LIFE AFTER POWERPOINT

eyeful presentations

TOP SALES WORLD
INSPIRING THE GLOBAL SALES COMMUNIT

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It seems there are few things as divisive as sales presentations. Sales and marketing professionals will happily debate late into the night the merits or sins of credentials presentations, the use of new technology (PowerPoint vs Keynote vs Prezi), optimum lengths, font sizes and animations... the list goes on. Everyone has an opinion and the problem is that most of them are valid(ish).

So, faced with the task of enhancing your current sales deck, where do you turn? Sharing a story seems a logical starting point, and the panel below summarises a recent challenge.

IDENTIFYING KEY ISSUES

A quick review of the existing decks identified the issues – it was packed to the rafters with data, statistics and legal caveats that did little to build need or instil confidence in the solution for the prospect. The majority of slides were horribly generic, leaving the audience with the feeling that they were on the receiving end of a "canned" presentation – while those created for specific opportunities were patchy at best (and the less said about the "brand police" response the better).

All of this would be troublesome on small ticket sales, but with an average order value of over £2m, it was quickly becoming a major issue.

The solution meant pulling all internal customer stakeholders together and running them through a presentation optimisation process, to define a clear and valuable message and then develop structure, content and engagement around it.

CASE STUDY

OUR CLIENT:

Global IT solutions provider

THE PRESENTER(S):

EMEA sales team

THEIR AUDIENCE:

C-suite in the financial services sector

THE BACK STORY:

The EMEA sales director contacted us in a panic. He had come to the conclusion that their existing presentation collateral was more of a hindrance than a help in most meetings. It was felt that the presentation did little to build a relationship with the prospect and had been created in isolation by the marketing team. The result was that many of the sales team had fallen into one of two camps:

1. Creating their own versions of sales decks by stitching together a patchwork quilt of slides, begged, borrowed or stolen from colleagues or historical PowerPoints (something we call Presentationstein)

2. Ditching the corporate story completely and, in their own words, winging it with homemade slides created for specific opportunities.

Underpinning all of this was a complete over-reliance on PowerPoint. It seemed that nothing was discussed with prospects or clients without a long and overly dense set of PowerPoint slides.

Something had to change.

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UNDERSTANDING THE AUDIENCE

The first step in the process was to gain a firm understanding of the audience. Our client had fallen into the age old trap of assuming a lot of things about the people they were pitching to – they were senior, short on time and buying on a mix of features and price. These were all plausible, but ultimately flawed, assumptions.

We employed an "audience heat map" process to dig deeper and understand more about why the prospect was willing to give up their valuable time to hear our client's story. The conclusion was eye-opening – yes, there was a strong factual pull within the audience, such as a desire for return on investment (ROI) and features, but the "visionary" element that related to long-term innovation and strategic benefits was equally strong.

In their rush to deliver a strong business case message to their audience, our client had forgotten that investments of £2m plus were also about supporting their audience's longer-term strategy. This simple exercise highlighted that the tactical ROI calculator-type approach, while valuable to sections of their audience, was dismissive of others and left them cold.

AUDIENCE-CENTRIC MESSAGING

With this revelation ringing in our ears, we recognised that chasing one killer message was ultimately naïve and unlikely to resonate with this more complex audience and so we began the development of three key messages. This also allowed the workshop participants to debate the merits of a range of messages rather than just fiercely protecting their own standpoint.

The key was ensuring that the messages elevated themselves above the generic value proposition clichés that lurk in most presentations, in this case recognising the fast-moving (and frequently scary) changes in sector specific customer behaviour, the stakes surrounding compliance, and referencing high profile failures in their industry. These were messages that formed the foundation of a connection with the prospect way beyond the traditional "save money, improve efficiency" value propositions blindly touted by their competitors. Yes, they took more time to develop but the impact they delivered was far beyond anything our client had previously experienced.

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TOOLING UP

Perhaps the biggest challenge was the major overhaul to the presentation format. Based on our "drains up" review, we recognised that we needed to go beyond PowerPoint to include hardcopy and tablet versions. Step one was to move away from a linear presentation to an interactive toolkit, compelling presenters to engage in a more intimate, conversational style. The new structure allowed them to drill down to information in response to their customers' interest rather than working from slide to slide in a lecture style. This broke down barriers, allowing the presenter to respond to questions in a much more natural but authoritative way.

