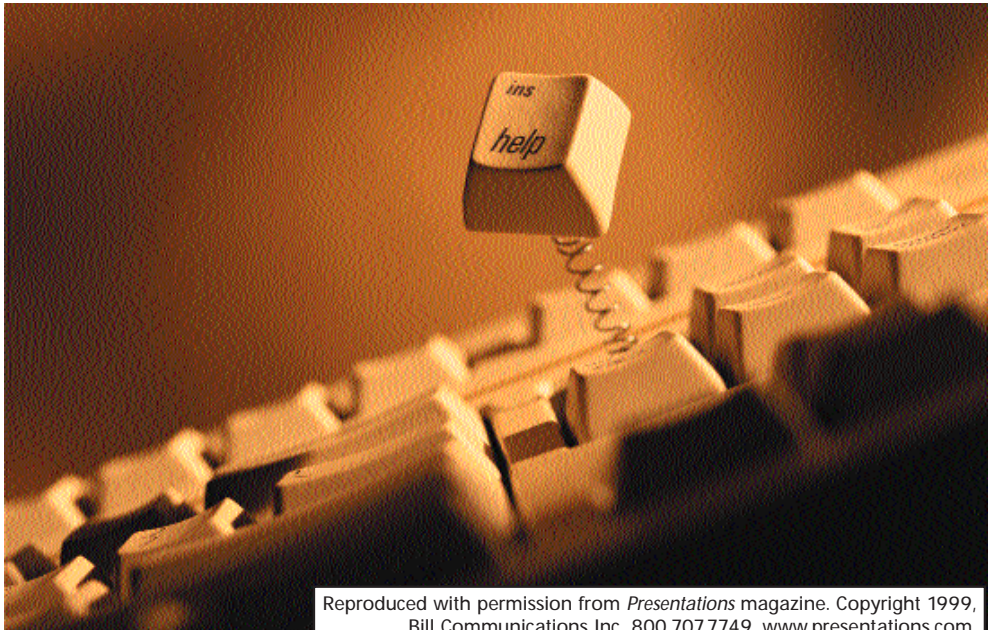
Behind me, the large projected image was telling the Infocomm audience that something was very, very wrong. Seconds suddenly felt like hours.

Fortunately, Tom turned out to be a master improviser. He carried on the conversation for both of us for the next few minutes while I completely rebooted the computer. Thanks to some quick thinking on Tom's part, a disaster was averted.

Of course, it would have been even better if the computer had done what it was supposed to from the beginning.

To lessen the chances of your computer locking up like this, there are a couple of things you can do ahead of time:

- **Jog your computer's memory.** Lack of computer memory is one of the primary reasons for lockup. Maybe you figured that if your laptop came with 32MB of RAM, then that's what it's supposed to



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have. Wrong! Manufacturers typically ship these computers with a minimum of memory, hoping to make money on the add-ons. Today, 32MB just isn't adequate for presentation graphics running in a Windows environment. So even if you don't add another thing to your computer, it's essential that you boost the memory — to 64MB at the minimum, and preferably to 96MB. The extra \$250 or so it will cost you is pretty cheap disaster insurance.

■ **Reboot before you present.**

Just before the presentation, turn your computer off, wait 20 seconds or so, then turn it back on again. This reboot purges the computer's memory and makes sure you have open only the specific application needed to drive your presentation. With Windows, it's better to start fresh. This is true even if all you've done recently is run through your presentation a few times and made a couple of changes. When I run a heavy music-and-animation sequence in PowerPoint four or five times, I often find that the music and the graphics get slightly out of sync. A reboot fixes the problem before it happens.

■ **Lower your screen resolution.**

To hear presenters talk these days, higher-resolution laptops and projectors have brought nothing but advantages to the presenter. And it's true that for detailed

content such as spreadsheets or small illustrations, high resolution is a necessity. But what you don't hear is that, in most laptops, higher resolution brings a performance trade-off. When your laptop is working to refresh considerably more pixels onscreen, you're going to see your animation slow down noticeably over 60 seconds. If you drop your screen resolution to 800 x 600, on the other

hand, you'll find that animation and music refresh much more quickly. This is something to consider when you buy a laptop as well. If you find you have to trade off color depth for high resolution — if you have to choose between 16-bit color and 1,024 x 768 resolution — you might be better off settling for the high color. For most presentations, 800 x 600 resolution is quite adequate. And 65,500 colors (which is what a 16-bit screen display offers) gives you a lot of impact.

**Disaster No. 2:
The infrared that failed**

I believe in transparent technology, because my presentation is about the message, not my equipment. If they made a Stealth projector, I'd buy it. That desire to make technology an unconscious part of my presentation is why I use a remote pointing device that goes through my projector. But that's also why, after this particular disaster, I make sure to run through a presentation in the actual room where I'll be delivering it, not just in the privacy of my office.

On this occasion, I opened up with some audience interaction, then stepped back and pushed the button on my remote mouse to move the cursor. The cursor jumped to the opposite side of the screen and froze. I frantically pushed and rolled and clicked; the mouse jumped again, but in a completely random direction. So much for transparent technology. The audience began to snicker; I laughed nervously.

Finally, I gave up and anchored myself behind my computer, where I stayed for the rest of the presentation.

What had happened? It turns out that infrared pointing devices in a room lit by fluorescent lights are apt to develop a mind of their own. (No, replacing the batteries doesn't help.) A practice run-through in the actual room will detect this embarrassing little quirk, giving you time to arrange an alternative plan.

**Pay no attention to
the man behind the curtain**

Audiences always want you to deliver the world's best presentation. They're happy when you're successful — and they share your intense pain when things don't go well. So you simply can't deliver a good presentation, no matter how strong your content, when you are preoccupied with all the things that might go wrong. When disaster strikes, whether it's technical, creative or circumstantial, quickly turn it to your advantage: Take a moment to put your audience at ease, then press on. It takes a strong will to forge ahead in the face of unexpected adversity, but your audience will appreciate your candor and courage.

It's tempting, of course, to simply try to bull your way to the end of the presentation. Unfortunately, although you'll probably finish the marathon in one piece, your audience will be exhausted.

Once, when I was delivering a seminar on presentation design techniques, I found a problem with my extensively hyperlinked PowerPoint presentation. After it jumped out to a link, the re-entry was erratic. Sometimes it came back out of the SHOW mode, but sometimes back to screen No. 1. Much to my dismay, I had to scroll through the entire presentation in front of the audience to get back to the correct screen. The first time this happened, I stopped and reminded my audience of that pivotal scene in the movie "The Wizard of Oz" — the one where Toto pulls back the curtain and reveals the Wizard pulling the levers that make "The Great and Mighty Oz" come to life. Then I walked the audience through the hyperlinking process, emphasizing what types of issues they might need to address — as I had just found out. This impromptu side lecture was warmly received. We were able to move on with a sense that none of us are impervious to the unexpected.

I don't want to give you the impression that it was easy, though. I was sweating bullets the whole time. ■

We want to hear from you

Creativity in presentations takes many forms these days, from well-crafted presentation graphics that tell a compelling story, to more effective use of software tools, to turning adversity into opportunity. One thing's for sure: It looks a little different for each of us.

What types of "creative techniques" information would be of most value to you? What creative ideas could you put to use right away? You can go to www.presentations.com/creative to send your questions and ideas. We look forward to hearing from you.