

Title:

Presentation Skills - The First To Know

Word Count:

743

Summary:

To fully understand the rules that govern just how much information you can include in your presentation slides, you need to appreciate a fundamental of human nature - namely, that we have an innate desire to be The First to Know.

Unfortunately, most of the presentation visuals that we see are designed with the mistaken belief that audiences will actually wait for the presenter to walk them through them. Wrong.

When the technology of communications was slower, we took ...

Keywords:

public speaking, presentations, presentation skills, presentation design

Article Body:

To fully understand the rules that govern just how much information you can include in your presentation slides, you need to appreciate a fundamental of human nature - namely, that we have an innate desire to be The First to Know.

Unfortunately, most of the presentation visuals that we see are designed with the mistaken belief that audiences will actually wait for the presenter to walk them through them. Wrong.

When the technology of communications was slower, we took a more historical approach to news - news was about what happened. We were accustomed to waiting for the news, and news had a time: Did you see the morning paper? Did you hear the evening news?

But with electronic advancements, we came to think of news more in terms of what is happening at the moment. Film brought us motion, but video feeds brought us there. Screens eclipsed paper as the preferred venue for getting the latest. Newspapers folded, first afternoon editions and then even icons of Americana - think Herald Tribune. Instead of being the first source of news in the world, to survive newspapers became more feature oriented - providing value only for less perishable and less immediate content.

Cable News Network took a huge gamble that people all over the world would watch news twenty-four hours a day - news on the people's timetable, not the providers. News on demand. Fulfillment for those with the desire to be "the first to know."

What does all this have to do with presentation design? You don't need to be a news junkie to share a basic trait of humans and other intelligent animals - curiosity. Curiosity is basic to survival, and we have evolved as creatures who need to learn what we can quickly. So this same desire that humans have to be the first to know translates to every event that involves new information uptake. During a presentation, audience members want the same control, and are basically unwilling to wait for you, the presenter, to help them be the first to know.

Once the curiosity about a slide has been satisfied, audience members usually will give the presenter their attention.

But when a new slide first appears on the screen, all eyes, like moths to the flame, tune to the new image, and immediately begin the race to be the first to know what the slide is all about. It's not their fault! They're human!

Only when every member of the audience is thoroughly convinced that they know exactly what the slide means will they lend their attention back to what you are saying.

And until this point you realistically might as well not be there. Oh, sure, you can act as most do and begin to describe the elements in the slide, but for all intents and purposes, it matters little what you do. You could drop your pants. You could leave the room. You could tell off-color jokes. But until the audience has determined for themselves exactly what all the data and word tracks on the screen mean to them, you have approximately 0% of their attention.

With most of the slides we see in business presentations today, this is where the disaster begins. You see, the typical slide contains so much information that a typical audience member would need more than 30 seconds just to read the material, much less absorb it. The reading process is delayed, though, because first the viewer tries to decide for herself where to begin, and which piece of information is most important. Clues to the relative value of the information are often erroneous, however, as audiences base them on such things as the size of the type or placement on the screen.

For this reason, you must ask yourself how long it will take the average person

to discover for themselves all the information you have in your slide. The more time it takes the average person to absorb and assimilate the information they see, the greater the chance you have to lose your audience.

So what does this tell us? Of course, there is only one truly viable solution, and that is to limit, by all means possible, the amount of information that is released with each click of your mouse.

The less time it takes the audience to discern the new information, the sooner they'll get back to you and start to listen to what you really mean to "say" on the slide.