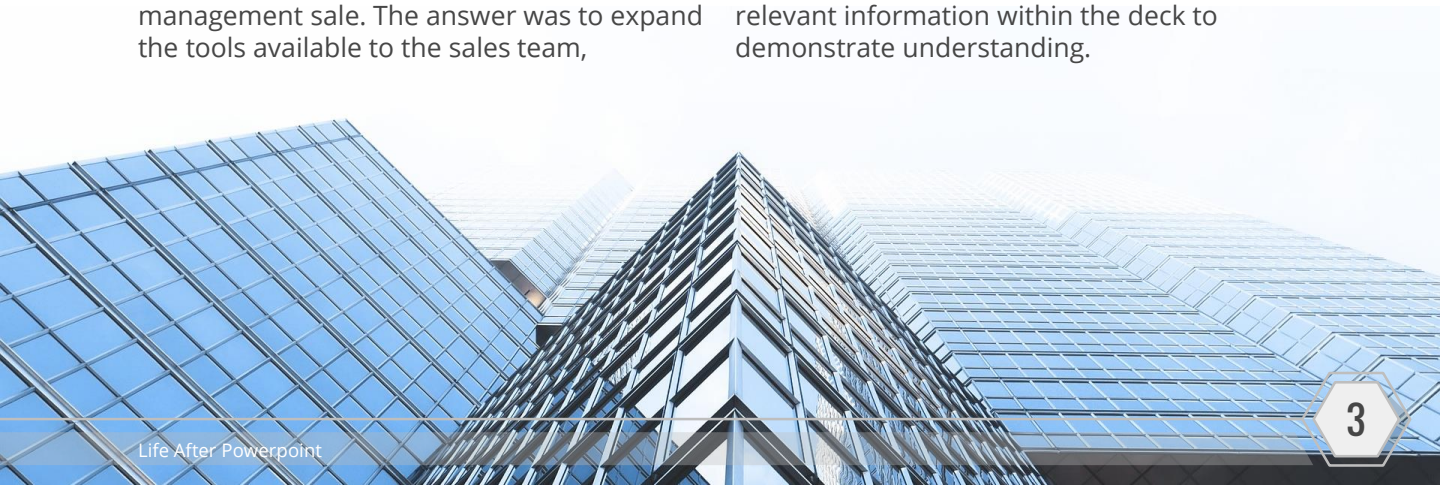
Importantly, the new message focus and format allowed us to challenge the status quo. We were able to lose many of the historic text-heavy slides and consolidate the detailed content as a leave-behind hardcopy deck, while the new interactive format allowed us to push the company credentials element to the back of the presentation. As a result, the audience was greeted with content that applied to their issues, rather than a long list extolling the virtues and history of our customer.

We also looked closely at the way information was being shared. Prior to the presentation review, PowerPoint was the only option which, while great for many formal and interactive forums, was frankly horrible for some of the more intimate and informal engagements made as part of an account management sale. The answer was to expand the tools available to the sales team, equipping them with iPad versions of the deck (a simple process thanks to the new Microsoft PowerPoint app), a whiteboard sales presentation structure, and a professionally printed hardcopy version of the presentation. Each was tweaked to meet the demands of the different media, but all were based on the same messaging and structure.

Finally, we uploaded all approved presentation collateral to an online slide library to ensure that the sales team had access to the latest content whenever needed. This not only allayed the concerns of the brand police, who had been fighting a losing battle against the mavericks in the sales team, but also addressed the "Presentationstein" that had led to confused and unfocused presentations.

TURNING A GOOD IDEA INTO PRACTICE

Was it really that straightforward? Well, ultimately, it came down to the sales team being open to change, contributing to the new approach and embracing the training and coaching that followed. It is difficult to understate how important coaching the sales presenters was – enabling them to grow in confidence, recognise life beyond PowerPoint and embrace the new sales tools, rather than view them with suspicion. Part of this process was recognising the importance of personalising each of the presentations before delivering them to a prospect. This went beyond simply adding a logo to the front slide, requiring the sales team to research the prospect properly, adding relevant information within the deck to demonstrate understanding.



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DELIVERING RESULTS

Overall the new format and tool options have been a huge hit with prospects and presenters. There has been an increase in the confidence and ability of presenters to speak off-script, engaging audiences on their terms by using a blended presenting approach, and using the right tools for the situation, from whiteboard through to tablet, rather than sticking religiously to PowerPoint.

Average order values have started to move up and there is a sense that the "box shifting" ethos of old has been swapped for a more value-added partnership. Audiences commented on the flexibility of the presentation – "We feel like we're being listened to" – while presenters have embraced the flexibility it provides them in front of their prospects.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TODAY

Any firm should pull salespeople together to share what works and what doesn't. A PowerPoint amnesty to allow sales teams to share their most effective slides, without incurring the wrath of the brand police, is remarkably effective – chances are, you'll find a nugget or two that might form the basis of your next presentation story. It's important to allow presenters to grow in confidence in how they share your corporate message. A salesperson with the "cajones" to step away from the wellworn, corporate-approved PowerPoint deck and share stories and visuals that resonate with an audience is going to deliver for your business.