



WHEN INTERNAL PRESENTATIONS GO WRONG

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Remember the ‘burning platform’ internal memo that cost Nokia \$4 billion?

What about the time Blackberry’s Vice Presidents released a music video to get their developers onsite?

Oh, and who can forget career long weirdness of Microsoft’s Steve Ballmer?

All are examples of internal presentations and communications that missed the mark. Now of course it’s very easy to point fingers, shake your heads and laugh knowingly at these ‘fails’ yet the reality is that most internal presentations teeter on the edge of similar fails every day. Who knows, it could be happening in your own business right now.

As a general rule, most presentations fail because the presenter has either not put enough time or effort in (regurgitating the same old stuff, sleepwalking through slide after tiresome slide) or morphed into a ball of nerves that they simply couldn’t get their message across. I’d suggest this isn’t the case with any of these examples... yet they all landed the companies and their presenters in hot water by not resonating with their audience.

I’d also suggest that in each of these high profile examples, the presenters cared deeply about the topic or their audience.

So why did it all go so horribly wrong? As is so often the case with presentations, it comes down to three simple areas:

FAIL NO. 1 - ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE AUDIENCE

Stripped down to the bare bones, a presentation is a tool to get an audience to change their thinking and do something different as a result of hearing a message.

For that to happen, an audience needs to connect with the presenter and vice versa. It goes beyond the gloss and glamour of expensive stage management and fancy slides and becomes about personal engagement with the people on the receiving end of your message. For that to happen, you have to really have a sense of what’s important to your audience before diving in.

Some of this comes down to respect, a word that conjures up a number of different emotions. I’m sure if you asked the leadership team at Blackberry if they respected their audience (software developers) they would hand-on-heart confirm this to be the case. I have no doubt that their respect is absolute. The only issue is that they misjudged what their audience wanted/needed to hear. The (unintentionally viral) video may have raised a smile but ultimately the key message (“stick with us – we have a plan that will re-establish us in the business smartphone market”) got lost. They got to live out their teenage rock star fantasies while the audience were left wondering where (or if) they fitted in.

Over the last decade or so of working with businesses on all kinds of presentations, I’ve become increasingly obsessed with understanding audiences. The reason is simple – if the audience does not buy into what you’re sharing, no matter how clever the story arc or engaging the visuals, you’re on a hiding to nothing. No presentation will ever work without **careful** consideration of the audience which means stepping away from the stereotypes (developers are only interested in software developer kits rather than business performance, junior staff are not interested in performance figures) and analyzing where they stand right now (at Eyeiful, we use a process called Audience Heatmapping). It’s a win-win – your audience gets the clarity and focus they need while your presentation actually prompts the positive change.

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FAIL NO. 2 - THE ABSENCE OF CLEAR OBJECTIVES

Presentations have an insatiable hunger for time and energy. Of course as presenters, it's easy to tot up the number of hours spent slaving over a hot PC analyzing data and developing slides but, frankly, this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of investment made in the whole presentation process.

Consider the cost of, and to, your audience – it's huge. Outside of their time (yep, that's precious too), there is the impact your message is going to have on them. If your message resonates with them and it sparks the right sort of change, wonderful. If it misses the intended target or they get the wrong end of the stick, disaster.

The stakes are always high with presentations... but never more than with internal presentations.

A clear presentation message comes from clear objectives. Far too often internal presentations are delivered out of a sense of duty or tradition rather than prompting a change or reinforcing a message. I recently worked with a leadership team in Germany who were bemoaning the fact that their quarterly presentations to the staff were apparently falling on deaf ears. They had become frustrated with the lack of interaction or engagement from the amassed staff team and began to view the

presentations as a waste of time. After a review of the content they'd shared over the previous 12 months, it was obvious where the problem was – it relentlessly followed the same boring structure and message every time.

I asked the team why they bothered running the presentations every three months and the answer was startling – “because we have to... and to keep the staff informed of business performance”. The intention of keeping your internal teams up to speed with the performance of the business is a laudable one but as soon as it becomes a chore for BOTH parties, it's time to think again.

Interestingly, I asked the same team why they thought the staff attended the presentations and the answer was remarkably similar – “because they have to”.

What a complete waste of time for all involved.

The solution was obvious – we needed to find a focus for the internal presentation and ensure that it was delivered in such a way that the audience derived value from the time they'd sacrificed to attend. The end result is that the presentations still happen quarterly, business results are still shared but a clear theme of each presentation is defined for each session and impacts are measured to ensure all parties are benefiting from their time investment.

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FAIL NO. 3 - BROADCAST PRESENTING

Internal presentations are unique for one simple reason – you have a pre-existing relationship with your audience. Of course, the larger the organization, the more likely that this relationship won't be on first name terms or be particularly intimate but the fact remains that your audience has formed an opinion of you... and you of them.

As such, it's important to build your communication around this pre-existing relationship. Taking an overly formal 'broadcast' approach to your presentation is unlikely to win hearts and minds – you need to deliver your message in a way that is both familiar and appropriate to all parties. Sadly this is rarely the case with internal presentations with 'broadcast thinking' coupled with a woeful lack of creativity when it comes to the medium of delivering internal presentations (it would seem that a bullet strewn PowerPoint presentation will suffice for many) and as a result internal presentations become a disaster waiting to happen.

Interestingly sometimes presenters grasp the creative nettle and try something different... for the wrong reasons. Take the leadership team at Blackberry and their now infamous reworking of 'More Than A Feeling'. Creative? Yes. Engaging? Maybe. Insular and self-serving? Sorry... but yes.

The good news is getting the mix of creative and inclusive right doesn't have to be difficult or cost the earth. The modern day presenter has been blessed with all manner of different tools to support interaction with audiences, no matter the size or how many far flung locations you are engaging with. New technologies like Glisser bring life to presentations by making the audience part of the equation. Creating interactivity in your PowerPoint deck allows the presenter to respond to the questions of the audience (and is remarkably simple to do). For presentations delivered remotely, tools like Citrix GoToMeeting allow the audience to engage, vote and question with ease. The list goes on... yet too many internal presentations default to the 'I speak, you

listen' school (with a liberal serving of Death by PowerPoint on the side).

Thankfully a small tweak in the way in which you deliver your message can have a huge impact and there are a couple of immediate benefits to this more inclusive approach. Firstly, your audience will become part of the presentation process, contributing to the flow of the presentation and engaging with your content on their own terms. This can only be a good thing. Secondly you are getting priceless feedback on the topics that are important to your audience. This sort of insight would be gratefully received by any presenter but is absolute gold dust for an internal communication. Open your ears and listen to what your audience is saying – the impact is likely to be huge!

So what can we learn from these high profile failures? Perhaps the biggest lesson is that getting internal presentations right is a tough nut to crack. I have no doubt that the senior execs at Nokia, Blackberry and Microsoft had a small army of advisors and experts guiding them right up to the point of getting on stage... yet they still got it wrong. I'm sure many hours/days/weeks were consumed trying to get the messaging, phrasing and slides perfect... yet they still failed.

So let's get back to basics – as with all types of presentations, it boils down to three simple things:

Understanding, respecting and engaging your audience.

Knowing what your objective is (if you don't know why you're presenting, don't bother).

Using a delivery mechanism that engages your audience (and it may not always be PowerPoint).

Get these right and your internal presentation will truly deliver, engaging your audience and prompting positive change within your team or organization. Ignore these and you've achieved nothing more than sustaining the belief that internal presentations are a waste of time for everyone involved... and surely no business can thrive with that kind of thinking.