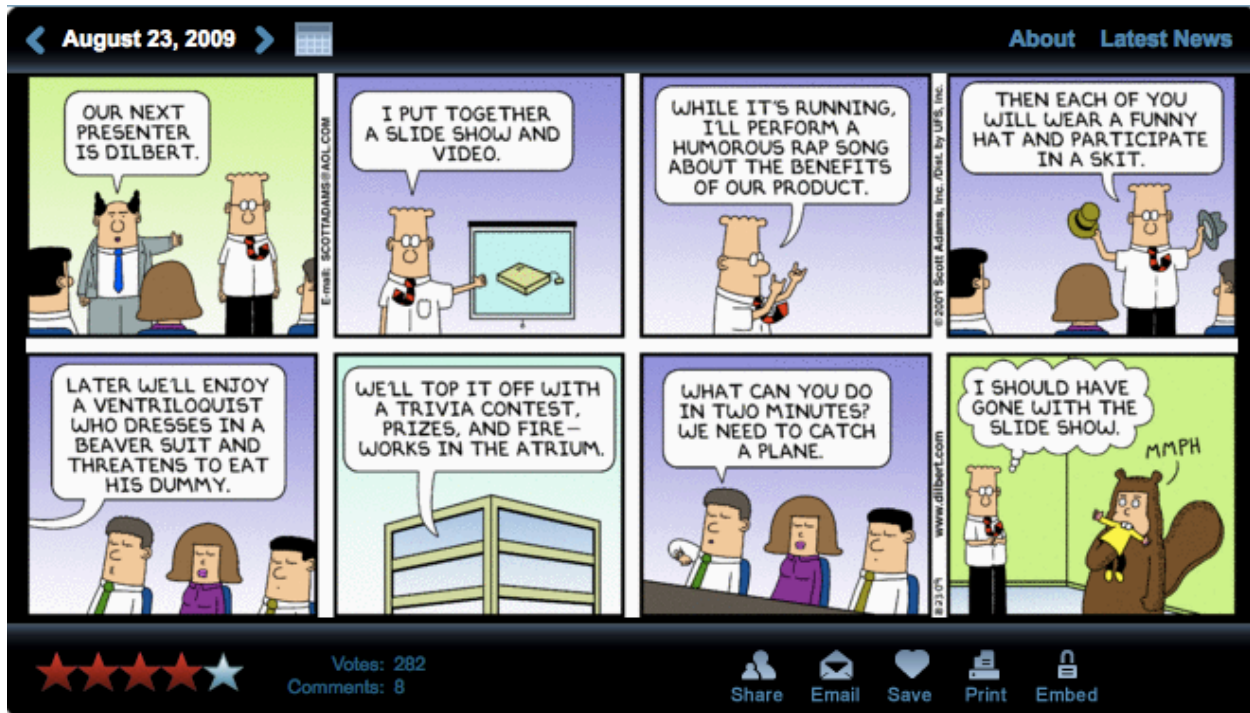


Communicating, not presenting



Goal

The professional world is competitive, confusing, and challenging. Successful leaders give presentations in order to persuade, explain, and create trust: communicate. Yet, most of us are not born communicators. And many presentations we see are not good examples from which to learn. They are boring, our minds wander, we leave feeling mildly irritated, and forget much of what was said.

All is not lost: communication is a skill that can be learned. There are two fundamental strategies you can follow to develop great presentations: focus on **STORY TELLING**, and focus on the principles of **HUMAN PERCEPTION** (so the audience gets your story effectively).

What is communication?

“Communication is the transfer of emotion”.¹ The common definition (“transfer of information to create understanding”) is not good enough. Successful professional communication requires that you

1. transfer information
2. persuade
3. make the audience care.

The last step is crucial: you want your audience to be motivated to do something (approve your project, hire you, join the team and work hard, study and learn so they have successful careers, etc.)

If you want to have a great impact on your audience, you could do worse than to emulate “Gone with the Wind”, “The Godfather”, or “To Kill a Mockingbird”. Each of these succeeded as great BOOKS as well as great MOVIES. Why? Because they told a great story.

Humans have used stories to transfer information, persuade and make their audiences feel strongly since the dawn of time. In the West we have the stories of David and Goliath, Samson and Delilah, Jesus. In India, the Mahabharata (which includes the Bhagavad Gita); in China the Adventures of the Monkey King have been told for eons to teach children important lessons. The Greeks, no slouches, had the Iliad and the Odyssey.

