

PowerPoint Overkill

Some financial planners are foregoing slick presentations for lower-tech alternatives.

By Russell Wild

July 1, 2003

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. In 1984, Microsoft created PowerPoint. And that's when things got really interesting. From that moment on, any mere mortal with a laptop could instantly create a world of lights and colors, diagrams and arrows, headings, subheadings, and bullet points. This new technology was rapidly embraced by every professional group under the sun. But one group in particular--financial planners--latched onto PowerPoint with intoxicating delight. Pie charts! Regression analysis! Standard deviation! Today, no investment seminar is complete without a slick PowerPoint production.

But some in the profession are wondering if the technology hasn't run amok. From coast to coast, financial planners are reporting clients nodding off in record numbers. Those who stay awake often look as excited as if they were watching their neighbors' slide show of their trip to Graceland.

"The PowerPoint presentation used to be refreshing, but it has gotten as tired as the old whiteboard," says Ed Baldrige, a CFP with my firm, Baldrige Asset Management in Allentown, Pa. Indeed. Baldrige, a 20-year industry veteran, has discovered through trial and error that the more personal, old-fashioned, elbow-to-elbow discussions seem to do a better job of holding audience attention and enlisting new clients.

Adviser Brent Kessel of Abacus Wealth Management in Pacific Palisades, Calif., agrees. "I've converted more clients with the personal approach than I have with any slick PowerPoint presentations," he says. "It makes sense. Money, for most people, is a very intimate subject. Discussions about money are best dealt with in an intimate manner."

Kessel adds that smaller, independent planners should be most wary of PowerPoint overkill. "People who come to an independent planner want the small-town doctor feel," he says. "If they wanted the big HMO feel, they'd be sitting down with a Merrill Lynch rep."

Three big wirehouse-type firms recently put in a bid for a \$70 million institutional account in the Atlanta area. A fourth contender for the contract was a local independent planner with a comparatively measly \$100 million under management. This planner, whom we'll call "X" since he didn't want to be identified, wound up nailing the account. And he did it without using PowerPoint.

"I hate PowerPoint," X confides. "I find it annoying. You sit there in the audience and get lulled into a kind of bullet-point coma. You often feel like the presenter isn't talking to you, but giving some kind of generic rap."

Believing that the competitors for this bid were going to pull out the big PowerPoint guns, X went a different route. "I knew I couldn't compete if I went head-to-head and tried to create a fancy presentation of my own, so I didn't even try. Instead, I walked into the presentation with a simple marker board. But I spoke to the four execs in the room--really spoke to them--for an hour. And instead of pointing to a screen and turning my back, I made eye contact the entire time and connected with them on a personal level. And I won the business," X exalts.

Adviser John Bird, president of Albion Financial Group in Salt Lake City, doesn't hate PowerPoint. "But the most powerful presentations I have attended--and given--have used no PowerPoint at all," he says.

Like X, Bird takes pride in knowing he has swiped clients from the big boys with his decidedly low-tech approach. "I know we have prospective clients who visit us after seeing Merrill or another major brokerage house. The value we can add depends on who we are, and to convey who we are, we need to make a real connection. That's easier done without PowerPoint than with it," he says. "If you are trying to convey that you are an expert in your field, then it behooves you to have the audience focused on you, not on a bunch of bullet points projected onto a screen." Baldrige adds that to convey expertise to prospective clients, you need to prepare diligently for a presentation, so that facts and figures roll off your tongue. PowerPoint is no substitute for such preparation; in fact, it often steals from it, he says. "The time spent putting together a fancy PowerPoint presentation is time spent decorating the house rather than building a strong foundation. You wind up paying more attention to fluff than to facts." Another danger in pulling together a fancy PowerPoint presentation is that it locks you into a certain format, reducing your ability to go with the flow. "With PowerPoint, you are committing to a somewhat linear presentation. You can't cut through, take detours, and go on tangents as easily," says Avery Russell Gross of Corporate Image Matters, a business development and marketing communications firm based in Houston. "You may have a wonderful PowerPoint presentation prepared, in which you plan to talk about investments, then insurance, and then estate planning," says Gross. "But after getting there, you discover that the audience isn't interested in insurance. Now what do you do?"

As with most technologies, PowerPoint can be properly used or abused. Here are some tips for maximizing the uses and minimizing the abuses.

Take size into account. Think long and hard before giving a PowerPoint presentation to any group smaller than six. A group that small demands intimacy. You're almost always better off huddling around a table and chatting.

View it as a support function. Use PowerPoint only to support your talk. It should never stand alone. The main focus should be on the podium, not on the screen. Don't let the technology become a crutch. Your main goal is to connect with the audience.

Don't overdo special effects. Special effects, such as panoramic vistas and animation, should be used sparingly, if at all. "Too much eye candy will actually detract from the message you are trying to convey," says Gross. "Too much slickness, and it looks like you're trying to trick the audience."

Be interactive. The PowerPoint process has to be interactive. A presentation should have built-in breaks where you can connect with the audience and re-establish eye contact. To do this, insert blank pages or pages that look like the presentation went black.

Be flexible. "Remember that the presentation is about them, not you," says Gross. If you need to move away from your planned presentation to satisfy the needs of your audience, then do it. "Just because you have your PowerPoint presentation all prepared doesn't mean you necessarily have to use it," he adds.

Keep it simple. Don't try to jam too much information into one visual. A good rule of thumb is to limit each visual to three or four bullet points or lines of text. Do not attempt to show the average returns of stocks, bonds, and Treasury-bills each year for the past 100 years. Remember you are trying to transmit the spirit of a message, not the nuts and bolts. If you want to share complex or detailed data, do it with handouts.

Practice your talk. Spend as much--or more--time working on your talk as you do on your PowerPoint visuals. "Have your presentation so ingrained that it just flows," advises Bird.

Have a contingency plan. Think about backup. Computers sometimes fail. "I had one client who had his entire PowerPoint presentation on the hard drive of his laptop. Then, right before a big presentation, he dropped it. Without any backup, he had to BS his way through the presentation, and he lost hours and hours of work," says Gross. Always have a backup, such as a CD-ROM or floppy disc. And have your presentation on paper, too. "Paper doesn't freeze. And the batteries don't ever go bad," says Gross.

One final point: Don't be too harsh on yourself if you see one person in a large audience start to fidget or yawn, says Baldrige. "Whether you use PowerPoint or not, whether you're a dynamic speaker or not, there's always one person in the crowd who starts to doze off for whatever reason."

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