

totalpolitics

HOME OPINION FEATURES LIFE

Follow us on twitter

Search:

Home > Life

How to avoid death by Powerpoint

by Harry Witchel / 18 Jun 2009

Like Be the first of your friends to like

Harry Witchel shows how to make a slide presentation come alive For anyone in the communications business, Powerpoint presentations are a fact of life.

Harry Witchel shows how to make a slide presentation come alive

For anyone in the communications business, Powerpoint presentations are a fact of life. But far too often they're a missed opportunity, with the presenter failing to deliver the goods and the audience left looking at their watches waiting for it all to end. Whether you're pitching to a potential new client or delivering an internal report, Powerpoint can be incredibly powerful tool; but only if you know how to use it effectively.

Often, watching how a speaker behaves during a Powerpoint presentation is more revealing than anything on the slides. The flip side of the coin is that you cannot hide behind your slides. The presentation is about you, and it often fashions people's first impression of you. It can make that breakthrough moment when your boss starts respecting you, because people take seriously people who are being taken seriously. Being watched elevates you, but not if you're boring your audience.

Engaging people with your ideas depends to a massive extent on how you use your voice and body. While there is an "open and engaged" manner that body language gurus profess, there is no decree saying that everyone has to stand straight, with their arms in an open position, gazing around the crowd or just slightly above it. I have seen riveting presentations where the presenter was slightly hunched over, looking at the floor, or obviously shy. The truth is that almost any image, if you nail it, can be a winning look, from selfabsorbed professor to bashful apprentice.

The Three Commandments While there are no commandments for what you must do, there are some inviolable laws for what you must avoid. You must not be hard to hear clearly. This is absolutely rule number 1. It may seem too trivial to note, but how many presenters ask in advance about lapel microphones or background noise like air conditioning? You must not be uncomfortable in an adolescent way. To avoid reminding your audience of an embarrassed teenager, don't lean, pirouette halfway, and mumble all at once. Finally, you must not flaunt the back of your head. There is a time limit for how long you can look away from the audience, and it depends on how long your slides will keep them interested.

If your slides engross the audience, they will never notice the back of your head, so you could look at your slides indefinitely. Sadly, most slides only telegraph short messages, which is a problem if you are shy and want to disappear under your slides. Where you look governs your relationship with the audience - they look where your eyes tell them to. When you look at your slides, they look at your slides. When you look at the audience, they look at you. When you look at your notes, they look at your notes - only they can't read them and you can. Briefly referring to your notes looks precise, but reading verbatim from your notes can feel alienating - as if the real speech is on the notes and the speaker is only the messenger-boy.

Tweaking Timing Timing is everything, especially with the rate of speech. When people are restless during a talk, it is most often remedied by going faster or slower. The perceptive speaker will respond to agitation by doing the opposite of whatever he or she was just doing, like a dodgem swinging round after impact. It is unnecessary to diagnose the problem, as testing this solution is quick and imperceptible to the audience. Changing from fast to slow will give you more gravitas, while going from slow to fast will make you more urgent or clever.

More generally, after 15 to 20 minutes it is refreshing to change gears to revitalise the audience. The unbeatable change is to swap speakers, if you have that luxury. Changing the lighting is a respite - justified by a movie needing the lights dimmed, or a visual demonstration requiring the lights to come up. High risk strategies such as asking for a volunteer will instantly regain everyone's attention, although orthodox tactics such as changing topic usually suffice.

Rehearse for Questions Handling questions can be your date with destiny, showering you with

Related Articles

You're hired: The government's apprentices
by EB Young / 23 July 2010

Talking to...Matt Charman, co-writer of Greenland
by Emily Sutton / 23 February 2011

Overseas aid isn't about compassion
by Shane Greer / 02 March 2011

With Zac on the case, resistance is futile
by Caroline Crompton / 15 March 2011

IPSA needs to be scrapped
by Shane Greer / 25 March 2011

Labour councillor defects to the Lib Dems
by Caroline Crompton / 25 March 2011

ADVERTISE WITH TOTALPOLITICS

Most recent

Pics of David Cameron's wedding emerge with dancefloor details

Tory MPs join calls for Cameron to change tune on refugee crisis

Furious Hacked Off campaigners hit out over Rebekah Brooks comeback at News UK

Cameron 'will not waver' on free schools as Corbyn plans to kill them off

Plaudits for Yvette Cooper as she breaks political taboo on refugees



David Singleton
Editor

Plus: Seb Whale, Liz Bates, Josh May and Dan Bond

Tweets

TP Total Politics @TotalPolitics 11h
David Cameron's wedding - unseen pics and dancefloor details
totalpolitics.com/blog/451076/pi...

TP Total Politics @TotalPolitics 15h
Pics of David Cameron's wedding emerge with dancefloor details
totalpolitics.com/blog/451076/fr...
pic.twitter.com/jtj4YoeJ7Y

glory or infamy. Not only is the Q&A directly related to what most interests the audience, but because they are about to leave, how you handle the questions forms everyone's final impression of you. Some devious speakers plant their first question in a big audience, but a more honest stance is to rehearse a strategy for handling questions where you do not know the answer. This is essential because the Q&A is like a landmine for problems with confidence. Whatever the dodge you choose, from "we are working on that and are expecting an answer on Friday" to "nobody on earth knows the answer to that", it has to be delivered with conviction. If there are wolves that smell blood, you have to move toward them with confidence.

Harry Witchel is a leading body language expert

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.

Comments

Name: *

Email: *

Submit

Be the first to comment on this article!

Tweets

Follow

PoliticsHome
@politicshome

12h

David Cameron invited to address EU Parliament on renegotiation plans polho.me/1Upo9ib
pic.twitter.com/W6Wr8OdAJb

