You show me yours

GORDON LAING REVEALS THE SECRET TO **PUTTING ON A GOOD SHOW** AND SPREADING YOUR MESSAGE.

YOUR BIG IDEA MUST BE HEARD BY THE world. Perhaps the boss wants to know what's going on, or it's time for the team to catch up on the status of a project. Or you could be pitching for business to potential clients. Whatever the reason, if you have something to say in a business environment, the chances are you will have to make a presentation.

Marker pens and pads still have their place, but the modern media-hardened audience hungers for something more slick. They may desire basic information, but by packaging this the right way, with graphics and multimedia, you will keep their attention and they will remember your message for longer than five minutes.

It goes without saying that technology is there to help you. But is making a presentation

as simple as knocking out your words in PowerPoint? What kind of display should you use? Is your audience going to come to you, or are you going to go to them? Is your equipment portable? Then again, with broadcasting over an intranet or the internet, maybe there's no need for you to meet face to face at all.

To help with these questions, we've considered all aspects of preparing a presentation, including how to deliver it in the most appropriate manner and choosing the right equipment to back you up. We've even thought about technique. By applying our tips to future presentations, you can be confident your message will be understood by the right people in the easiest, most enjoyable and hence most memorable fashion.

Software

Long ago, the presentation graphics software market was very much like word processing or spreadsheets, with many products competing for your money. Today, almost the entire office application market is bundled into suites, with just two key players battling it out – Microsoft with Office and Lotus with SmartSuite. Their presentation graphics packages are, respectively, the ubiquitous PowerPoint and Freelance.

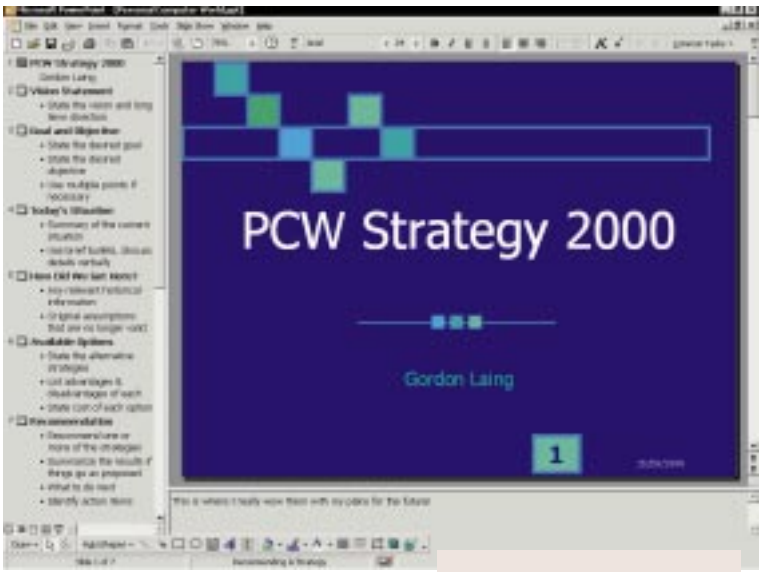
We could launch into a detailed discussion weighing up the pros and cons of each package, but to be perfectly honest, the decision as to which you use is almost entirely down to which one came bundled with your PC or was bought by your company. The battle that Microsoft and Lotus are fighting is not for direct sales to individual customers, but for PC OEMs that will license a suite across an entire range, resulting in a large installed base – think Dell with Microsoft Office and Time with Lotus SmartSuite.

If you already have presentation graphics software as part of either Office or SmartSuite, we cannot recommend switching to the other. It's not just down to PowerPoint versus Freelance anyway. Lotus only sells Freelance as part of SmartSuite, and although Microsoft will sell you PowerPoint separately, you'd be a bit of a fool not to go for the whole Office suite. So, you're looking at word processing, spreadsheet and contact management software too.

