Results of the 2017 Annoying PowerPoint survey

PowerPoint is being used to create documents that are called presentations. Presenters need to focus their message and provide the extra details outside of the presentation.

The most significant trend from the 439 people who completed the 2017 survey on what annoys them about PowerPoint presentations was the increase in text heavy presentations that should really be distributed as documents. The responses to the survey provide presenters with insights and recommendations that will improve the effectiveness of PowerPoint presentations.
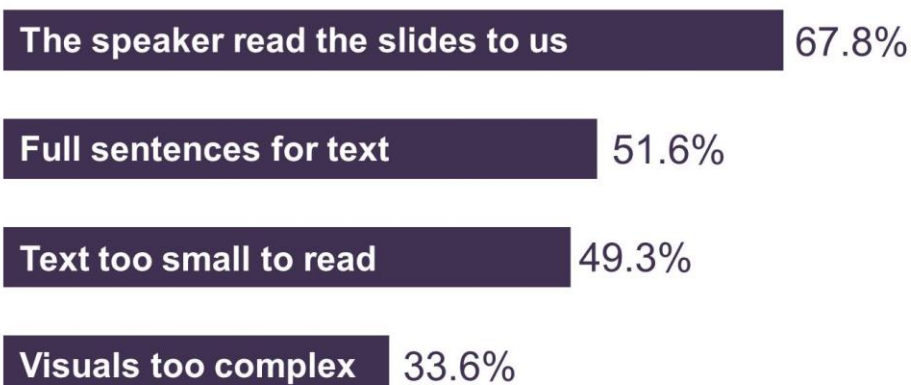
Presentations continue to increase in popularity as a communication tool in organizations

In my customized workshops and conversations with business professionals at conferences, I hear that PowerPoint presentations are increasingly relied upon as the primary communication vehicle in organizations. This survey showed another increase in the percentage of people who say they see at least one PowerPoint presentation every business day to 27.8%. This proportion has more than doubled in the last ten years. In the latest survey 74% reported seeing two or more PowerPoint presentations each week, showing how prevalent presentations are in organizations.

A quote from one of the survey respondents agrees with the statistics and hints at a bigger issue. They said one annoying thing about PowerPoint is, "*Organizational reliance on it as one of the main methods of communication – not just for presenting information, but as a reporting tool.*" As a tool, PowerPoint can be used to create many different outputs, presentations and reports being two of the more common ones. The issue that came out later in the survey results is that there has been an increase in reports being considered presentations.

Reading text is still annoying and putting more text on slides seems to be an increasing cause

The top four responses to the question of what annoys audiences about PowerPoint presentations did not change from the last survey. I ask respondents to pick their top three from a list of twelve options and these four are clearly more common than the other choices.

The speaker read the slides to us	67.8%
Full sentences for text	51.6%
Text too small to read	49.3%
Visuals too complex	33.6%

Reading the slides continues to be the top annoyance, with a slightly smaller proportion of the respondents including it in their top three choices. The second and third most popular choices, those related to putting too much text on the slide in small font, increased in popularity from the last survey. I think more text leads to reading the slides by the presenter, so the top three are all related in my mind.

The fourth choice, visuals that are too complex to understand, points to an issue arising from some popular advice in the last few years. It has been popular to suggest that if presenters simply replace all the text on their slides with graphics, it will solve all of the problems in presentations. This is not the case. Unless the visuals are clear and easy to understand, they don't help the audience, but further confuse them.

Documents being presented are annoying; Presentations need a focused message

After I ask the respondents to select their top three annoyances from the list of twelve, I allow them to add any other comments on what annoys them about PowerPoint presentations. In reviewing the comments, three areas emerged. The first is that documents are being created in PowerPoint and being presented as if they were presentations. One comment captures this issue well, "*People don't understand the difference between a slide deck and a "memo" or "letter". Way too much information on each slide and it is a challenge to decipher what is clearly important.*" When you have a document on the slide, you also tend to read it to the audience, making it even worse.