Organize your presentation around telling a story

A story is an “Everyday form of communication that enables a diverse [set of people] to follow the development of [an argument] and reason about the issues in it.”²

Stories are effective because they answer the fundamental questions from which we glean much of the importance of social activities:

- where are we? when? (setting the scene)
- who are we? (the protagonist – someone we care about, maybe the audience)
- why are we here? (the imbalance or conflict)
- what do we want to see happen? (the balance)
- how? (the solution)

Be sure to organize your presentation around asking and answering these questions for (or with) your audience.

The structure of a story is familiar; using this familiar structure will assist your audience in organizing, understanding and remembering the information you are transferring. Make sure your presentation is organized into

¹ Via Seth Godin, “Really Bad Powerpoint”, 2001, <http://www.sethgodin.com/freeprize/reallybad-1.pdf>. Based on research by psychologists Dolf Zillman et al. (1973, 1974)

² L. Bennett and M. Feldman. Reconstructing Reality in the Courtroom (Rutgers University Press, 1981), p. 4.

- exposition
- development
- climax
- resolution
- denouement

and takes place in the context of a well-defined set of actors, means, motives and scenes.

Design your presentation to help humans perceive your story

Above I said the goals of a communication are to transfer information, persuade your audience, and make them care. Stephen Kosslyn presents these three goals slightly differently, to show how using well-known principles of human cognition can bring you success. His three goals for communication:

1. Connect with your audience (emotionally)
2. Direct and hold their attention
3. Promote memory and understanding³

He then devotes his book to detailing eight well-established principles of human cognition – how people receive, process and make sense of information – that you can use to help you establish these goals.

These principles should seem familiar. We teach them in SI 500 (week 3 this year, 2009). Mark Newman teaches them in more depth in SI 688, Fundamentals of Human Behavior. We come back to them in many classes.

Connect

1. The Principle of Relevance: Communication is most effective when neither too much nor too little is presented. Build the presentation around the take-home point. Give people what they need, but nothing more.
2. The Principle of Appropriate Knowledge: Communication requires prior knowledge of pertinent concepts, jargon, symbols: "know your audience", Use care in choice of language. Select familiar, informative ways to present data. Build on common ground with the audience, often by using familiar examples.

Direct and hold attention

3. The Principle of Saliency. Attention is drawn to large perceptible differences. You can use this for good or bad: using large differences to draw attention that is not informative results in distraction. Humans naturally attend to large differences in place (caused by motion), bright or bold patterns, loud noises. Use these, judiciously.

³ Stephen M. Kossly, Clear and to the Point: 8 Psychological Principles for Compelling PowerPoint Presentations (Oxford University Press, 2007).

4. The Principle of Discriminability. Two properties must differ by a large enough proportion or they will not be distinguished. People in the back will not see small text in a table – that table is useless to them. Use contrast between background and typeface color.
5. The Principle of Perceptual Organization (aka “Gestalt”). People group objects into units (and other related effects). Use the Gestalt principles to design layout of an illustration. Also for the timing of your talk: insert pauses to separate things. Put facts together that are related to each other.

Promote understanding and memory

6. The Principle of Compatibility. A message is easiest to understand if its form is compatible with its meaning. Cf. the Stroop effect (1935). Edward Tufte has a fabulous book showing (with gorgeous illustrations) ways in which people destroy or distort communication by using graphics that are not compatible with the message.⁴
7. The Principle of Capacity Limitations. Humans have limits on the amount of incoming stimuli they can process in a short period of time; to use high bandwidth, need the stimuli to be very organized to have meaning (e.g., a classical symphony). Humans also have severe limits on how much they can remember in the short-term, and then they need time and attention to process that information into long-term memory. Respect their limits.

Presentation tips

From JMM

1. Prepare your story before opening your slide software. Use a standard storytelling structure. I like the template available from http://sociablemedia.com/resources_bookdownloads.php4.
2. Stand up, move around. Movement attracts attention, and you want people to be paying attention to you, so you can transfer your information and your emotion.
3. Express your feelings. Be passionate about your main point.
4. Have water nearby: talkers get dehydrated.
5. Never apologize.
6. Use silence (pauses): gives emphasis, creates anticipation.
7. Rehearse. Rehearse again. Best presentations don't use cue cards.
8. Don't, please, please, for God's sake, don't use bullet point slides.