One word of warning, however. Microsoft sells several versions of its Office suite and, unforgivably, the Small Business Edition does not come with PowerPoint. Beware, as this is the version usually bundled with PCs. It's particularly frustrating since Office Standard, which comes with PowerPoint, costs the same to new users as Office SBE – about £330, compared with £300 for SmartSuite. PowerPoint 2000 by itself costs £239, but SBE 2000 users, along with anyone who owns an earlier version of Office, can upgrade to Office 2000 Standard Edition for £155, Professional for £199, or Premium for £279. It's a nasty trick not throwing PowerPoint into the SBE, but upgrading an existing copy is still cheaper than switching to SmartSuite.

We can, however, recommend the latest versions of both suites – Office 2000 and SmartSuite Millennium – particularly when you consider the entire package. Freelance and PowerPoint have never been easier to use, but the products still come up with new tricks. Internet is the buzzword for both suites and you can now save your slides as HTML and post them on a website for anyone with a browser to see, or even schedule a presentation to be broadcast across an intranet or the internet. In this instance, your audience point their browsers at a pre-announced website and watch your presentation in real time. As long as there's sufficient bandwidth, you can even supply audio and video to accompany the slides, but this is really only for IT-mad companies with fast intranets.

www.microsoft.com
www.lotus.com

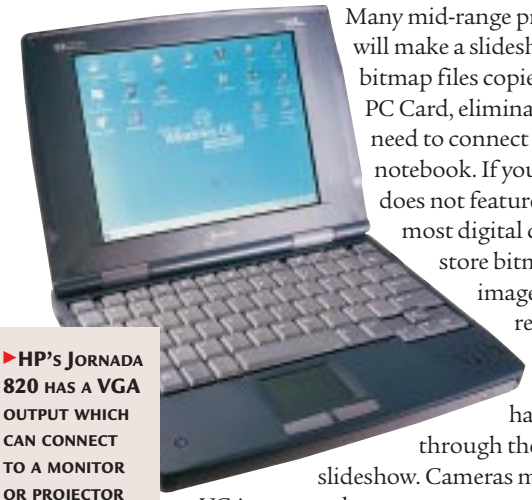


▲ CREATING PRESENTATIONS IS A DODDLE WITH POWERPOINT. IF YOU'RE FEELING UNINSPIRED, IT CAN EVEN WORK OUT A SERIES OF SLIDES BASED ON STRATEGY, BRAINSTORMING OR PRESENTING BAD NEWS

Delivery

What if, horror of horrors, you've prepared a presentation but the PC it's being shown on does not have either PowerPoint or Freelance installed? Fortunately, both packages can export the presentation with a compact standalone viewer and can even bundle the fonts if desired. Then again, you may want to turn your presentation into an Acrobat PDF file, which can cut down on file sizes and boast wide cross-platform compatibility – great for emailing.

Presentation packages also allow you to render each frame into a bitmap file at a specified resolution. While you can view them with almost any software, the point is to allow for more



▶HP's Jornada 820 has a VGA output which can connect to a monitor or projector

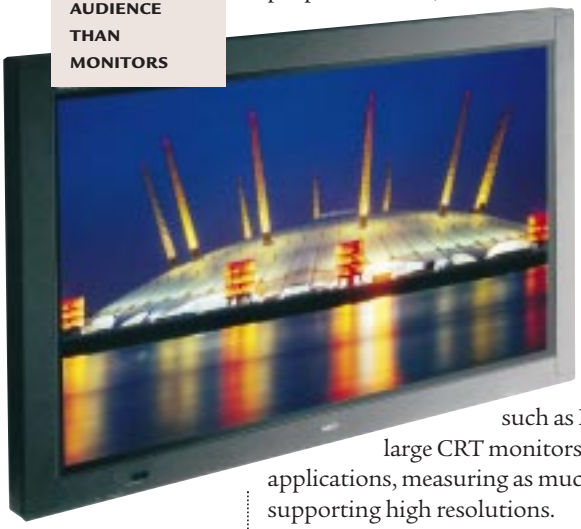
cunning means of delivery. Many mid-range projectors will make a slideshow from bitmap files copied onto a PC Card, eliminating the need to connect a PC or notebook. If your projector does not feature slots, most digital cameras store bitmapped images on removable cards and will happily cycle through them as a slideshow. Cameras may not have VGA outputs, but most pump out composite video which can produce a fair image on a TV set.