This idea of putting more and more information into a presentation seems to be driven by executives. Here is how one respondent described it, "*Too much information on one slide. All I hear around my company is use less slides. People are more concerned with the number of slides than the content. The leadership here doesn't want to cut the content. They want the same level of content on less slides. We create presentation with so much information on a single slide that the audience does not know where to focus.*"

If you want to use PowerPoint to create a document, that is fine. Just don't call it a presentation and project it on a screen. As one respondent put it, "*Many times a mass email would serve the purpose of transferring the needed information without having to gather dozens of people together at the same time.*" Think of how much time and money organizations could save if they emailed documents instead of presenting a document on the screen.

Poor design choices annoy audiences

The second area of common annoyances was presenters making poor design choices. Most organizations have a template that they ask staff to use when creating a presentation. If designed well, the template has set the colors and fonts that will make the text and other elements of the slide easy to see and read. When presenters don't adhere to the guidelines and start placing text in different spots on each slide and selecting different fonts and sizes, audiences notice, and don't like it. Here's what one respondent said, "*I can't say enough how much it bothers me when text is all over the place; when they make fonts smaller to fit more on (which is an indication there that you've got too much text on the slide). Or, when titles/bulleted points are in different places on different slides. To me this indicates sloppiness in your work.*"

You may think that choosing interesting colors and flashy animation effects will make you look "cool." They won't. As one respondent said, "*When color and animation are so distracting that all I can think about is how awful it is, and I'm completely distracted away from the subject matter.*" Your design choices matter.

Presenters still not prepared enough when they deliver the presentation

The third area that respondents said annoyed them is a lack of preparation by the presenter. Rehearsal, which is saying your presentation out loud using your slides, is so valuable. You will become comfortable with the material and be less likely to read the slides, and you will also make sure you stay within the time given for the presentation. As one respondent said, "*No rehearsal or dry run. Many errors and inconsistencies can easily be ferreted out with a dry run.*"

Presenters think they can just "wing it" and it will be fine. This approach leads to fumbling through the content, speaking about content that is not related to the topic on the slide, and making apologies such as "I know you can't see this…" None of these outcomes make your presentation more effective.

Information overload continues to be a big issue

In the survey I ask people to share three words or phrases they hear when people in their organization talk about PowerPoint presentations. Respondents can write whatever they want, so I clean up the list of words to focus on the descriptive words that give us insight into the perception of the presentations. I create a word cloud visual from the list, where the size of the word is proportional to the frequency of the word in the list. Here is the word cloud from this survey's list of words.

As in past surveys, the word "boring" stands out as the most common description of a PowerPoint presentation. Other common words refer to the amount of text and information

being too much in many presentations. I think these ideas are related. When a presenter overwhelms the audience with text or data, the audience gets confused and mentally checks out. We see this behavior during presentations, as one respondent said in the freeform comments in the previous question, "*Audience members who look at their phones all the time.*" When you check with these audience members at the end of the presentation, they often say they were bored because there hadn't been anything of value for them in such a long time. I think the root cause of many "boring" presentations is the overload of information. In this survey, the overload of text was a clear issue.

Audiences want presentations that are clear and concise in the Content, Slides, and Delivery

Based on the success of the question in the last survey, I again asked respondents what advice they have for presenters to improve presentations. After reading through hundreds of comments, a theme emerged: Presenters should be clear and concise with the content of the presentation, the slides they use, and the delivery of the presentation.

Content

When planning a presentation, one respondent summarized it very well, "*Decide on your message. Then decide on the sequence needed to relay that message. Then the main topics. Then each slide. Simple slides, always readable, without too much info on each slide.*"

It always starts with a clear goal for the presentation. Here's how one respondent said it, "*Focus on the outcome. What do you want to accomplish from making the presentation. Then build your presentation to achieve that goal.*" Comments from previous questions reinforce this idea. Respondents said that when the purpose is not clear, presentations tend to have an overload of information as the presenter is hoping that by throwing everything at the audience something might stick.

