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Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) Programs: Making Your (Power) Point[1]

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Microsoft PowerPoint is a proprietary presentation program developed by Microsoft.

Introduction

You have just completed the annual report of accomplishments of your business retention and expansion (BRE) program. Now you are being asked to make oral presentations about the work to a wide variety of audiences, including your Development Board, local elected officials, business organizations, and assorted gatherings of other interested citizens. You have made these presentations before and sometimes noticed a less than favorable reaction from your audience. Was not the mayor nodding off the last time you spent your allotted 15 minutes trying to speed through 100 carefully crafted and visually exciting slides? You had graphics, charts, sounds, color, and narrative, especially lots of narrative. You made use of every device embedded in the software to enhance the content of each slide. Yet people still did not always react favorably.

You have a limited time to explain your program and report its successes and you know that visual aids can help illustrate what you need to convey. It is time to turn on the computer and start building your presentation. You wonder: Is there a better way to craft this year's presentation?

One of the best-known and widely used presentation programs is Microsoft PowerPoint. According to Microsoft, some 30 million PowerPoint presentations are delivered on any given day. Introduced in 1990, PowerPoint presentation software was a new way of conveying information to a wide variety of audiences. It was not long before the phrase "death by PowerPoint" became a common reaction to presenters who had relied too heavily on this software. Why is this? It may be that many presenters do not understand the fundamental rules of visual presentations. Often too many slides are used and individual slides contain too much information. Putting too many words on a slide can result in using fonts that are too small to read. Some presentations rely on overly "busy" slide layouts or including too many graphics and sounds in slide transitions and text introductions. Color combinations receive little thought, even though poorly selected ones can make it difficult to read the material. Perhaps worst of all, presenters sometimes *read* the slides rather than talk to the audience (Neuborne 2006).

How can you avoid "death by PowerPoint"? When creating any form of a visual presentation, it is important to know and follow a few simple rules. This publication provides an overview and a set of guidelines for developing effective visual presentations that won't leave your audience snoring or lost.

This publication is one of a series on establishing Business Retention and Expansion programs. The publications in this series can be found online at the EDIS website at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ TOPIC_SERIES_Retention_and_Expansion_of_Exist ing_Businesses.

Before You Begin

"Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start" (Rodgers & Hammerstein, Do-Re-Mi, *The Sound of Music*).

An outline of what you want and need to convey is the beginning of a successful presentation. So begin by outlining what you intend to present. Ask yourself:

- What are the major ideas or points that you wish to make?

- Which of these points can be further illustrated or explained with a visual aid?

- Do you want or need a title slide?

- Are there people that should receive credit for the work presented?

Presentation software has both good and bad points, making it important to understand both the benefits and risks associated with its use (Roberts 2008):

- It is easy to use, but putting together the "perfect" presentation may consume too much of your time.

- It may help you organize your thoughts, but may tempt you to talk to the projected images rather than the audience.

- It allows for flexibility in the design of the slide, but tempts you to focus more on the entertainment aspect of the slide rather than the content.

- Using technology carries with it inherent risks, such as computer or projector failure, so ALWAYS have a back-up plan.

After considering the pros and cons of using presentation software and outlining your presentation, it is time to begin developing your slides. As noted in the introduction, four common errors usually result in ineffective visuals and poor presentation. The following sections discuss methods to minimize or avoid each type of potential error.

Too Much Information on the Slide

The purpose of a visual aid is to introduce those elements of your presentation that are essential points you wish the audience to grasp. The audience should get the point of a slide within five seconds of its appearance (Radel 2003). Give your audience time to read and comprehend the slide by remaining silent for several seconds after it appears. Your oral presentation should expand on the content of the slide, not merely repeat what the audience can already see. For this to work, it is imperative that slide content be kept to a minimum. Include only the most important information on slides. Use graphs, tables, and charts sparingly, and avoid the use of inserted pictures or objects unless they reinforce the point you are trying to make. Ask yourself, Do I want the audience to remember the points I am trying to make, or the graphics I used?

People read more quickly than you can speak, so having too much text on the screen means that the audience must choose between reading the slides and listening to the presentation. There is no accepted standard for the number of lines of text on a slide, or the number of words in each line, but "the joy of six" (Saylor 2001) is a useful guideline.

- Use no more than six lines of text per slide.

- Use no more than six words per line of text.