Windows CE Professional edition also allows PDAs to open (but not modify) PowerPoint presentations. The displays may be tiny, but most higher-end CE machines, such as HP's Jornada 820, boast VGA outputs, which could be connected to a monitor or even a projector.

Displays

Broadcasting your slides over the internet may offer unique advantages, but the majority of presentations today and in the future will be made in person with the help of some kind of display. There are plenty of options, but you should choose a display based simply on your budget, the number of people in your audience and the kind of room in which they will be.

Personal presentations to fewer than three people can be made with a large notebook screen, eliminating the need for any kind of projector or TV screen. Many desktop replacement notebooks with large 15in displays are designed with that purpose in mind, but watch out for potentially limited viewing angles. If there are fewer than 10 people in the audience, a large computer monitor can do the trick – large text on a 21in monitor can be seen quite easily from a few feet back. Companies such as NEC also produce large CRT monitors for presentation applications, measuring as much as 37in and supporting high resolutions.



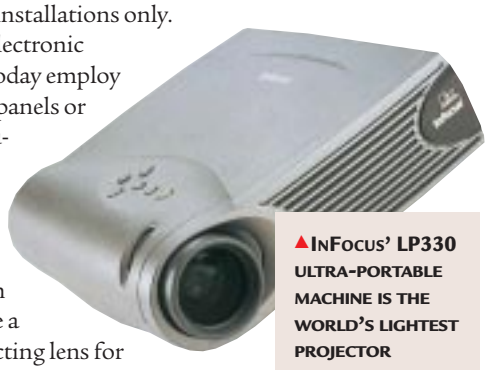
▼Plasma displays reach a larger audience than monitors

Beyond the mid-30in sizes, CRT and LCD monitors become impractical, leaving the market open to other technologies. Plasma display panels are becoming increasingly popular, with their large, bright images, wide viewing angles and slim footprints. You'll find them used for public announcements in stations or airports. Today, they are most commonly available in 42in or 50in diagonals with 16:9 widescreen aspect ratio, for between £5,000 and £13,000. However, like large CRTs, plasma displays are usually too big and heavy for anything other than a permanent installation.

Projectors

For a really big picture, plus the benefits of a relatively small box, you should consider an electronic projector. Almost all offer basic audio capabilities so you don't need to carry speakers around. Most also feature serial ports that connect to the mouse port on your PC or notebook, allowing the projector's remote control to take over the on-screen pointer.

Old-fashioned three-gun CRT projectors may still boast high resolutions and excellent quality, but they're large, difficult to set up and for permanent installations only.



▲InFocus' LP330 ultra-portable machine is the world's lightest projector

Almost all electronic projectors today employ either LCD panels or Texas Instruments' DLP (digital light processing) system, both of which use a single projecting lens for easy focusing, zoom capabilities and quick setup. Many high-end LCD and DLP models are also eating into the traditional CRT permanent installation market.

LCD projectors are most like traditional slide projectors, in that they use a transparent image sandwiched between a bulb and a lens. In all but the cheapest models, you'll find three LCD panels – one each for red, green and blue light. So-called three-chip devices are the ones to go for because single-chip designs are disappointing, particularly in colour performance.

DLP uses a small chip called a digital micromirror device, or DMD, which consists of a matrix of tiny mirrors – one for each pixel. The mirrors can assume positions to either reflect light through the lens or bounce it to an absorption area. By quickly switching the mirrors on and off, a DMD can produce an image for projection. One advantage of DMD is that the gaps between adjacent mirrors are smaller than those between LCD cells, so there's less of a grid effect on a big screen. Single-chip DLP projectors have considerably smaller optical assemblies than

three-chip LCDs and tend to be found in ultra-portable projectors. However, LCD transmission has become more efficient over the years, which, coupled with the comparatively small size of DLP chips, allows LCD projectors to boast higher brightness on average models.

