

The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint

GERSTNER's blunt action shutting down the projector suggests that there are better tools for doing business analysis than reading aloud from bullet lists: "*Let's just talk about your business.*" Indeed, Gerstner later asked IBM executives to write out their business strategies in longhand using the presentation methodology of *sentences*, with subjects and predicates, nouns and verbs, which then combine sequentially to form *paragraphs*, an analytic tool demonstratively better than slideware bullet lists.²

"*Let's just talk about your business*" indicates a thoughtful exchange of information, a mutual interplay between speaker and audience, rather than a pitch made by a power pointer pointing to bullets. PowerPoint is *presenter-oriented, not content-oriented, not audience-oriented*. PP advertising is not about content quality, but rather presenter therapy: "A cure for the presentation jitters." "Get yourself organized." "Use the AutoContent Wizard to figure out what you want to say."

PowerPoint's convenience for some presenters is costly to the content and the audience. These costs arise from the *cognitive style characteristic of the standard default PP presentation*: foreshortening of evidence and thought, low spatial resolution, an intensely hierarchical single-path structure as the model for organizing every type of content, breaking up narratives and data into slides and minimal fragments, rapid temporal sequencing of thin information rather than focused spatial analysis, conspicuous chartjunk and PP Phluff, branding of slides with logotypes, a preoccupation with format not content, incompetent designs for data graphics and tables, and a smirky commercialism that turns information into a sales pitch and presenters into marketeers.

PowerPoint comes with a big attitude. Other than video games, not many computer programs have attitudes. Effective tools such as web browsers, Word, Excel, Photoshop, and Illustrator are not accompanied by distinctive cognitive styles that reduce the intellectual level of the content passing through the program.

Nonetheless, PowerPoint may benefit the bottom 10% of all presenters. PP forces them to have *points*, some points, any points. Slideware perhaps helps inept speakers get their act together, outline talks, retrieve visual materials, present slides. Furthermore, PP probably doesn't cause much damage to really first-rate presenters, say the top 10%, who have strong content, self-awareness, and their own analytical style that avoids or neutralizes the PP style. This leaves 80%, workaday presenters for whom the PP cognitive style may cause trouble, especially for those seeking to present evidence and serious analysis.

In practice, PP slides are very low resolution compared to paper, many computer screens, and the immense visual capacities of the human eye-brain system. With little information per slide, many many slides are needed. Audiences endure a relentless sequentiality, one damn slide after

² Gordon Shaw, Robert Brown, Philip Bromiley, "Strategic Stories: How 3M is Rewriting Business Planning," *Harvard Business Review*, 76 (May-June, 1998), 42-44.

