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Lessons from Golf-A Caddy's Perspective on Presentation Design

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinction

In the world of golf, there seems to be an army of people who are responsible for making that sport as popular as it is today. The major networks splash tournaments on our TV screens nearly every Sunday afternoon. Sports agents, tournament promoters, and advertisers market the heck out of the events. (I wonder if Tiger Woods really drives a Buick?) And of course, the players themselves are the focus of in-depth articles, Golf Channel specials and a never-ending parade of media interviews. In this sea of activity, there's one specific person we see nearly every week who plays an important role in the outcome of many of those tournaments. He is ever present from the tee box to the green but his voice is usually only heard in the ear of his employer. I'm pretty sure he makes more money than you and I can imagine in a typical year but you may not even recognize his name because at the end of a long golf tournament, he frequently disappears into the parking lot without an interview. His name? Steve Williams, the caddy for Tiger Woods.



As I read an interview with him prior to the 2002 New Zealand Open in January, I began to realize how his role closely parallels that of those who work to support many presenters. His tools of the trade; yardage cards, a keen awareness of the environment and an understanding of the many ways his golfer can get into trouble given their skill, temperament and experience. The tools your presentation support person uses are equally as essential although relatively unacknowledged in most companies. Those things include the use of editing tools to optimize graphics, a sense of appropriateness for the use of animation, imagery, color and sound, and an awareness of presenter style and where you may get in trouble. As similar as their support roles may be, there are few notable differences. Tiger actually listens to his caddy and it makes a big difference in how he approaches an event. Often times, however, presenters simply plow ahead with the same game plan that has only been marginally effective for years and disregard their "caddy's" best instincts. Unfortunately, most of these presentation support people have grown accustomed to not seeing their role as being very valued in their respective companies. It seems many presenters feel fairly self-contained and confident in putting together a presentation but the real truth is they have often been responsible for an audience's exposure to mind-numbing text content, muffled laughs at the use of very bad artwork and worst case, lost opportunities that simply get written off to better competition.

Here are some excerpts from Steve William's interview.

"I basically make sure he knows where the lines are, trying to make him aware what side of the greens you want to miss on, that sort of thing. Sometimes there might be something glaring in his game that I need to mention."

What's glaring in your presentation "game?" Perhaps you've just found it easier to drop in marginally related clipart or use a very bad photograph because it's been in your presentation for years. Remember, every presentation is new for your audience and they are making decisions about you and your company based on the content and design decisions they experience today. If you think their expectations haven't changed over the years, think again.

Solution

Let your presentation design person source some new artwork. Give them some ideas as to the type of imagery that would be a great fit to your slide content. Online image libraries or CDs full of topic-specific pictures offer up low cost screen resolution pictures that can provide much needed graphical relief to a text weary presentation. Well-illustrated animated concept slides can describe a business process or company solution in a fraction of the time of words alone. What's that worth to your presentation goal?

"I think we've clicked on the golf course and off the course. It's a very fortunate situation, but you've got to respect them, at all times. (and they need to respect you)"

Mutual respect based on a clear understanding of the value you respectively bring to the process is essential. When's the last time you respected your presentation support people enough to ask them if there's too much text? How would they make a slide more interesting? People don't seem to understand the slide - does it make sense to them? The colors you've selected don't seem to work well - what would they suggest?

Solution:

Formalize your presentation process to include a design review step where you actually sit down with the designer prior to the project to discuss your objectives and solicit their ideas. This may be in stark contrast to a 'dump and run' philosophy that may have been used for years, but a presenter's personal success often rests in their ability to let go of a measure of control in the presentation process. An over confident presenter can often think there's nothing to this presentation layout stuff. The truth is, presenters frequently don't know what they don't know and there are individuals who possess the skills to make their presentations much more successful. These valuable presentation support people have an awareness of the design tools that can elevate a presentation from benign mediocrity into a professional personal communication tool.

"Some of the professionals can get very pumped up with the excitement, they can get a bit of adrenalin running and maybe focus a bit too far ahead of themselves - that's where the caddy has to step in. if I'm 100% sure of what I'm thinking, I'll try to relay that to the professional."

How well does your presentation design group understand your presentation style? Do you have a tendency to repeat everything that's on screen? Do you rush when you get nervous? Are your stories really working to help underscore key points? If your time is frequently cut short, has your presentation team defined a PowerPoint "Custom Show" shortened path

through your content to better facilitate an abbreviated presentation? Maybe it's time to foster a more symbiotic relationship with those who can help support your presentation efforts. And just maybe some presenters need to let go of their need to control the content of every screen and defer to those who understand the design process and tools better than they do.

The reality today is that companies pay me good money to tell them what they probably already suspect. That's just the nature of being a consultant I suppose. They believe their presentations are pretty boring and they're right. They sense their audiences don't seem to 'get it' and there are real dollars being left on the table and they're generally right again. Over the course of a day, I give them ideas, tips and a few skills on how they can be more effective presenters and better shape their messages for their audiences. But I often wonder if there are good people behind the scenes who would make the same recommendations if they were only asked. Individuals who could bring much greater value to the presenter and the process if companies only invested a bit more in their presentation-related training and education? Presentation design specialists are emerging in many companies today acknowledging the need for this critical design skill. It's not like making web sites. It's not like designing brochures. It has implications for unique message development approaches, design considerations that take into account the supporting technology and psychology of influence variables, and all those elements deployed through a very personal delivery mechanism (you). I'd say those are pretty unique skills, wouldn't you?

Until I see the day that Tiger Woods carries his own golf bag and never takes the advice of his caddy, I think I'll try to keep myself open to those around me whose unique perspectives can help me give a better presentation. There's no lack of resources if we're really looking for them. You see, when we have a greater sense of this critical partnership, we actually "win" more often and just like Tiger, there's usually a larger payday associated with it.

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