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Technology in Speaking Skills A/V Technology: Necessity...or Nightmare?

(The Pentagon Declares War!)

by Patricia Fripp, CSP, CPAE

What do the Pentagon, corporate CEOs, and Patricia Fripp have in common? We all deplore the current trend toward replacing solid presentation content with flashy audio/video effects. A Wall Street Journal headline (4/26/00) announced: "The Pentagon Declares War on Electronic Slide Shows That Make Briefings a Pain."

We sit in the audience and watch spectacular presentations using PowerPoint, Director, and banks of coordinated slide carousels, and we think, "Wow, if only I could do that!" Now, most of us can. The explosion of exciting new A/V technology has made a wide range of special effects generally available to presenters.

However, just because something is available, doesn't mean we have to use it! Here is another point of view.

I am an exceptionally high-tech marketer and receive good business and prospects from my web site, e-mail newsletters, MentorU on-line learning seminars, and other high-tech parts of my business. However, the fastest growing segment of my business is coaching sales teams, executives, and leaders so they can be more effective on the platform. The downside of all the presentation-enhancing technology is summarized by what more and more frustrated managers are telling me: "Our CEO used to be a really great presenter before he had PowerPoint. Now he relies on it so much that he is less effective at motivating our sales force."

Two executives came to me to develop a speech about a new program. They spent some time describing it, but it was so complicated that I couldn't really grasp it. I figured that if I just didn't get it with our one-on-one attention, then the non-technical audience they wanted to sell it to didn't stand much chance. Finally, I asked them, "How will this change the way your customers do business? Tell me about the impact it will have on their lives." They walked out with a great speech, supported by PowerPoint for added illustrations. One commented, "What a great process! Usually we put together 40 PowerPoint slides and then decide what to say in between."

That's exactly the problem. Misuse of technology can turn speakers into mere readers of captions for slides. Personal communication is lost.

At the Pentagon, General Hugh Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has issued an order to all U.S. military bases worldwide which translates as, "enough with the bells and whistles - get to the point." Army Secretary Louis Caldera suggests that the Pentagon's PowerPoint presentations are alienating lawmakers: "People are not listening to us because they are spending so much time trying to understand these incredibly complex slides." And Navy Secretary Richard Danzig announced that he was no longer willing to sit through slide shows, saying they were necessary only if the audience was "functionally illiterate."



That's exactly the problem. Misuse of technology can turn speakers into mere readers of captions for slides. A recent survey of captains at Fort Benning, GA cited "the ubiquity of the PowerPoint Army" as a prime reason why the Army is losing too many bright young officers. "The idea behind most of these briefings," it said, "is for us to sit through 100 slides with our eyes glazed over." The term "PowerPoint Ranger" has even become a derogatory term, describing a desk-bound bureaucrat more adept at making slides than tossing grenades. (WSJ)

Here's another business example. It was near the end of one of my all-day speaking school and coaching sessions for engineers. Everyone there was very proud of their expensive, colorful presentation materials and expected to rely heavily on them. I had been demonstrating the relationship of organization and content to delivery, emphasizing that stories are the currency of human contact, the only way to connect emotionally as well as intellectually.

I asked one gentleman to play a game with me. Would he pretend that the power had gone off and he had to repeat what he had just said without any visuals? He did so, becoming animated and enthusiastic. Without exception, all the other engineers agreed that he was a much stronger presenter when he talked to them directly and made eye contact instead of just narrating his slides. This proved what I had been telling them all day about the superiority of human contact over electronics. Since then, these engineers often e-mail me that my name is frequently mentioned in their briefing rehearsals: "Fripp is right. Cut the viewgraphs down to one third!"

Dan Maddux, Executive Director of the American Payroll Association, agrees. He oversees 350 meetings year for APA's more than 18,000 members. He has been hiring professional speakers, government officials, and name entertainment for 17 years for their yearly congress. Maddux says his favorite speakers use few if any audio/visuals. "Every time your PowerPoint slide is on the screen, you aren't!" he says. "Most disappointing," he says, "is when dynamic speakers totally overshadow themselves and their performance with their slides."

Technology is terrific -- as long as it supports and enhances your connection with your audience. Corporate communication departments can use technology magnificently. What good speakers have is story telling ability! If your listeners could run your presentation without you, why are you there?



START WITH GREAT STORIES

Start by answering the audience's basic question, "Why should I care about your subject?" Turn numbing data into exciting pictures of what will change in the listener's life or business. Help them make the decision your presentation is designed to promote.

In the end, your message and power of persuasion depends on creating exciting pictures in the minds of your audience, not only on a screen. Use your unique stories to stimulate your audience's most powerful sensory organs, their imaginations. More than any showy visuals, people will remember what they 'see' in their minds while they are listening. When we think of memorable Hollywood films, what we usually remember most are the moving, dramatic, and funny stories that movies tell. The screenwriter Robert McKee says, "Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact."

All actors recognize the value of great stories and the importance of making them come alive. I teach business leaders and sales professionals to use stories to train, lead and sell.

An audience of one or a thousand will always prefer a trivial story brilliantly told to a brilliant one told badly.

Executive speech coaching has become an exciting part of my business. Often, a corporate speaker brings me sheets of statistics and says, "Here's what I want to talk about."

"Why should your audience care about all this?," I ask. "Where is the excitement? What can we illustrate with stories?" Then we set about turning the numbing data into stimulating descriptions of what it all MEANS.

Don't depend on PowerPoint, slides, and overheads alone to tell your story.

Am I asking you NOT to use these tools? NO! But first decide what you want to say. What are your points of wisdom? How can you illustrate these points best? Use your support materials to support your case.

You need to connect with your audience EMOTIONALLY as well as intellectually. Look at the people you're talking to, not at your notes. Keep the type on your slides to a minimum. Your audience is there to listen to your stories, not read them.

Relate your stories to the needs and interests of your audience. For example, if you're talking to salespeople, tell stories about how your satisfied clients have used your product or service. Use their comments as exciting and vivid dialogue in your story. Follow the classic Hollywood formula:

Start with interesting characters. Add sparkling dialogue. End with an important lesson learned.

Remember, everyone resists a sales presentation, but few can resist a good story well told.



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ADD TECHNOLOGY JUDICIOUSLY

Use technology to support the message, not visa versa. An over-reliance on flashy affects can even negate the message. A very fine presenter I know had a nightmarish experience when he was invited at the last minute to speak for a small group in Las Vegas. The audience would be young and the theme MTVish. It was, without a doubt, one of the most exciting meetings he'd ever attended. There were actual MTV clips, high-powered music, and the officers came dressed as rap stars. The intensity was so great that it was impossible to get the audience to focus on a real live speaker or the topic of the meeting. The goal was lost in the glitz.

Don't let your people fall into the trap of using technology as a substitute for communicating directly with their members. Their audiences want to connect with a leader, not glossy graphics. By all means, use audio/visual technology as a valuable support, but never, never lose the powerful personal touch! IT SHOULD SERVE YOU AND YOUR MESSAGE, not the other way around. Use it at is was designed to be used - to enhance your message, not to eclipse it.

(1,492 Words)

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