From Godin

1. Use cue cards. Don't project your script on the screen.
2. Make slides that reinforce your words, not repeat them.

⁴ Edward Tufte, The Visual Display of Quantitative Information (Graphic Press, Cheshire, CT, 1983).

3. Create a leave-behind document. Tell audience you'll give it to them at the end. Not at the beginning: They'll read it rather than listen to you.
4. Create a feedback cycle: If seeking approval, hand out an approval form. If seeking learning, build in questions and pop quizzes.

Further reading

Cliff Atkinson, Beyond Bullet Points: Using Microsoft PowerPoint to Create Presentations That Inform, Motivate, and Inspire (Microsoft Press, 2005)

Stephen M. Kossly, Clear and to the Point: 8 Psychological Principles for Compelling PowerPoint Presentations (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Edward Tufte, The Visual Display of Quantitative Information (Graphic Press, Cheshire, CT, 1983).

Example

Attached is the story template that I worked out, in full, before I made my first slide for the presentation I gave on this topic.

<h1>Communicating, not presenting</h1> <h2>By Jeff MacKie-Mason</h2>		
Act I: Set up the story		
The setting	The professional world is competitive, confusing, and challenging	
The protagonist	Successful leaders need to persuade, explain, and create trust: communicate.	
The imbalance	Most of us are not born communicators.	
The balance	Communication is a skill that can be learned.	
The solution	Focus on story <i>telling</i> and story <i>perceiving</i> , not presenting. (You can become GREAT communicators!)	
Act II: Develop the action		
5-Minute Column: How?	15-Minute Column:	45-Minute Column:
What is communication?	"Communication is the transfer of emotion." (Godin)	That is: Convey information and understanding
	Do you want to have as much effect on your audience as "Gone with the Wind", "The Godfather", or "To Kill a Mockingbird" (both books and movies)?	Persuade Make them care Then tell a great story
Examples		David and Goliath, parables, life of Jesus
		Wizard of Oz, ET, Casablanca, Titanic
		Mahabharata (story of the civil war between sons of Kuru and sons of Pandu; includes the Bhagavad Gita)
		Adventures of the Monkey King
		Iliad & Odyssey

	<p>What is a story?</p>	<p>“Everyday form of communication that enables a diverse [set of people] to follow the development of [an argument] and reason about the issues in it.” Bennett and Feldman p. 4</p>
<p>Learn to <i>tell</i> stories</p>	<p>Why are stories effective?</p>	<p>Much of the meaning and importance of social activities depends on who? what? why? when? where?</p> <p>The structure of a story is familiar, which aids organizing, understanding and remembering information: Exposition, development, climax, resolution, denouement in the context of a set of defined actors, means, motives and scenes.</p> <p>A plot assimilates disjointed information into a coherent framework</p> <p>Examples: Recounting vacation trip; presenting a case in court; telling a friend about a new love interest</p>
	<p>Key elements to telling a story (see Aristotle, “Poetics”)</p>	<p>Setting (“where are we? when?”)</p> <p>Protagonist (“who are we?”)</p> <p>Imbalance/conflict (“why are we here?”)</p> <p>Balance (“what do we want to see happen?”)</p> <p>Solution (“how?”)</p>
		<p>Connect with your audience (emotionally)</p>

Stories work best that respect human perception	Story telling goals (Kosslyn)	Direct and hold their attention
		Promote understanding and memory
	Connect	1. Relevance
		2. Appropriate knowledge
	Direct and hold attention	3. Saliience
		4. Discriminability
		5. Perceptual organization
	Promote understanding and memory	6. Compatibility
7. Informative changes		
8. Capacity limitations		
Turning point	Can you learn to use the skills of good communication?	
Act III: Frame the resolution		
The crisis	We are not born as great professional communicators	
The solution	Focus on story <i>telling</i> and story <i>perceiving</i> , not presenting.	
The climax	Great communicators are made, not born.	
The resolution	Communication, not presentation (Questions?)	

Beyond Bullet Points Story Template © 2005 Cliff Atkinson www.sociablemedia.com