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The curse of PowerPoint®

by Lawrence Kutner, Ph.D.

Many of the finest professional speakers I know refuse to use PowerPoint® or other so-called speaker support media because it can interfere with both the message and the relationship between the speaker and the audience. I rarely use it unless I'm teaching a half-day or full-day workshop. (I also prefer Apple's Keynote® when I need this type of program.)

I recently gave a presentation to the senior executives of a corporate client in New York. I followed a consultant from Bain & Company, one of the big management consulting firms. His 45-minute presentation contained at least 100 PowerPoint® slides, most with a chart or two, as well as text. Most of his oral presentation was a replication of the information that was on the slides. It was completely mind-numbing.

When he had finished, and I was introduced by the Senior Vice President, I walked over to the projector, put a book in front of the lens to block the light, and said, "For the next hour, I declare this a PowerPoint®-free zone!" The executives broke out into applause.

Too many people, like this consultant from Bain, use PowerPoint® and other speaker support media as crutches. They essentially read from the slides. The audience, therefore, pays attention primarily to the visual images instead of the speaker, and moves at its own pace. This means that the speaker has lost control of the audience.

Another problem with PowerPoint® and similar systems is that speakers get carried away with fancy visual transitions and sound effects. In fact, a few years ago the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent a memo to officers at the Pentagon asking them to stop using sound effects like explosions and cannon fire in their PowerPoint® presentations. Things had simply gotten out of control.

Speaker support media, whether it's a flip chart or a big-screen video program, have their place—but only when they complement what the speaker is saying, not when they simply parrot it. I suggest that you focus your speeches on useful content and good stories, and do them at first without any support materials. Only after you have a speech polished should you think about what might be gained if you added a bit of technology.