How to Avoid Death by PowerPoint: Steve Jobs' secret weapon

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 15

by Philip Yaffe

Editor's Introduction

Each "[Communication Corner]" essay is self-contained; however, they build on each other. For best results, before reading this essay and doing the exercise, go to the first essay "[How an Ugly Duckling Became a Swan]," then read each succeeding essay.

Bite the bullet and learn how to organize your presentation slides to get the greatest effect.

How to Avoid Death by PowerPoint: Steve Jobs' secret weapon

COMMUNICATION CORNER No. 15

by Philip Yaffe

Note: This installment of "Communication Corner" is an update to "Resurrecting the Bullet Point: the Return of an Old and Valued Friend" from April 2011.

The next time you are asked to do a presentation, don't. The word "presentation" implies a one-way communication; you talk, they listen. To be truly effective, what you really want is a conversation. True, you may be doing most of the talking, but unless your audience is mentally engaged with you, you are going to be considerably less effective than you might be.

Failure to understand this fundamental fact leads to some extremely bizarre and counterproductive presentation practices. Some critics have condemned slide presentations in general, and bullet points in particular, for luring people away from truly listening to each other and therefore damaging communicating rather than promoting it. In short, bullet points for slide presentations are dead.

I heartily disagree. And so did Steve Jobs (1955-2011). Co-founder and head of Apple Inc., Jobs was famous for giving legendary presentations without bullet points—and is still cited as a paragon of "pointless" clarity. However, there are three things wrong with the notion that bullet points are dead.

- Bullets points, an extremely useful communication tool, are moribund largely due to the unthinking, mind-deadening way they are too often used.

- Steve Jobs did use bullet points, but in the way they were intended—with spectacular results.

- There is no such thing as a slide presentation.

But first things first, just what are these things called bullet points? And why do they cause so much polemic?

Bullet points are nothing but terse, telegraphic phrases that encapsulate an idea, usually without trying to explain it. By analogy, they are like chapter headings in a book. They give a

glimpse of what the chapter is all about without trying to substitute for it. The chapter is still there to be read; the heading only whets your appetite to do so.

On presentation slides, bullet points do the same thing. They give the audience a glimpse of what the speaker is going to talk about in order to pique their interest. Often they also serve as a reminder of what the speaker has said in order to better fix the idea in their minds.

How could such an outstandingly useful tool be considered dead or deserving to be dead? Quite simply, because many presenters seem to have forgotten—or never knew—their true purpose.

How often have you seen so-called bullet points written out in long, convoluted sentences rather than in terse, pithy phrases? How often have you seen four to six bullet points, even well-written, splattered on the screen all at once like a plate of spaghetti thrown against a wall? If their purpose is to whet the audience's appetite, they should be introduced one at a time, i.e. the first bullet point, followed by the presenter's comments about the point; the second bullet point, followed by the presenter's comments about it; and so on.

This is only common sense, which in recent years seems to have become decidedly uncommon.

Thirty years ago, in the Dark Ages when people still used overhead transparencies, introducing bullet points one by one was standard practice. Although all the bullet points were written on a single transparency, the astute presenter would cover them with a sheet of paper, revealing them one at a time as needed.

It is quite easy to do the same thing with PowerPoint and other computer-generated slide programs, yet many presenters fail to do so. Putting the full list of bullet points on the screen in one fell swoop is like publishing a book with only a table of contents but failing to put headings on each individual chapter. It makes no sense.

But Steve Jobs didn't introduce bullet points one by one, did he? Well, yes and no.

First of all, people who claim Mr. Jobs didn't use bullet points at all are off-target. He used them all the time. However, there is no requirement that a bullet point look like a bullet point, i.e. begin with a bullet symbol (point, star, arrowhead, etc.) followed by text. Mr. Jobs frequently showed only a single phrase on the screen with nothing else there, or as a single phrase associated to a relevant image. When he did show a list, he introduced the points sequentially, commenting on each one before revealing the next one. The process is so smooth that people don't even realize that they are looking at bullet points. Whether they are recognized or not, the important thing is that they have the desired effect.

If all this sounds somewhat theoretical, let's make it more concrete. **Example A** below is typical of slides seen in all too many presentations. It commits two cardinal sins. It uses full sentences rather than terse phrases, and it shows all the bullet points at the same time. **Example B** does the job well.

A   **B**

<table>
<tr><td>

Style of Text

The style of the text should be telegraphic. This is in order to:

- **Minimize how much text the audience must read on the screen;**
- **then re-focus the audience's attention on the speaker so that he can elaborate what is on the screen.**

</td><td>

Style of Text

Be telegraphic:

• Minimize text audience must read.