Size

Projectors typically fall into one of three categories: ultra-portable, transportable and fixed. Ultra-portables are small, light and designed to be carried with a notebook. Believe it or not, some are thinner than 3in and weigh less than 3kg. In a bag small enough to fit in an overhead locker, you could carry everything you need to make a full multimedia presentation, including a PC and projector capable of producing a large image.

Mid-range transportables are yesterday's ultra-portables, but weighing around 7kg, they are best kept within the same building and lugged into meeting rooms as and when required. They tend to offer better specifications than ultra-portables, with higher resolutions, brighter images, longer zoom lenses, extra inputs, better audio capability, and PC Card slots which can play back entire presentations without a PC or notebook. Some even allow pointing devices to draw or annotate on the projected image like an electronic whiteboard.

Fixed projectors are designed for permanent installation at venues used regularly for large presentations or shows. Essentially, they're scaled-up transportables, with brighter images and high resolutions capable of projecting huge images across long distances – think 300in images. They may be used to project video more often than the other two categories. However, with size comes lack of portability. These are the type of projector you screw to the ceiling of your venue and leave there.

Location

Image size is a crucial consideration. A zoom lens may be able to slightly enlarge the image for fine adjustments, but the biggest changes are made by moving the projector closer to or further away from the screen. If you have a specific distance and image size in mind, make sure your projector will do it. NEC's transportable MT830G+ can produce an image of between 20in and 300in at a distance of between 1m and 12m. To produce a 100in image, it needs to be between 4m and 5m from the screen. When locating your unit, bear in mind that the bright lamps become hot and need cooling fans. And it's not until you've sat close to a projector that you realise how noisy they can be.

Specifications

If you're in the market for a projector, you should be considering four basic specifications: brightness, resolution, weight and price. Brightness, measured in ANSI Lumens, is probably the most important specification, because it defines how dark the room has to be for a certain size image to be clearly seen. As you enlarge your image it grows dimmer, while rooms with high ambient light levels already pose a challenge. If you're presenting in a room without curtains or you want a big image, you'll need high projector brightness.

Today's ultra-portable and transportable projectors typically feature between 600 and 1,200 ANSI Lumen brightness. In a room with fair ambient light conditions (not direct sunlight but not dark either), a 600 Lumen projector should happily produce a bright 36in image, while a 1,200 Lumen model will produce bright images up to 100in. However, like resolution on scanners and pages per minute on printers, brightness spec is fast becoming a marketing numbers game, with some less scrupulous manufacturers making false claims or suggesting unnecessary power for a given environment. Above 1,500 Lumens is generally bright enough for all but the largest images or brightest environments, but avoid anything below 600 Lumens. Watch out for lamp life, too. At up to £400 each, you should be looking for about 2,000 hours worth of use.

Bright lamps become hot and need cooling fans. And it's not until you've sat close to a projector that you REALISE HOW NOISY they can be

Resolution

In terms of resolution, think of a projector in the same way as you would a monitor. Although scaling tricks can be performed, they have a maximum image resolution, typically VGA (640x480), SVGA (800x600) or XGA (1,024x768). The higher the resolution, the more expensive the device, although you may be surprised to learn that bigger isn't necessarily better. Average PowerPoint slides look fine when projected at SVGA resolution and unless you need to project fine details in diagrams or tiny spreadsheet cells, you shouldn't really need anything higher than 800x600. Remember, the projector is only for presenting a slide, not for creating it.

Like LCD monitors, all LCD and DLP projectors have a native resolution referring to

ALL PRESENT AND ACCOUNTED FOR

When preparing a presentation, remember those you have attended that were useful and enjoyable, as well as any disasters. Learn from them, try not to make the same mistakes and, unless you're presenting to the same group of people, feel free to nick their best tricks.