Once you know the goal you need to assess the audience and their needs. Only then can you focus the content to take them on the journey from where they are to where you want them to be at the end of the presentation. Concise content requires you to edit out everything that is not absolutely necessary to communicating that message. If you want the audience to have the additional detail, send it to them before or after the presentation in a document. [*Resource: GPS for Presentations book*]

Slides

Clear slides have one message per slide only. It is clear to the audience the message you want them to understand. Start by summarizing your message in a headline. One respondent echoed this when they said, "*Write meaningful headlines instead of generic slide titles.*" Use newspapers or news websites as a model since they write headlines for every story.

Once you have the headline, select a visual that will clearly communicate the message. Whether it is a graph, diagram, image, or text, make sure it is large enough to easily see. Strip out any element that does not help the story so the visual is as concise as possible. Add a callout to direct attention to the important part of the visual. [*Resource: Select Effective Visuals book*]

Delivery

We have already heard the importance of rehearsal in responses to other questions, and it was reinforced here. One respondent said, "*Practice ahead of time to get pacing down right and to be able to cogently discuss the highlights of the data you are presenting.*" We also heard again about reading the slides. I like how one respondent put it, "*If all you do is read the slide, then there is no reason for one of the two of us to be in the room.*"

In this survey a number of respondents commented on presenters speaking about content that was not on the current slide. This is confusing. Instead, respondents suggested using the "B" key to blank the slides in Slide Show mode so the focus is just on what you are saying and there is nothing distracting the audience on the screen.

Suggestions I don't agree with

There were two suggestions that came up many times in the responses that I want to respond to because I don't think they are good advice. The first is the suggestion that "less is more." I wrote an article on this phrase [*article link*] and how I think "clear is more" is a better approach. I hope that the intention of the respondents who shared this advice was to suggest that more focused content is better. Blindly cutting content to achieve "less" content is not useful. Focusing the content so the audience gets the key message is useful.

The second suggestion was to use fewer slides. As the respondent said above, this often leads to packed slides that overwhelm and confuse the audience because the presenter doesn't reduce the amount of content, they simply jam it into fewer slides. I don't think the number of slides has anything to do with the effectiveness of a presentation [*article link*]. The clarity of the message and concise, clear slides help make a presentation effective.

Steps you can take to improve presentations

How can presenters use the results of this survey to improve presentations? The first step is to distinguish between documents and presentations. I will be writing an article on when each should be used because there seems to be confusion that is leading to documents being presented on the screen. Be careful when deciding on whether you are using PowerPoint to create a document or a presentation.

When you have decided that you need a presentation, there are two areas you can work on.

For your own presentations, whether you create them or you ask others to prepare them for you, always start with a clear goal for the presentation. Without a clear goal, it becomes very difficult to decide on content. Once you know the goal, analyze the audience and determine the content you need in the presentation. Be ruthless in editing the content down to just what is needed and include extra details in supplementary documents that the audience can access. [*article link*]

For each slide, write a headline that summarizes the message you want the audience to get from that slide. Select a visual that communicates the message and make sure it is clear and concise. Finally, plan time to rehearse your presentation before the day you are delivering it.

You may also want to start changing the presentation culture in your organization. Many poor presentation practices have been ingrained because "that is the way we have always done it." [*article link*] The primary effort will be to educate others on what is possible. Use this survey

report, other articles, videos of great presentations, and slide makeover examples to demonstrate what is possible in the future [*link to makeovers*]. Start small with your efforts to make changes and build on successes [*article link*]. As you get more buy-in, more changes will be possible.

One way to jump start improvements in your presentations is to invest in training. I offer customized in-house workshops for groups of business professionals and a guided self-paced online course for individuals.