

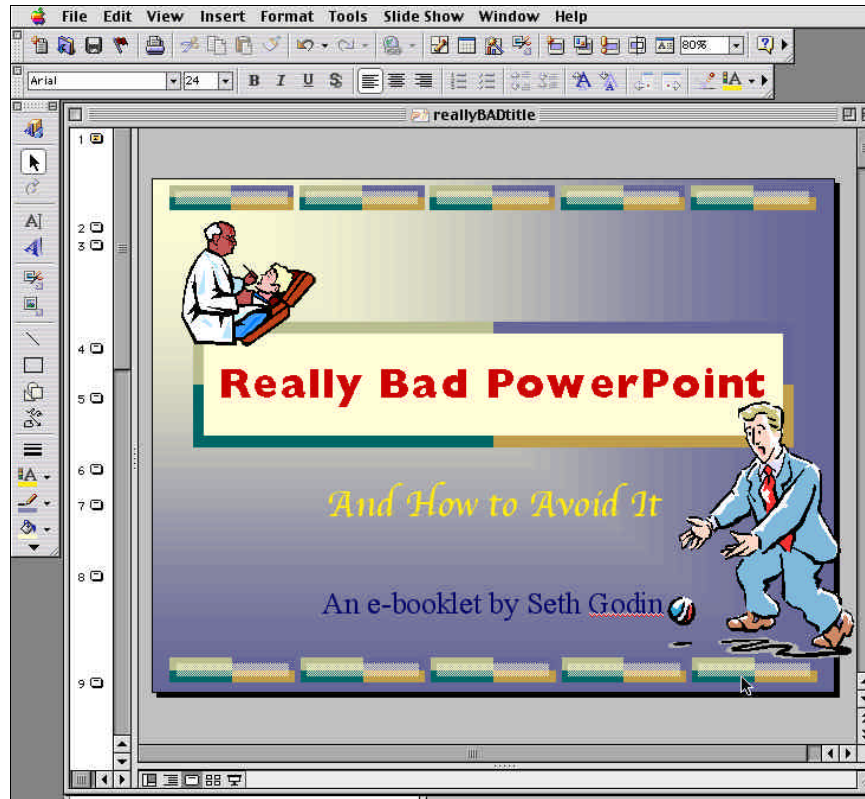
R E A L L Y

BAD

PowerPoint

(and how to avoid it)

by Seth Godin



Yes, it's bad on purpose. Sheesh.

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Why Are Your PowerPoints So Bad? (Hint: it's not your fault)

What would we do without Microsoft PowerPoint? How would we communicate with each other?

PowerPoint was developed by engineers as a tool to help them communicate with the marketing department—and vice versa. The programmers behind PowerPoint saw it as a clever hack—a way to save time and money instead of creating slides the old fashioned way. Once unleashed, though, PowerPoint took on a life of its own.

It's a remarkable tool because it allows very dense verbal communication. Yes, you can send a memo, but no one reads anymore. As our companies are getting faster and faster, we need a way to communicate ideas from one group to another. Enter PowerPoint.

PowerPoint could be the most powerful tool on your computer. *But it's not.*

It's actually a dismal failure. Almost every PowerPoint presentation sucks rotten eggs. And much of the fault lies with Microsoft.

Microsoft has built wizards and templates right into PowerPoint. And those “helpful” tools are the main reason that we've got to live with page after page of bullets, with big headlines and awful backgrounds. Let's not even get started on the built-in clip art.

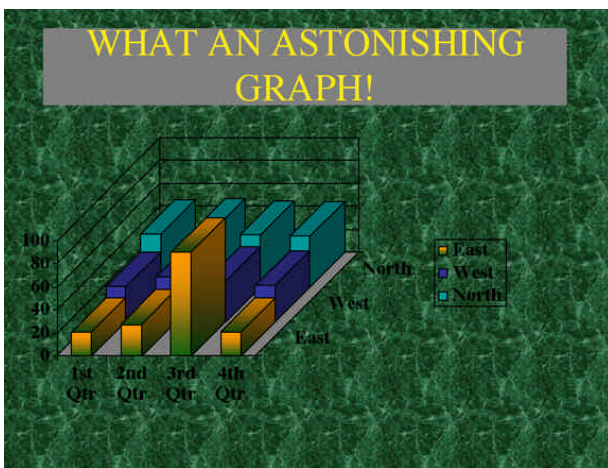
Hear Reports on Achievements

- Congratulate award winners.
- Note areas of growth.
- Have impromptu reports on success.

