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Tips for Avoiding Technology Trouble

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinction

It was Matt's first really big presentation (his name has been changed to protect what's left of his ego) but he was determined to make a huge impression. The stakes were pretty high - not because there were huge dollars on the line but because the room was going to be jammed full of his industry peers.

As Matt entered the conference room at the Moscone Trade Center in San Francisco, he was starting to feel just a bit cocky. After all, he'd stayed up several nights in a row cramming every bit of knowledge he had on the subject into his PowerPoint presentation and it was looking pretty good.

That morning his wife met him at the door and handed him the disk (she'd kept it for safe keeping because Matt was prone to forgetting little details) and launched him on his way.



As he entered the meeting room, he made his way to the front. The AV guy was there silently making sure all the arrangements were finalized and that all the presenter needed to do was load his presentation and go. (By the way, these silent partners are not to be taken for granted. We can have the hottest presentations on earth but when the projector isn't working or the sound support or lighting is sub-standard, it can all come apart in a big hurry. They also see us at our very best and worst. We're often pre-occupied, frequently short on patience and constantly last minute in our requests but for the most part, they come through for us.) Now back to Matt.

With 30-minutes remaining before the introductions, Matt confidently slipped his 3.5" floppy disk into the drive but before he could launch PowerPoint, an ominous message appeared on screen: A:/ NO FILES FOUND. He inserted the disk three or four times with the same result. People were coming in and Matt was beginning to break into a cold sweat. So he did what most men do when they get in trouble - he called his wife. As she began to relate the events of the morning, his worst fears began to materialize. It seemed that his wife, in an attempt to find an out-of-the-way place for the computer disk, used a rather large banana magnet to attach it to the front of the refrigerator. To the uninitiated, magnets in contact with a magnetic medium like a computer disk will completely wipe out their contents.

The rest of the details of Matt's experience are rather unpleasant but it's clear that without a good understanding of the nuances of the technologies we use, we can get ourselves into a heap of trouble. In this scenario, there was someone in the picture that day that understood technology well. Someone who had seen just about every mistake a presenter could make. The onsite AV pros are usually pretty sharp individuals so I asked one particular guy what

he'd like to tell every presenter about presentation technology and how we can keep ourselves out of trouble on presentation day. Here's what he had to say.

Plan Ahead

Most often, the "Request for AV" forms go out well ahead of the event. Lest you think this is simply an annoying little detail, equipment is being reserved, and rooms are being set-up based on your answers to those questions. Don't skip any details. If you want to play sound from your laptop - let them know so the right adaptors can be there. Want to present from the left-hand side? Indicate that upfront. As much as we think that's just common sense today, 25% of the convention meeting rooms are flip-flopped with presenter space provided on the right hand side making it a bit awkward for the audience.

Know who's supporting you

Often a quick call to the conference center or conference producers will direct you to the right group. A one-on-one conversation can go a long way when they recognize your name on a long list of conference presenters. To complicate matters, some cities are strangled by separate union responsibilities. You can't change a light bulb without getting someone from the filament union to step in. Want to go with a cordless microphone or move a chair? Two more people come into your life. Bottom line, it means that the responsibility for supporting your presentation is spread far and wide. If you know that ahead of time you can have your requests better planned.

Create presentation back-ups

Granted, because of all our last minute changes, we generally don't have time to create numerous back-ups, but when the opportunity warrants, print a paper copy of the presentation, burn a CD ROM of your presentation (with embedded fonts) and, if your fortunate enough, travel with your own electronic projector as well. Also, laptop computers are not infallible. Have someone standing by with a back-up laptop (preferably with the presentation already loaded). If disaster strikes, calmly take a five-minute coffee break and you'll be ready to roll again.

Bring all the right stuff

If you have an ultra-portable computer that requires a separate docking bar, accessory station or component bar, bring it. If you need any cables that require a proprietary connector for that one piece of gear, bring it. If you have a separate power supply, bring it. If your laptop does not have an internal floppy drive and requires any special cable or connector for an external floppy drive, bring it. You may find that making a trip to Radio Shack and getting a 1/8" stereo plug (your laptop sound connection) adaptor to connect a number of different house sound system options like 1/4" jack and stereo phono plugs, is a wise investment. If you don't bring them, bring your aspirin you'll probably need it.

Get there at least 60-minutes early

If you saunter in 15-minutes before your presentation, your disaster recovery options become very limited. Get there at least 60-minutes early and actually sit yourself down in a number of the seats and get an audience perspective. Look at things like how loud the house sound system is from that chair, visual obstructions, outside room noise, size and clarity of the projected image and how easy it is to use your remote pointing device and laptop as a

teleprompter. Do you need an extra table for your laptop? Now's the time to request it.

For most of us, getting ready for a big presentation starts to feel strangely like getting ready to go on a camping trip. Once you're there, there's usually no going back. If you've forgot something critical, you may need to improvise. Finally, even if you're in a big hurry, don't let someone else pack up your SUV.

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