

IS POWERPOINT RULING OUR LIVES?

by Peter Coughter, Professor

The chances are very good that you or a loved one has or will view a PowerPoint presentation today. I say this because Microsoft, the folks who invented the software, claim that 30 million PowerPoint presentations are given every day. Thirty million. Every day. If that doesn't make your blood run cold, I can't imagine what does.

I was recently asked to speak to a group of about 100 business executives at a two day conference. They told me they wanted me to go last. I'm not sure exactly why, but they tried to make it sound like a compliment. It turns out that I was the last of 15 speakers. Every one before me had used PowerPoint. And badly. It was like a clinic on how to misuse PowerPoint. I attended every presentation just to watch what happened. As the lights dimmed, out came the Crackberrys. And even the laptops. As I looked around, I saw that as the speakers went on clicking relentlessly through their "decks," attention steadily diminished to the point at which only the organizers of the event were paying any attention. And not even all of them were tuned in.

When it finally became my time to speak, one of the organizers asked if I would be using the projector that was set up and running, casting its hideous light on the screen behind me while its fan wheezed that unmistakable sound. I said, "Just leave it."

I stood there until everyone in the room quieted down and was looking at me. "Microsoft reports that there will be 30 million PowerPoint presentations given today," I started. "But they're wrong. Today there will be 29,999,999." At which point I unplugged the projector and tossed it at the wall to my left.

At first the crowd was stunned silent. They then began to clap. Then they stood up and clapped. After a while, they were all standing and clapping with big goofy grins on their faces. They were giddy with delight because someone did what they secretly wanted to do. Because someone said what they wished they could.

Needless to say, the talk went well from there. I followed one of the basic rules of effective presenting, which is to get people's attention right away. But what really interests me is the complete contempt for PowerPoint presentations that

my audience demonstrated. Yet each of the individuals in the crowd uses it personally and attends multiple shows daily. The advertising business, it seems, wouldn't exist without PowerPoint or its smarter younger brother, Keynote.

Is PowerPoint inherently evil? Of course not. It's like the NRA says about guns—guns don't kill people, people kill people. Or something like that. It's the misuse of PowerPoint that causes audiences to tune out. We all know this intuitively, but we couldn't prove it. Until now.

Last Spring, researchers at the University of New South Wales published a study in which they found that it is more difficult to process information if it is coming at you both verbally and in written form at the same time. Professor John Sweller, one of the researchers, went on to say, "The use of the PowerPoint presentation has been a disaster. It should be ditched."

While it's easy to agree with Professor Sweller, his statement seems to assume that PowerPoint always includes endless lines of text projected on the screen and read verbatim by the "presenter."

That isn't a presentation. A deck isn't a presentation. Businesspeople write the deck and think they've created a one size fits all solution to their communications challenge. But a dessert topping is not a floor wax. Apologies to Saturday Night Live.

If we're going to use a screen, let's remember that it's a visual aid. There is so much to be said about this topic, and so little space in this magazine. Let's just say this:

Design your slides. Keep them simple. Elegant even. You are the star. You are the message. Not the screen. Use restraint. Don't read the words on the screen. It's possible to use PowerPoint effectively with no words on the screen. I know an agency Media Director who does media presentations in PowerPoint with no numbers. Media with no numbers.

Ironically, PowerPoint can be a great way to show creative.

What I recommend to busy professionals is that they do even more work than they're already doing. Create a slide show, write a voiceover and write a leave behind. It's three things. Not one deck.

But if you do this creatively, in the long run, you will be far more effective.

And when it's your turn to speak, your audience will put their Crackberrys away.