I am not making this up! When I set out to write this piece, I worried that I might not be able to find sufficiently bad stuff—I figured that people would hide it. Amazingly, I found this slide and the next one built in to PowerPoint. These are supposed to be the good examples!

Competitive Analysis

- **Competitors**
 - (You may want to allocate one slide per competitor)
- **Strengths**
 - Your strengths relative to competitors
- **Weaknesses**
 - Your weaknesses relative to competitor



This Is Not “Communicating”

That’s the magic word. The purpose of PowerPoint is to communicate with your audience. Unfortunately, rather than communicating, PowerPoint is used to accomplish three things, none of which leads to a good presentation.

The first thing that most people use PowerPoint for is a teleprompter! Think of all the presentations you’ve been to where the presenter actually *reads* the slides. Did your audience really have to come all this way to a meeting to listen to you read the slides? Why not just send them over?

The second task is to provide a written, cover-your-ass record of what was presented. By handing out the slides after the meeting (or worse, before), the presenter is avoiding the job of writing a formal report, and is making sure that she can point to the implicit approval she earned at the meeting.

The third task is to make it easier for your audience to remember everything you said. Sort of like reading your slides, but better. After all, if you read your slides, and then give the audience a verbatim transcript of what you read, what could be wrong with that?

Communication Is The Transfer Of Emotion

If all you want to do is create a file of facts and figures, then cancel the meeting and send in a report. Do it in PowerPoint if you want, but it’s not a presentation, it’s a report. It will contain whatever you write down, but don’t imagine for a second that you’re powerfully communicating any ideas. Communication is about getting others to adopt your point of view, to help them understand why you’re excited (or sad, or optimistic or whatever else you are.) Unless you’re an amazing writer, it’s awfully hard to do that in a report.

The three tasks that most people set out for a PowerPoint are in direct conflict with what a great presentation should do. Our brains have two sides. The right side is emotional, musical and moody. The left side is focused on dexterity, facts and hard data.

When you show up to give a presentation, people want to use both parts of their brain. So they use the right side to judge the way you talk, the way you dress and your body language. Often, people come to a conclusion about your presentation by the time you’re on the second slide. After that, it’s often too late for your bullet points to do you much good.

You can wreck a communication process with lousy logic or unsupported facts, but you can't complete it without emotion. Logic is not enough. If all it took was logic, no one would smoke cigarettes. No one would be afraid to fly on airplanes. And every smart proposal would be adopted. No, you don't win with logic. Logic is essential, but without emotion, you're not playing with a full deck.

PowerPoint presents an amazing opportunity. You can use the screen to talk emotionally to the audience's right brain (through their eyes), and your words can go through the audience's ears to talk to their left brain.

That's what Stephen Spielberg does. It seems to work for him.

It's Selling

If everyone in the room agreed with you, you wouldn't need a presentation, would you? You could save a lot of time by printing out a one-page project report and delivering it to each person. No, the reason we do presentations is to make a point, to sell one or more ideas.

But selling is hard. Most people don't even like to admit that they're selling. So, instead of taking a chance and *trying* to sell people in a presentation, we make our presentations boring. What a waste.

If you believe in your idea, sell it. Make your point as hard as you can and get what you came for. Your audience will thank you for it, because deep down, we all want to be sold.

Four Components To A Great Presentation

First, make yourself cue cards. This feature should be built in to PowerPoint, but it's not. You should be able to see your cue cards on your laptop's screen while your audience sees your slides on the wall. Alas. In the meantime, you'll just have to resort to writing them down the old-fashioned way.

Now, you can use the cue cards you made to make sure you're saying what you came to say.

Second, make slides that *reinforce* your words, not repeat them. Create slides that demonstrate, with emotional proof, that what you're saying is *true* not just accurate.

