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The Secret Sauce for Great Presentations

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinction

I see it every day. The volume of creative tools available to those who create presentations seems to be expanding at a dramatic rate. A decade ago, presentations seem to be an afterthought to the business communication process and because of that, no one seemed to bother with investing in those resources. Most presentations were pretty ugly because everyone else's were ugly too and there was little intellectual linkage between what we used to tell our important "stories" and the perceptions they created about our companies or institutions. In the last decade, the world has started to view the presentation process differently. Just like PowerPoint was once the orphan child of the Microsoft Office suite and can now stand on its own, our presentations have taken on a new level of respectability and importance in organizations. Colleges and universities are now paying much more attention to equipping their students with this critical life skill.



This metamorphosis has been the driving force that's been responsible for filling our desktops and mailboxes with flyers, electronic newsletters, magazine reviews or free downloads that tell us how to crop, convert, manipulate, distort and re-purpose just about anything we can put into PowerPoint. With all the digital gymnastics at our disposal these days, I often wonder if the art of presenting has been truly advanced? Do our audiences understand us better now or has it all become the digital equivalent of the multi-colored/patterned faces available for our cell phones - it's fun, it's cool, maybe even visually fun, but in reality, our primary directive has remained unchanged.

What I want to tell you is simply this - there is very little that's new under the sun in presenting. Clipart CDs, image libraries, special effects plug-ins or artistic templates may give us a handle on something new for our audiences to see on screen, but in the end analysis, those things may be of little consequence in making a powerful audience connection. Don't get me wrong, if they can help us communicate our ideas better and more quickly, I would be the first to try them out but if our plan is to entertain, there are ways to do that that much more effectively than a PowerPoint presentation and our audiences know it.

As a personal indictment, there are many of us who write frequently about the presentation design process and we fill volumes on how to create more professional looking content. I guess, our hope is that in the perspective we bring on creative topics, we somehow challenge the masses to move beyond much of the benign mediocrity we experience in presentations today. At this point, you may be thinking that since you're not going to get any creative tips

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out of me today, that annoying pile of backed-up email is starting to look good to you. But before you go, consider this.

Really good presentations may be more about what you don't do on screen, than what you do put there.

As presenters and designers, we've been so preoccupied with what to put into our presentations that we seem to lose focus on what might very well be the "secret sauce" of truly great presentations. We suck up every artwork tip and technique - but we scratch our heads when audiences seem to be temporarily entertained but in the long run relatively untouched by our 'creative' content. The real lessons on good presenting may come in places where we're not looking. I'm going to share a few.

Washington Whispers - An electronic newsletter counterpart of US News and World Report

"Gephardt's Secret Weapon: Mom"

[excerpt] He has been in politics 31 years, but house Democratic leader Dick Gephardt couldn't warm to the trick of tapping his personal life to make political points. "He never use to talk about his family," says an associate. But as he braces for a fight over Social Security reform with the White House - and a likely 2004 presidential bid - he's giving voters what they want; folksy family tales. His favorite features his 94-year old mom, Loreen, who lives in a St. Louis retirement home. "She called me just last week," spins the good son.

The story goes on to provide insight into some of his mom's financial challenges and how they illustrate the problem with George Bush's plan to let folks invest some of their Social Security dollars. He concluded his comments with this, "She kept saying to me, Dick, what if the Social Security checks were to stop coming?"

As I wipe the hint of a tear from the corner of my eye, I think there's an important lesson here that presidential hopefuls spend millions of dollars to have consultants tell them. People are informed by the logical but moved by emotion. In the debate, there will no doubt be a time for graphics, flip charts and illustrations but he used something that day that had infinitely more impact in reaching into his audience's heads and hearts - his personal story.

What makes this scenario different from what you and I might do in a presentation is simple. We don't dare play politics with savvy audiences. It doesn't seem to matter what your political persuasion might be, we suspect the motivations of most politicians who get too warm and fuzzy with us. The interactions with our audiences better be honest and real or we'll lose any respect they may have had for us. If our goal is to alter, even slightly, an audience's belief system or move them to action - that is almost always more effectively done when we reveal a bit of ourselves and address topics that resonate with their passions (ie. organizational change) hopes (increased profitability) and fears (overcoming competition).

As I work with a group of executives, we talk about our first big presentation experiences - for a few moments we share the pain and a few laughs. Another presenter might tell an opening story about going onsite with an end-user of their product and seeing first hand how it has dramatically improved their workplace. In one presentation, Ken Blanchard, author of "The One Minute Manager", used props and a personal story to convey to his audiences tales of organizational change and the people it touched. His supporting graphics on the big screen

were pretty elementary, but that became secondary to the spoken word.

The Oregonian - Oregon's largest daily newspaper

"Objective, Dispassionate Journalists Don't Shed Tears" [Commentary by Barry Koltnow] Note: This newspaper commentary focused on the increasing trend since 9-11 for journalists of all kinds to show more emotion in reporting the news.

[excerpt] .Dan Rather's breakdown [on the David Letterman Show] triggered a national debate on whether the veteran anchor, who once covered the Vietnam War from the trenches, had totally lost his objectivity or was just showing his humanity.

I don't know about you, but seeing a little real human reaction in response to a tragedy is a good thing. The writer of this article went on to take a cynical position about his concern that journalists will begin to manufacture emotion simply for the ratings. I suppose that's always a possibility, but for now, I will embrace something that appears real in human beings. I will be suspect of the overly polished, prepped and perfect - another lesson for presenters. Our audiences want to embrace the refreshing taste of real presenters talking about topics they're vested in and not being afraid of letting them see who we are. All the photos, digital video, special effects tools or artful templates cannot rival a passionate and honest presenter with a strong sense for their audience's needs and hopes.

I don't think we have to worry about presenters getting so cocky that we're manufacturing passion and transparency just for the crowd. Most of us are just too darn nervous to be that calculating. I do believe that visual tools can play a compelling role in helping presenters convey their important messages more quickly - it can be powerful. But before we get too crazy with the software, we need to remind ourselves that our audiences want to hear from people just like them. The most important lesson of all might be this - before we can lead an audience anywhere, we must first come along side them and that will never be just a software thing.

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