Know your audience. If they're beginners, don't blind them with science and if they're experts, don't talk down. By understanding their needs you'll make a better presentation.

Where possible, know your venue too. A little reconnaissance beforehand will reveal tricky steps or glaring lights and enable you to check whether you can be seen or heard at the back. Always try the projection system with your computer before the event, or make sure the system at the venue can read your files. More time is lost and more stress generated trying to get projectors to talk to computers than at any other part of a presentation. That's why many people take no risks and bring their own notebook and ultra-portable projector.

When it comes to preparing slides, many presenters end up writing a near-complete script. This may be suitable for stage actors learning a play, but no-one wants to be faced with thousands of words on a screen. Do write notes, but prepare your slides with condensed information in bullet points. The slides are there to announce a new subject or hammer home a brief message. If you're presenting on behalf of a company, it's good practice to use official logos or stick to an agreed set of colours for your slides. If several people are presenting in succession, it may or may not be appropriate to use the same template designs.

Use the slides as a springboard for a detailed verbal discussion, tailored to your audience's preferences. Never read the words off the screen. The screen is only there to back up what you are saying and if you turn around too many times to check it out, your audience will pay more attention to it than to you.

Printed copies are also useful, but it's best to keep them until the end. If you provide a printout before you begin, your audience may skip ahead and spoil any surprises you had planned; they'll also have time to prepare a nasty question about later slides.

The key to all presentations is to be aware of human attention span. Media trainers have long advised presenters to choose no more than three key messages and to stick to them. Any more and your audience will be bored, and you've probably strayed off track. If you only choose one form of backup for your speech, make sure it's a piece of paper with these key messages noted. By sticking to these short messages, you'll ensure the audience goes away remembering what you're about. Finally, if you keep your presentation short and relevant, you'll make friends. Avoid monotone speech, then throw in a joke to lighten things up and they may even ask you back.

the number of horizontal and vertical pixels they have. You can supply signals of higher or lower resolutions, but the device will be forced to scale the image appropriately, with varying results. Some projectors claim they have superior scaling, but our advice is to set your PC or notebook to output a signal at the projector's native resolution.

Advanced projectors can re-scale an image so that the sides slope in or out from each other. This so-called keystone correction allows a correct square image to be projected when the unit is aiming downwards or upwards. Inferior projectors may crop the image to straighten the edges, so choose a model with intelligent keystone scaling.

Weight/price

Weight and price are obvious specifications. If you're going to be carrying a projector around all the time, go for something that weighs no more than 4kg. As far as budget is concerned, projectors are ideal devices to share among a company or department, so several thousand pounds may be affordable after all. Many companies rent projectors, so you can try out a model first.

Price-wise, on the transportable front, NEC's MT830+ (1,250 Lumen, SVGA, LCD, 7.3kg) costs £3,000, while its higher-resolution MT1030+ model (1,100 Lumen, XGA, LCD, 7.3kg) weighs in at £4,000. As far as ultra-portables are concerned, InFocus' tiny LP330 is the world's lightest (650 Lumen, XGA, DLP, 2.2kg) and costs just under £5,500, while its LP400 (700 Lumen, SVGA, DLP, 3.09kg) costs a more palatable £2,285. Pico Direct's PDS700 ultra-portable (700 Lumen, SVGA, LCD, 3.7kg) costs £2,695. Sony's transportable VPLS900E (1,100 Lumen, SVGA, LCD, 5.9kg) costs £3,995, and its lighter VPL-PX1 (1,000 Lumen, XGA, LCD, 4kg) costs £4,750. These figures (ex VAT) give you an idea of how much a particular type of projector will cost, and we can recommend models from any of the companies listed in our contacts box. ❐

PCW CONTACTS

PROJECTOR INFORMATION

Epson
www.epson.co.uk

InFocus
www.infocus.com

NEC UK
www.screengods.co.uk

Pico Direct
www.picodirect.co.uk

Proxima
www.proxima.com

Sony
www.pro.sony-europe.com

Texas Instruments DLP
www.ti.com/dlp