Talking about pollution in Houston? Instead of giving me four bullet points of EPA data, why not show me a photo of a bunch of dead birds, some smog and even a diseased lung? Amazingly, it's more fun than doing it the old way. But it's effective communication.

Third, create a written document. A leave-behind. Put in as many footnotes or details as you like. Then, when you start your presentation, tell the audience that you're going to give them all the details of your presentation after it's over, and they don't have to write down everything you say.

IMPORTANT: Don't hand out the written stuff at the beginning. Don't! If you do, people will read the whole thing while you're talking and ignore you. Instead, your goal is to get them to sit back, trust you and take in the emotional and intellectual points of your presentation.

Fourth, create a feedback cycle. If your presentation is for a project approval, hand people a project approval form and get them to approve it, so there's no ambiguity at all about what you've just agreed to.

So What's On Your Slides?

Here are the five rules you need to remember to create amazing PowerPoint presentations:

1. No more than six words on a slide. EVER.
2. No cheesy images. Use professional images from corbis.com instead. They cost \$3 each, or a little more if they're for 'professional use'.
3. No dissolves, spins or other transitions. None.
4. Sound effects can be used a few times per presentation, but never (ever) use the sound effects that are built in to the program. Instead, rip sounds and music from CDs and leverage the Proustian effect this can have.
5. Don't hand out print-outs of your slides. They're emotional, and they won't work without you there. If someone wants your slides to show "the boss," tell them that the slides go if you go.

The home run is easy to describe: You put up a slide. It triggers an emotional reaction in the audience. They sit up and want to know what you're going to say that fits in with that image. Then, if you do it right, every time they think of what you said, they'll see the image (and vice versa).

Alas, This Is Harder Than What You Do Now

But what you do now is lazy and ineffective. It bores people and doesn't communicate with them. Once you get the hang of this process, it's actually easier to make a great presentation. An audience that wants to hear what you have to say is more likely to listen, and you're more likely to get what you want. And isn't that the point?

What's really cool is the way you'll start making presentations in the future. Instead of making slides that follow your bullet points, you'll organize the presentation emotionally, letting the slides drive the process.

Remember that every slide doesn't have to stand on its own. You can use one slide to set up a point and then the next slide to bring it home.

A Few Examples To Get You Started

Let's say you work for a non-profit and are doing a presentation for your backers at the United Way. You want more money for a program that helps aging Vietnam Vets get the social and mental therapy they need as they grow older.

In the old days, you'd start with a bar chart about the aging population and then five bullet points about how you'll approach the problem.

Instead, why not use this photo:



Then, while the audience gasps at the memories this image brings back, tell your story. Tell it the way you'd tell it to a colleague. Explain why you want to run this program and who it's going to help. And then refer your audience to the facts and figures you'll be happy to hand out in a few minutes. Show some digital snapshots of the people already in your program. Insert a few photos of graduates, now leading productive lives without your help...

Or, how about something a little simpler. You're trying to sell your boss on getting a budget to redesign your website. It seems that your competition is gaining market share because your site is so lame.

Instead of regaling her with statistics, *show her*. Do ten screen shots, one after another, demonstrating the process of buying stuff from your online store. Then show the three steps it takes your competitor's customers. It will only take you thirty seconds to step through the steps, but once you're done, you've established a real need in your audience. Show the problem and it's easier to sell the solution.

Apologies

Sorry that this e-booklet is so short. Actually, if I hadn't spent so much time on it, it would be longer. What I've just described is simple, effective and difficult. You'll resist at first. You'll point out that it's not the way your company works. You'll remember the last time you saw someone fail with a similar approach.

My goal in making it short and vivid and hyperbolic is to dare you to try it. Try it without compromise.

I hope you'll give it a shot despite the long odds. If something is worth getting ten (or a hundred) people in a room, it seems to me that it's worth doing right. You may not be as tall as Abraham Lincoln or as eloquent as Winston Churchill, but you are able to make great presentations. Have fun.

SETH GODIN is the author of the bestsellers *Permission Marketing*, *Unleashing the Ideavirus* and *The Big Red Fez*. His new book, *Survival is Not Enough* is due from the Free Press in January, 2002. And his PowerPoints are not boring.