• Re-focus audience attention on speaker for elaboration.

</td></tr>
</table>

Because the text in **Example A** is painfully long, the astute speaker has no option but to remain silent while the audience is reading. Numerous surveys have shown that the speaker reading a long text aloud sends the audience's annoyance level right off the scale.

Because the text in **Example B** is admirably short, the speaker can read or paraphrase it along with the audience. For example, he could say: "You should use telegraphic style to minimize how much text the audience must read before re-focusing their attention on you, the speaker, for elaboration."

By emphasizing the key aspects of the text through tone, vocal variety, and perhaps even body language, the speaker is unlikely to provoke the same degree of annoyance as with the long text. On the contrary, the audience is likely to appreciate his effort rather than reprove it.

But a word of caution: the objective is to minimize the text, not to eviscerate it. **Example C** shows a really brief version of **Example B**, to the point of being abrupt. The argument is that you want people to read the text along with the speaker to whet their appetite for what the speaker will say about it. This is a two-step process. First, focus audience's attention on the screen; second, refocus it on the speaker.

C

> **Style of Text**
>
> **Telegraphic:**
>
> • **Minimize text**
>
> • **Re-focus to speaker**

However, we are only halfway there. For the best benefit, the text should be introduced sequentially, not all at once.

As previously noted, with overhead transparencies this was achieved by moving a sheet of paper from top to bottom or using overlays. With 35 mm slides, this was achieved by using "build-up slides."

For example, instead of showing five bullet points on a single slide, the speaker prepared six slides. The first slide showed only the title; the rest of the screen was left blank. The next one showed the title plus bullet point no. 1; the rest of the screen was left blank. The next slide showed the title plus bullet points no. 1 and no. 2; the rest of the screen was left blank. The same was done for each succeeding slide. It was only on the last slide that the full text (general statement and bullet points) became visible.

Producing six slides was of course considerably more expensive than producing only one. But it was also considerably more effective. You should use the same technique with computer-generated slides. It is exceedingly easy and there is no additional cost. For example:

Build-up - 1	**Build-up - 2**	**Build-up - 3**	**Build-up - 4**
Build-ups work like this:	**Build-ups work like this:** • **Show bullet 1**	**Build-ups work like this:** • **Show bullet 1** • **Show bullet 2**	**Build-ups work like this:** • **Show bullet 1** • **Show bullet 2** • **Show bullet 3**

5

Introducing text sequentially rather than instantaneously makes reading or paraphrasing the slide to the audience even easier—and increases the effect.

Remember: The words are on the screen not to replace, but to support the speaker. Speaking each line as it appears and giving it appropriate vocal and body language emphasis ensures that the words on the screen support the speaker's presentation in two crucial ways:

- First, the attention of the audience is totally focused on the bullet point (the chapter heading).

- Next, it is totally focused on the speaker for elaboration (the chapter).

At no time is the audience's attention split between reading and listening.

Moreover, at no time is the speaker standing mute while the audience is reading, as if his presence didn't matter.

Let's look at a real example of this approach and technique. Here is a build-up slide I use in my writing and public speaking workshops, with the commentary I use as each bit of the slide appears on the screen.

If arguing that the speaker should read or paraphrase slide text aloud sounds heretical, it is probably because you have never seen it done properly. However, when it is done properly, it is an extremely valuable tool.

You don't have to take my word for it. Watch Steve Jobs. In his highly lauded presentations, virtually every time text appeared on the screen, he read it aloud; using both his voice and body language to give it full meaning. And most of the time, the text appeared on a blank screen without a visual. Why? Because an irrelevant visual is just that—irrelevant—and therefore distracting.

No wonder Mr. Jobs was such a popular presenter. He gave the audience precisely what they wanted—full information—precisely the way they wanted it—in carefully crafted, easily digestible nuggets. You can find an excellent example of Mr. Jobs in action delivering a keynote address at Macworld 2007.

To summarize, here is how to get the most from your slides:

1. Write text telegraphically.
2. Introduce ideas (bullet points) line by line, not all at once.
3. Use voice and body language to emphasize each line as it appears.
4. Comment fully on each line of text before moving on to the next one.
5. Avoid irrelevant, distracting visuals.

As Mr. Jobs instinctively knew, the term "slide presentation" is a pernicious misnomer. There is no such thing as a slide presentation. Slides only support the presentation; they should never be confused for the presentation itself.

