AIA Best Practices:
Why PowerPoint doesn't have to suck: 10 tips for better presentations

By Bill Schmalz, FAIA, CSI

Summary

Are your PowerPoint presentations capturing the attention of your audience members or putting them to sleep? This best practice offers ten simple tips on creating compelling PowerPoint presentations that will keep your audience interested in what you have to say.

Introduction

If you're reading this from a computer, here's something you can try: on your search engine, type "Why PowerPoint sucks." You'll probably get more than 450,000 hits on Google and the only thing surprising about this will be that the number wasn't higher. For years, many articles have been written full of complaints around PowerPoint's inadequacies. Yet, when Microsoft released PowerPoint in 1990[1], it quickly (and globally) replaced 35mm slides, printed boards, and overhead projectors as presenters' primary visual aid, for several good reasons: First, what it can do graphically far surpasses the visual aids it replaced. Second, most people can easily master enough basics to become adept in its use (even though it has more features than most of us can comprehend). And third, it does something near and dear to every architect's heart: It allows us to make changes up to literally the last second. So why do so many people hate PowerPoint? What's going on?

Actually, there's nothing wrong with PowerPoint in itself[2]. The problem is how it's used. You may not be an expert presenter, perhaps not even average, but you are likely a terrific audience member. You know what captures your interest and what bores you, what you can and can't see from the back of a large room, and what you can consume on a single slide for the few seconds it's on the screen.

10 simple tips

The following 10 simple tips for creating more effective slide shows, are written with the expert audience member in mind:

1. Use no more slides than necessary.[3] Once your audience sees you're padding the show, the cell phones come out for email checking. When reviewing your draft slide show, ask yourself about each slide, "What if I remove it? Have I lost anything essential?"

2. Each new slide should provide just one new piece of information. Don't overload your audience with too much information at once. If it's worth showing to your spectators, it's worth letting them absorb it.

3. Use the least amount of text you can get away with. Try using no more than 10 words on a slide—a hard target to hit but fruitful it can be reached. Make sure that you as the speaker repeat the words on the slide. You can, and probably should, say more than what's on the slide, but don't confuse your audience by saying something different.

4. Check the basics: spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Don't assume your spell checker will catch all the mistakes. There is no easier way to turn off audience members than by writing "principals" when you meant "principles." And if you have to use acronyms, make sure the audience knows what they stand for.

5. Unless you're presenting to a small group of people sitting at a table, use a font size larger than what you think is appropriate. Many spectators, even those with glasses, can't read small text from a distance, so you're better off erring on the side of too large rather than too small.

6. Speaking of text readability, make sure your font colors and background colors aren't fighting each other. Black text on a red background, or white text on a yellow background, may look cool on your computer monitor, but it's unreadable when projected.

7. Use surprising and, where appropriate, humorous graphics. Avoid images grabbed from the Internet that audiences have seen dozens of times. Find images that your spectators don't expect. Surprise them and jar them to attention.

8. Avoid tables and charts unless they are exceedingly easy to comprehend on first glance. If your audience members struggle to understand the tables and charts, they'll give up (in other words, time to check emails). If you have to share complex information, supplement your presentation with handouts.

9. Don't try to pack everything you know about a topic into a presentation. Only show what you think the audience needs to know. Leave something for post-presentation questions.

10. Emphasize the important stuff, the things you want the audience to remember. Most spectators will remember maybe five of the things you say, so make sure they are the five things you want them to remember.

What these 10 points add up to is simple: Make it easy for the audience. If "the reader is always right" is our motto for writing, then "the audience is always right" should be our motto as presenters[4]. Keep in mind that, as presenters, we are facing one of the most powerful forces in the universe: drowsiness. We should assume that half of our audience members did not get enough sleep the night before, and often are either hungry or have just eaten. Try as they might to pay attention, drowsiness is doing everything it can to take over. Our challenge as presenters is to battle drowsiness for our audience's attention.

Think like a spectator

Perhaps we, as presenters, are thinking, “So what if they sleep. It’s their loss.” Well, it’s our loss too. After all, why are we presenting? To demonstrate our expertise? To show off what we know? I hope not. Our goal as presenters should be to engage our audiences, to share some of what we know so they know it too.

We are all, every one of us, expert audience members. As such, while reading this list, you were probably thinking, “Well, of course. This is all so obvious.” As audience members, it is obvious to us. But when we change our role from spectator to presenter, many of us forget what we as spectators know, and what it’s like to be trying to make sense of a presentation. Since most of us spend way more time being in audiences than being presenters, thinking as an audience member ought to be easy, but it isn't. However, if, when creating our presentations, we think not as presenters but as spectators, our PowerPoint shows are far less likely to suck.

Footnotes

1. PowerPoint has been with us even longer if you count its predecessor, “Presenter,” which was developed for MacIntosh computers by Forethought, Inc., in the mid-’80s. It was renamed PowerPoint in 1987, before the company was bought by Microsoft.
2. Other than that annoying upper-case P in the middle of the name.
3. Slide: every time something changes on the screen. A “slide” that has six elements that appear sequentially is defined, for the sake of this article, as six slides.
4. “The reader is always right” comes from Patricia O’Connor’s book Woe Is I.

About the contributor

Bill Schmalz, FAIA, CSI, is a principal with the Los Angeles office of Perkins+Will. He is the author of the book *The Architect’s Guide to Writing* and a contributing author for the latest edition of *The Architects Handbook of Professional Practice*. He has also sat through way too many bad PowerPoint presentations.

About AIA Best Practices

AIA Best Practices is a collection of relevant, experience-based knowledge and expert advice on firm management, project delivery, contracts and more, aligned with the *Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition*. See the full AIA Best Practices collection at aia.org/aia-best-practices.

This article corresponds to:

Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition Unit 1 - The Profession
Chapter 06 – Marketing and Business Development
Section 03 – Public Relations and Communications