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3 Quick PowerPoint Tips to Keep the Punch in Presentations

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinctions

As an executive trainer and consultant, I often find myself working with groups of business people or educators in presentation skills training workshops. The actual training content, although customized for each group's unique needs, has a certain level of predictable outcomes by the end of the day. Predictable at least until one day last month when I concluded the all-day session and asked my closing group question, "So, what were the top 2-3 most important things you learned today?"



I had expected some of the more customary responses from the group of 12 senior sales people like, "I learned more about my personal presentation style and how I can adapt it", or "The psychology of influence approaches were pretty powerful." That particular afternoon, their feedback took a whole different direction. "That 'B' key thing was really great!" And then another person chimed in, "Yea, that 'Custom Shows' feature in PowerPoint was really helpful too." I smiled and nodded approvingly. Although I try to minimize discussions about PowerPoint because it causes presenters to take their eyes off the more important issues, I must admit a few obscure PowerPoint features won the day. Since a couple small tips were important to them, I figured they might just be important to you too. So for the moment, I will put aside my normal presentation themes and give you their top 3 favorite presentation tips that day and why they were significant for them.

To "B" or Not to "B"

The concept of **less being more** is no more important than in the art of presenting. Somewhere in the long forgotten past, presenters got the idea that the more they could put into a set of PowerPoint slides – the more they could simply bowl over an audience with the power of an intellectual argument. Audiences would have to take action because of the sheer number of bullets and the dominance of their marketing message. The scary part of this misconception is that many presenters today have not budged from this relatively ineffective way of creating influence with audiences.

The first important principle that my training group grabbed onto that day was a passing comment I made about the use of the "B" key while in PowerPoint's slideshow mode. It temporarily takes the screen to black. When we are tempted to cram a sea of facts down an audience's throat in an effort to persuade them – it's generally the time where we need to hit the "B" key and... step away from the keyboard. I'm convinced that many business opportunities (selling, partnering, funding) are lost these days because the presenter doesn't

know when to stop talking. Instead of pushing relentlessly through a prepared 30-40 minute presentation oratory, presenters desperately need to be able to “read the room” and simply blank out their prepared PowerPoint, get off their canned blah-blah and just talk. It means asking if you’ve read their issues correctly or what’s most important for them to understand. In addition, the B key can be used strategically to direct all eyes back to you when you are communicating pivotal concepts, telling personal stories or trying to make a final, crucial point. Eye contact becomes critical. As long as there is content on screen, you can bet that some portion of the eyes will stay there. You may not be comfortable with all eyes on you but that is precisely how we get through to human hearts – through our eyes. People gauge trustworthiness and sincerity by a presenter’s ability to make and hold eye contact. Hit the B key and fully leverage the moment. Just this one small idea leveraged at the right times can dramatically change an audience’s perception of the presenter.

Creating the Short Game Plan

If you’ve been presenting long at all, you soon learn that one of two things can usually happen in a presentation. Either someone else’s presentation has run long (causing you to cut yours short) or as you are preparing to deliver the presentation, the executive across the table from you informs you that he/she has a meeting or conference call they need to be on and you will need to cut your presentation time short. (Oftentimes they don’t but they’ve grown accustomed to long winded presenters who fail to honor their time commitments) The options for most presenters get pretty ugly. First they may try jumping out of PowerPoint and skipping around in the presentation like a child at an Easter egg hunt. This visually disjointed patchwork quilt of themes usually ensures that even if your audience had some interest when you began, it soon waffled as you began playing presentation hopscotch. Second, you can just talk faster which, although generally more embraced by presenters these days, is also a fast track to audience apathy. They may be Evelyn Woods graduates, but the last place they want to speed read is your presentation. Sooner or later it will happen to you.

The second memorable concept that my training group embraced that day was in a section of the seminar about, *Making the Message Hard*. It deals with how we provide our audience with clear and tangible handles to important points so that they will remain “hard” long after they leave the presentation. During that time, I spend all of five minutes talking about PowerPoint’s ‘custom shows’ feature. This menu item (buried in the Slide Show menu) allows you to predefine a unique path through your existing set of presentation slides. You can actually preplan your abbreviated presentation game plan so when your time is cut short, you can seamlessly launch the shortened presentation and move on with confidence. The reason this is so critical is not just to save the presenter a little embarrassment, but has more to do with keeping your important messages intact. Your opening five minutes and closing five minutes should be the most rehearsed part of your presentation. This approach allows you to keep those elements uncompromised while simply hitting more high-level slides in the middle of the presentation. Your audience will be unaware that you’ve not only picked up the curve ball that was just thrown you, but you still managed to hit it deep into left field. If you haven’t prepared for this likelihood, you’re simply not prepared.

Sticking the Landing

Gymnasts have been aware of the concept for a long time. They know at the end of most gymnastic routines, they need to execute a near flawless bar exit and balanced landing on the matt. It’s the critical last impression that the judges will have of them. Unfortunately for most presenters, their close is the equivalent of slowing down, hanging lifelessly from the bar, dropping to the matt and walking from the stage. The presentation appears to end because the presenter ran out of slides. There is no more critical time in your presentation than your summary of important points and the mechanism that follows for driving those home to the

audience – your close. The close may take the form of a story, quote, prop or some other way of making the message hard for them but it must be there. NEVER compromise your concluding five minutes and **be prepared to close at any time.**

The last element my training audience seemed to love that day was the fact that while in PowerPoint's slide show mode, you can type in any slide number and hit enter and go directly to that slide. Suppose the manager across the table from you has asked you to "wrap it up," just 20 minutes into your presentation. Instead of breaking into a cold sweat, I would recommend something infinitely more productive - type in the slide number that corresponds to where your well-rehearsed summary/closing slides are located and execute a flawless presentation conclusion. No presenter can afford to rush or blunder that important time.

Maybe you found a few nuggets too in this month's column. After a little confusion, I was ok with the fact that their important "take-aways" had less to do with my more "meaty" presentation topics. For some that day, wisdom took the form of a few seemingly small things that solved some bigger presentation issues. I guess I had to remind myself that value is in the eye of the beholder. It wasn't even about PowerPoint really. (Many software tools offer similar options.) Great presentations are forged through experience, occasional discomfort, and yep, a desire to be a little more prepared for tomorrow's presentation than we were for today's.

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