



THE NEW RULES OF PRESENTATIONS

99 PROBLEMS... BUT THE PITCH AIN'T ONE

As you'd expect from a self-confessed presentation geek, the walls of my study are lined with a multitude of books dedicated to the topic of presenting. They vary by area of expertise, presentation technologies, design thinking, and, frankly, quality, yet there is one thing that the vast majority share – an obsession with what I would term “formal presentations.”

You know the type of thing – hints, tips, and sage advice focused on making the most of an engagement where the presenter does all the talking and the audience is only allowed to interject during the Q&A session (or if they're feeling particularly brave/aggrieved,

when they stick their hands up and ask questions). This makes for a nice set of “presentation rules” that are easily shared by the experts, readily consumed by those in search of wisdom, and regularly rehashed by publishers the world over.

It's a cracking model that has kept authors, readers, and publishers busy for many years. The problem is that this obsession with formal presentations not only ignores the reality of what is going on out there (most presentations are not strictly “formal”), but it's also creating a tension between perceived best practice and what audiences really want.



FORGET THE OLD RULES

For years we presenters have lived under the impression that if we weren't standing at the front of the room, pointer in hand and feeling just a little bit sick, we weren't truly presenting. Indeed the gut-wrenching anxiety that came with ensuring that you were sticking to the rules (no questions or handouts until the end, don't wave your hands around, a picture paints a thousand words, etc.) was seen as a rite of passage for any would-be presenter. Anything else was just cutting corners.

What a load of old twaddle ...

As modern-day presenters, we're equipped with tools to help us deliver our message in a whole heap of ways, from a cozy chat over a coffee to orating to masses at a conference. Each situation demands a different approach, both in terms of the way presenters deliver their messages and the tools they use. It's time for presenters (and authors!) to recognize what we at Eyeful term the “presentation landscape” – in short, like audiences, presentations come in all shapes and sizes.

PUTTING THE AUDIENCE FIRST

Make no bones about it – the defining factor in deciding where you sit on the presentation landscape is your audience. This might sound like I’m stating the blindingly obvious, but the reality is that few presenters make this leap. They’re too busy thinking about their slides, their breathing, or their attire to take a moment to ask themselves the simple

question – how would the audience like to be presented to? Once you recognize that the audience is the most important stakeholder in the whole presentation process, it makes it a whole lot easier for presenters to focus on engaging with the people in front of whom they are standing.

“SMART CASUAL” PRESENTING

By embracing this new thinking, we presenters are able to sidestep the long list of “rules” and engage audiences on their terms. Once you’ve taken the step to think beyond the constraints of formal presentations, the sense of freedom is incredibly empowering.

In a way, it’s similar to when organizations woke up to the fact that their employees didn’t need to sit trussed up like chickens wearing neckties and restrictive business suits to work and allowed them to go “smart casual.” Of course, there were those who questioned the move, seeing it as an example of dropping standards, but the reality is that

everyone just felt a bit more comfortable. It felt right ... which had a direct impact on the quality of the work environment and ultimately the work being produced.

Now of course this doesn’t mean that it’s appropriate to wear jeans and your favorite band T-shirt to every business occasion. Sometimes you need to dress up, put on a starched shirt and your best suit ... and sometimes it’s something a little more casual but still smart. Much the same goes for presentations – there’s a time and a place for the rules and restrictions of a formal presentation as well as a more relaxed interactive engagement.

INTERACTIVE PRESENTING - TECHNOLOGY FRIEND OR FOE?

So what does recognition of the presentation landscape mean to the online presenter? The good news is that it gives you the option to think beyond the constraints of technology and formality and put thoughts of how you can engage your audience on their terms foremost in your mind.

The bad news is that engaging audiences has never been more challenging – as a presenter, you're in direct competition with their email, social media accounts, phones, and, um, lives. Even if you stand in the same room as them, the rules have changed so much that you have no right over their attention – they will happily pull out their smartphones and brazenly commence tweeting, Facebooking, and Candy Crushing if you get it wrong. The stakes are even higher when presenting remotely.

But rather than bemoan the fact, use the reality of the situation as the catalyst for doing things differently. By throwing out the old rules and engaging with audiences on their terms, we can create presentation environments that ensure that your message is delivered clearly and succinctly.

So what tricks can you have up your sleeve when presenting remotely?

1. ENGAGE WITH YOUR AUDIENCE EARLY ON

This works across the entire presentation landscape but is particularly useful when you're delivering remotely. For some peculiar reason, polls are massively underutilized in most webinars but actually offer a huge opportunity to engage your audience from the get-go. Naturally it's all about maintaining a balance – don't bombard your audience with too many questions (no one wants to feel like they're being interrogated!), but interaction with your audience at points throughout your presentation is a wonderful way of keeping them on track ... and of keeping you informed of their interests.

This then creates another opportunity to build your presentation around the needs of your audience. Imagine the power of having a set of three case studies to hand out but only sharing the one that is of most interest to your online audience. Rather than making an educated guess and making the choice for them, what about polling the audience and asking them which case study is of most interest? Using the (very simple to use) hyperlink features in PowerPoint, Keynote, or Prezi (other slideware is available), you'd then be responding directly to the needs of the audience.

No guessing. No boring your audience with information they have no interest in. No rushing through the good stuff because you've got too much content.

Ultimately your audience wants the presentation to be valuable to them and for you to succeed ... so why not ask them what's of most interest to them and then share that?

2. TIMING

This is a quick win (excuse the pun). For some reason, presenters feel they have to fill a specific time period (normally 30 minutes or an hour). Why not make them shorter? Ever wonder why TED Talks are no longer than 18 minutes long? Because people get bored (even with the most engaging content) and tend to drift off.

So don't feel obliged to stretch out your presentation to fill up a predetermined time slot – take as long as you need and no more (no one ever complained about a presentation being too short).

3. TECHNOLOGY IS YOUR FRIEND

There will be those who feel that conducting an online presentation is as big a technological leap as they are willing to make. Add to this the concept of polling and they go all aquiver. ... While this technophobia is completely understandable, those sticking purely to “ye olde PowerPoint” are potentially missing a trick.

Increasingly, I’ve been using a blend of technologies to engage online audiences. Amid the polls and interactive slides, I’ve been using my tablet as a whiteboarding tool. It allows me to “doodle” certain elements of my presentation and turn a one-way lecture

into something more conversational.

Indeed, the science of whiteboarding stacks up – the Aberdeen Group ran a study that pointed to sales presenters using whiteboarding as part of their presentation mix having a 50% higher lead conversion rate. This may be due to greater engagement with the audience, increased interaction, or simply the novelty factor of someone stepping away from PowerPoint ... but no doubt a useful contribution to online presentations.



SO IN SUMMARY

I’m really excited about the state of presentations today. The technology, the importance attached to presenting, and the power of stories all combine to make this an incredibly vibrant area in which to work. But the thing that excites me most is that people are waking up to the fact that the “old rules” no longer need to apply to all presentations. Presenters are taking risks, flipping the

perceived wisdom on its head, and, at last, putting audiences first. Those willing to break the mold and disregard the presentation lessons of yesteryear will engage with audiences on a whole new level, which can only be good news for presenter and audience alike.

Now it’s your turn ...