

Death by PowerPoint

First, a word of warning. If you frequently create presentations on PowerPoint, you might find this column offensive.

Next, a disclaimer. I've used PowerPoint myself on a few occasions. And finally, a wish: I hope you read this before you prepare your next PowerPoint presentation.

An American friend once told me that he enjoys coming to Finland for seminars and conferences. He said they are well-organised, the topics are interesting, the speakers are skilled and knowledgeable, the surroundings are pleasant and everything happens on time.

There is only one problem, he said: too many presentations are based on PowerPoint. He called it "death by PowerPoint," and I think he was spot-on.

It used to be overhead slides that far too often served as a crutch for speakers.

These days, a standard feature of the Microsoft Office suite has the same effect. I don't have a problem with PowerPoint as a program, just with the way in which it's often used.

Most of you can picture this: 100 slides in 30 minutes. Graphs, pictures and text breeze by like scenery out of the window of a race car. The presenter is so eager to share his information that he loses his audience after the first slide and himself after the third.

After the speech the audience applauds politely, but looks utterly lost. No one dares to ask a question, fearing another frenetic exposé of irrelevant slides.

We learn things by listening, watching, reading, writing and speaking. The problem is that PowerPoint tries to get us to do all of these five things at once (yes, I have witnessed presentations where data is being fed into a slide while the speaker keeps on talking). I'm a multitasker, but simply cannot focus on more than one (let alone five!) things at the same time.

There is, of course, a difference between a speech and presentation. But please tell me if you have ever seen or heard of a great speech based on a series of graphs and bullet points. What would Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King have sounded like with slides?

I've witnessed hundreds of PowerPoint presentations and can honestly say that I struggle to remember any of them, except two great pictures included in the presentation of Finnish academic Peter Ekholm, who was trying to illustrate the proper level of integration among nation states.

The first picture was of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President François Mitterrand holding hands at a WWII memorial: an example of proper interaction. The second was of

Communist leaders Leonid Brezhnev of the Soviet Union and Erik Honecker of the DDR embracing by kissing one another on the lips. I'm certainly a raving liberal, but dare to say that perhaps this display of affection went too far in state relations.

A strong image is worth a thousand words, and those two managed to make a point – even though they were part of a PowerPoint presentation. So next time you think about putting together a PowerPoint show, perhaps you might want to keep things simple and stick to a couple of strong, illustrative images. "Show, don't tell" is certainly a worthwhile piece of advice, but for public speakers, it's what you say that counts. ■■

Alexander Stubb is Finland's minister of foreign affairs and prefers speeches over slideshows.

Let's declare September a PowerPoint-free month.

