



Keys to Growing Your Practice

By Joey Asher, Esq.

"PowerPoint: The Movie"

If PowerPoint were a movie, it would almost certainly be a Stephen King horror film.

In the movie, as PowerPoint turns 20 (as it did this year), its evil conquest and subjugation of the minds of the world's business people are almost complete. In a mere two decades, what was originally conceived as software to *illustrate* business presentations has come to dominate the *conception and creation* of presentations in a way that makes business people ineffective presenters and weak communicators.

Thanks in part to PowerPoint, many have forgotten the three keys to making great presentations:

- Focus on the audience rather than the machine.
- Tell stories with clear, powerful lessons.
- Rehearse.

All "PowerPoint: The Movie" needs is a hero—sort of an Arnold Schwarzenegger in business casual.

Draft Presentations on Paper

Arnold's first mission would be to alert the world that the process of creating slides has merged in our corporate brains with the process of creating a presentation. As a result, we're creating terrible presentations.

"PowerPoint: The Movie" might start with a scene that takes place thousands of times every day across America. In this scene, Judy needs to create a presentation. So she sits down at her desk, opens up her PowerPoint software, and begins using the one-size-fits-all templates to outline her message. Before long, she has created 30 or 40 slides, loaded with bullet points and sub-points. She then goes in front of her client and narrates her presentation from the slides.

Meanwhile, her listeners are busily thumbing their Blackberries. Judy has bored them with too much detail and too many slides, a lack of eye contact with her clients, and an absence of enthusiasm.

Why? Because PowerPoint encourages lots of bullet points, a boring outline format, and gratuitous graphical devices. We need to remember that PowerPoint is a program for creating visual aids that *support* the speaker's story, not for drafting presentations.

Instead of turning so quickly to PowerPoint, Judy should have tak-

en out a blank sheet of paper and a pen. She should have taken the low-tech approach taught by her grade school teachers a long time ago:

Step 1: Think about your audience. What is the business challenge that they face, and what solution can you offer? The solution should be the focus of the presentation. No PowerPoint slides will hold the audience's attention as well as simply addressing the audience's deepest concerns and suggesting action they can take now.

Step 2: Think about one, two, or three simple messages. Repeat and reinforce those messages throughout the presentation. PowerPoint makes it so easy to create voluminous slides that we often forget that the audience can't remember more than a few ideas, even if they are projected on a huge screen.

Step 3: Think of some relevant anecdotes, problems-solution stories, colorful characters, and juicy details that will illustrate and support your primary messages.

Long before PowerPoint, presenters held audiences riveted with stories. Think about the best presentations you've ever attended. What you almost certainly remember are the stories about people, not the slides.

Save Time to Rehearse

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alert the business world that we are spending so much time creating slides that are artistic masterpieces that we're failing to do the most important thing needed to succeed: rehearse.

PowerPoint is a horrible time sink. Plenty of people are great presenters without PowerPoint. No one is great without rehearsal. Rehearsing allows you to master your material, speak with passion, and connect with the audience, rather than merely reading your slides like a corporate weenie.

An architect told me recently that his firm was consistently losing competitive presentations for new business. When I asked how much they rehearsed, he admitted, "Not much." When he e-mailed to me the PowerPoint slides, it was clear that they had spent days creating gorgeous visuals.

Let's be clear. When choosing between PowerPoint and rehearsal, dump (or at least tone down) the slides. For a 30-minute presentation, use eight to 10 slides *at the most*. Spend your time rehearsing instead of graphic designing.

"PowerPoint: The Movie" can have a happy ending. We must remember that PowerPoint is a tool to help us illustrate presentations. It should not replace what has always made a presentation great: a clear, listener-focused message, stories that clarify and support the message, and lots of practice. **VE**



Joey Asher is an attorney and president of Speechworks (www.speechworks.net), a selling and communication skills coaching firm in Atlanta. He has worked with hundreds of accountants and consultants, and with dozens of firms, helping them grow their business and connect with clients. He is the author of Selling and Communication Skills for Lawyers (ALM Publishing, 2004) and Even a Geek Can Speak (Longstreet Press, 2001).