The next time you think about doing a "slide presentation," stop and think again. Never let what is going on behind you upstage you. Remember, your presentation should be a dialogue with your audience, not a one-way information dump. So if you ever feel that what you are showing is becoming more important than what you are saying, delete the slides, tear up your speech, and start over again.

This takes courage. But both you and your audience will be better off for it.

Mathematical Magic

Writing and speaking clearly and concisely is a leitmotiv of the "Communication Corner." Earlier in the series, I put myself to the test by writing instructions for two self-working card tricks and an algebraic "proof" that 2 = 1 without supporting diagrams or photos. In the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, author of *Kidnapped*, *Treasure Island*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*:

> *"Don't write merely to be understood. Write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood."*

If you can achieve this, you can write anything—and say anything in a speech to the plaudits of you audience.

The Lie Detector

Here is a card trick so simple that it is difficult to imagine most people wouldn't immediately figure it out. However, as virtually every magician will explain, most tricks to some extent depend on distraction and misdirection. This trick almost totally depends on these elements. In particular, it depends on the story you tell.

> "A psychologist friend recently told me that when someone is trying to conceal important information, you can often tell by a subtle change in their voice. I am going to use an ordinary deck of playing cards to see if my psychologist friend's technique really works. I'm still novice at this, so if you don't mind I am first going to remove all the jacks, kings, and queens from the deck."

Remove all the jacks, kings, and queens. Hand the deck to the participant and ask him to shuffle the cards as much as he wants. Then, while your back is turned, ask him to pick any card he wants, memorize it, and put it on top of the deck. You turn around and say:

"Have you chosen a card and put it on the top of the deck? Good. It's important that you have the card firmly fixed in your mind. So to be certain, I will turn my back again. Then from the bottom of the deck I want you to take the same number of cards as the value of your card and put them on the top of the deck. For instance, if you card is the four of spades, you would take four cards from the bottom of the deck and put them on the top of the deck. Clear? Good."

You turn your back and the participant does as instructed. You then turn around and take the deck in your hand.

"Now I am going to deal out the cards face up one by one. Each time I deal out a card, I want you to say its value and suit aloud. There should be a subtle difference in your voice when we get to your chosen card. I'm going to see if I can detect it."

Let's say the participant has chosen the four of spades. You start dealing out the cards face up and the participant names each card as you do. When you deal out the four of spades, you hesitate a moment and say, "Will you please repeat that?" He does, and you triumphantly say, "That's your card, isn't it?" And it is!

If you haven't figured it out, in the next installment I will show you how it is done.

HOMEWORK: Retrospective to Communication Corner No. 14

You were given a number of criteria for designing effective slides. You were asked to:

1. Check any slides you yourself may have produced in the past to see how closely they conform to these criteria. Be critical. The fact that you designed them, and may have expended considerable time and energy doing so, is irrelevant. If they don't work for the audience, they don't work. Whatever your good intentions, the time and energy you spent, while laudable, is simply beside the point.

2. Whenever you attend a presentation, which includes slides, check them to see how closely they conform to these criteria. Chances are you will find many of them do not. More importantly, you will probably find that this failure deeply damages the presentation. Fix this thought firmly in mind, and keep it uppermost in your mind whenever you prepare slides for you own presentations.

If you have faithfully done this, you should now be firmly convinced that properly designed slides advance a presentation while poorly designed slides hinder it. So any extra time needed to produce good slides is time well spent.

CURRENT HOMEWORK

Do the same two exercises you did for Communication Corner No. 14, adding the additional principles and advice offered in this essay.

1. Check any slides you yourself have produced in the past to see how closely they conform to these criteria.

2. Whenever you attend a presentation, which includes slides, check to see how closely they conform to these criteria. Chances are you will find many of them do not.

3. Go to the web site for the Steve Jobs presentation and admire how it was done by a master, with incredible results.

4. Above all, never forget that there is no such thing as a "slide presentation." Slides only support the presentation; they should never be confused for the presentation itself.

About the Author

Philip Yaffe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1942 and grew up in Los Angeles, where he graduated from the University of California with a degree in mathematics and physics. In his senior year, he was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bruin*, UCLA's daily student newspaper. He has more than 40 years of experience in journalism and international marketing communication. At various points in his career, he has been a teacher of journalism, a reporter/feature writer with *The Wall Street Journal*, an account executive with a major international press relations agency, European marketing communication director with two major international companies, and a founding partner of a specialized marketing communication agency in Brussels, Belgium, where he has lived since 1974. He is the author of more than 20 books, which can be found easily in Amazon Kindle.