Wrong Font Style and Size

It is important to use font styles, sizes, and colors in a consistent manner throughout your presentation. Doing so will "train" your audience to learn what your choices mean as they relate to the concepts you have identified in each slide. Lack of consistency may lead to distraction and a lack of focus on the part of your audience.

Choose a font style that is easily read. Some of the more common fonts for written presentations are:

- Times New Roman

- Arial

- Courier

Notice that each of these styles, even using the same font size, is visually different. Each will look different when projected on a screen. Block style fonts such as Bookman or Century provide an alternative to the font styles typically used in written documents. A quick way to view various font styles is to click on the font style pull down menu in PowerPoint and scroll through the various styles available. Try several on the slide master to see how each looks in various sizes and when italicized or bolded. If you change font styles, do so only when the importance of the material changes.

Size is important. We want our audience to see what is on the slide, so selecting the proper font size is extremely important. Microsoft's PowerPoint software package provides templates that recommend different font sizes for various levels of content within the slide. Use of these preset font sizes is a good place to start. However, many presentations do not follow a predefined template format, thus the user has the flexibility to determine the font size for each line of text.

It is not enough to look at the presentation on the computer screen and assume that because you can read the material, your audience too will find it readable when projected onto a screen during a presentation. There are several ways to guesstimate whether the font size will be readable from a distance. One suggestion is to print a single slide and place it on the floor. If you can stand over it and read it, then the size is probably all right. Another suggestion is to put the full-sized slide on your computer screen and stand about six feet from the screen. If you can read the material on the screen, you have probably selected an appropriate font size. Remember that bigger is always better and if it looks too big, it is probably just right for the audience to read.

Wrong Color Combinations

Color is extremely important in creating and using slides. Color combinations determine whether the printed material is clearly visible, how quickly viewers can read it, and the emotional state of the audience. It is also helpful to look at how various colors and color combinations actually appear when projected onto a screen. Often the colors you see on a computer screen are markedly different when projected onto a screen. Using different font colors within a single slide or throughout all the slides can inform your audience about the importance of the material on the screen. Some presenters like to use one color for headings on slides and another color for the points made under each heading. One cautionary note: make sure that the slide background color and the font color are compatible. If you are uncertain as to what combinations work well, simply begin by using a standard template from the PowerPoint software. Your goal is to educate and inform, not aggravate or lull your audience to sleep.

Overly Busy Slides

Introduce one major point per slide to cut down on the subsequent narrative in the slide. Remember the "joy of six" rule and limit the illustrating points to no more than six lines of text. Do not fill slides with hard-to-read details. Ask yourself: Is this material really needed? Limit the number of tables and graphs in your presentation. If possible, use charts or graphs rather than tables. Even here, the level of detail should be limited. If tables must be used, limit the content to items that illustrate the point you are trying to make. Many presenters provide their audience with handouts of the slides. Keep in mind that when printing multiple slides on a single page, PowerPoint allows the user to specify one, two, four, or six slides on each page as audience handouts. The

more slides on each page (three to a page is common) means that the content of each slide will be significantly reduced in size. Complex tables and graphs that are unreadable when projected onto a screen will certainly be unreadable when you try to squeeze multiple slides onto an letter-sized (8.5" x 11") page.

Reading the Slides

We have all heard the joke about the musician asking a New Yorker how to get to Carnegie Hall—the answer: "Practice, practice, practice!" It matters very little that you follow all the rules for the creation of a good presentation if you do not know what is on the slides and what you want to say about each one. Audiences might overlook busy slides, colors that clash, and excessive content, but it is a safe bet they did not come to watch the back of your head as you read the slides to them. People respond best when a presenter addresses them directly. Knowing your audience, your subject matter, and the content of your visual presentation will make your presentation more effective. How can you avoid the tendency to read your slides to the audience? Again, you must "practice, practice, practice!"

Conclusion

Using presentation software can make your presentation more memorable and impart your ideas with greater impact. On the flip side, your use of the software can also distract your audience from what you want to communicate. However, if you follow the guidelines as we have discussed here, you can minimize distractions and leave your audience better informed about your topic. *Focus* on the points you want to make, *plan* the layout of your presentation, and *practice* your entire presentation as a way of improving what you do (Saylor 2001). Make it *big*, keep it *simple*, make it *clear*, and be *consistent* (Radel 2003). Taken together, following the suggestions of these authors will go a long way toward making you an effective user of presentation software.

References

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