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John Care, Managing Director

Why PowerPoint Makes Us Stupid

Read My Bullets

I spend a lot of time explaining why PowerPoint can make you stupid, and why it introduces too much complexity into the sales cycle. There are many reasons why the classic sales and marketing .ppt presentation numbs the brains and behinds of an audience. It's worth revisiting some of those reasons and some of the scientific evidence behind my assertions - especially about Bullet Points.

1. **It's Boring and Predictable.** .. Speaking as a former IT executive, as soon as I saw the Corporate Overview, the slide full of customer logos or the very first set of bullet points - I slumped in my seat. It is a Pavlovian response. We have come to equate Power Point with boredom, both inside and outside of our own companies.
2. **What's So Important?** A slide with six bullet points (and the seemingly obligatory and illegible screen shot) doesn't have the audience focus on what is important. If all six bullet points are important, they each merit their own slide. Simple.
3. **You're Lazy.** If you need multiple bullet and sub-bullet points to remember everything you need to talk about - then you are lazy and don't know your stuff. Putting something on the screen "just in case" almost guarantees that someone will want to talk about it.
4. **You Talk Too Much.** Most pre-sales engineers I know, when faced with a slide that has six bullet-points, succumb to the desire to speak about every bullet point. This makes your presentation long, wordy and unfocused. If you've ever been told you speak too fast - that's one main reason why.
5. **What's Your Value?** Now - some organizations (such as the US Federal Government) love bulleted slides for use as briefing materials after the call. However - if all you are going to do is cover each bullet without adding much personal experience or insight - what is the point of giving the presentation in the first place?

6. The Science - Part I. [Christine Atherton](#), a cognitive psychologist, recently delivered a [paper](#) at the British Technical Communications Conference. She measured the effect - in an educational setting - of using bulleted slides versus sparse slides with a diagram in the retention of her audience. Retention of material presented using sparse visual slides was 120% better than traditional bullet slides. Some authors, such as [John Medina in BrainRules](#), assert that the advantage can be over 600%.
7. The Science - Part II. At any given time, our audience can remember anywhere from 4 to 6 chunks of information ([Cowan, 2001](#)). Since several of those chunks are taken up thinking about work, money, sports, the children etc. we face stiff competition in making our message memorable so that it will stick. Our brain uses two main pathways to process information - the auditory cortex which processes written and spoken language, and the visual cortex which processes images and what we see. PowerPoint bullets utilize less than half the auditory cortex, the rest of our brain goes to sleep (thinking about work, money, sports...). Visual images with a few words keep both parts of the brain awake and active - therefore we are 120% more likely to remember.
8. [Using The Science](#).
 - Don't say too much. Limit what you cover in a presentation by focusing in on just the important information for the customer.
 - Design slides so that they can be processed by the visual and auditory cortex. This means using more meaningful images and less words.
 - Eliminate clutter. Get rid of "just in case" points. Have more slides with less information on each slide.
 - Make your title do the work. If you have a title on a slide, make it more like a newspaper headline: "How Real-time alerts prevent server crashes" rather than the traditional "Alerts" title.

<Next Month - How to Use Images And Make Over Your Slides.>

"PowerPoint Makes Us Stupid!"

Gen James N. Mattis – US Marine Corps


Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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Appendix: Sparse & Visual Slides vs Conventional Slides

The spacing effect

- Ebbinghaus (1885): spacing out periods of learning improves later recall of the information
 - Obvious implications for revision!
 - Start revising now!

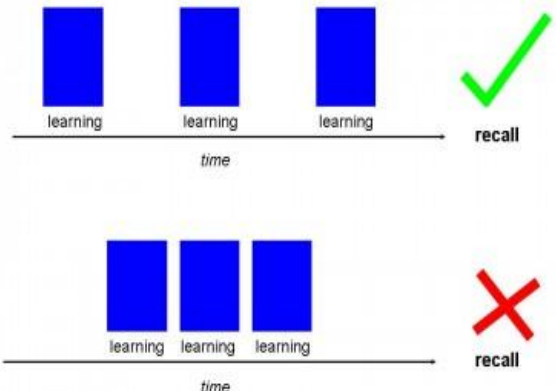


The diagram illustrates the spacing effect. On the left, three blue vertical bars representing learning sessions are spaced out over time. An arrow labeled 'time' points to the right, ending at a 'recall' point marked with a green checkmark. On the right, three blue vertical bars representing learning sessions are crammed together. An arrow labeled 'time' points to the right, ending at a 'recall' point marked with a red X.

- When spacing is very short, people do better on immediate testing, but worse when tested later on
 - Cramming might be better than nothing!

(A traditional bulleted slide)

The spacing effect (Ebbinghaus, 1985)



The diagram illustrates the spacing effect. The top part shows three blue vertical bars representing learning sessions spaced out over time. An arrow labeled 'time' points to the right, ending at a 'recall' point marked with a green checkmark. The bottom part shows three blue vertical bars representing learning sessions crammed together. An arrow labeled 'time' points to the right, ending at a 'recall' point marked with a red X.

(a sparse text slide with visuals)

With thanks to Christine Atherton and Olivia Mitchell