
Power Points

By Lothar Katz

At least *this* war is over: without a doubt, Microsoft's Powerpoint has won the battle for best presentation software, now representing the de-facto standard around the world. If everyone creates presentations the same way, at least you know you won't have to worry about that aspect when preparing your pitch for that upcoming meeting with a foreign customer. Right?

Wrong.

While the tool may be universal, there is great local variance in how it is used. As with many other aspects of doing business, cultural preferences are a strong factor in what makes presentations effective. When preparing for important business meetings with international counterparts, you'll want to pay particular attention to three aspects:

Design

In certain Western countries, colorful, animated business presentations convey characteristics such as 'creative', 'dynamic', and 'success-oriented'. Unless your profession is strongly design-oriented, however, consider that this may not work well across cultures. Mexicans, the Swiss, Singaporeans, Turks, and many others view doing business a 'serious' activity. Delivering what they might see as an over-the-top presentation can damage your reputation and credibility with such counterparts. In addition, superstitious beliefs are associated with many colors in China and other parts of East and Southeast Asia. Using yellow may be read as arrogance, since that color signals royalty in China. Red is a favorable color, but only as long as it is not used for text. As many more such pitfalls exist, realize that you may have to learn about them. Alternatively, resort to using only black and white on your slides.

Pay attention to differing paper formats as well. Your stylish slides might look odd when printed in A4 size instead of the Letter format for which you designed them.

Content

No consent exists across individuals, corporations, or countries as to what constitutes 'the right amount of information' given in a presentation. Where some prefer to present only the big picture, others expect to cover much greater levels of detail. Again, this choice has a strong cultural component. In so-called 'high uncertainty avoidance' cultures, such as Japan, Korea, or Germany, presentations are generally expected to provide extensive background information and detail about the proposal or issue addressed. In contrast, businesspeople in the United States or the United Kingdom, for instance, tend to focus on high-level aspects. There, 'diving too deep' into the details may put off audiences.

Another content consideration, at least when presenting to groups whose native language is different from yours, is whether to translate your materials. If an interpreter is available, should you have your slides translated or not? Quite often, the best choice is to do both, i.e., to present the information in both languages. That way, you can easily navigate your slides while your audience is able to read them in their native language.

Delivery

A variety of factors determine what people consider 'effective' presentation delivery. Should your oral explanations closely follow the text shown on the slides, or is it better to give outlooks on what is yet to come, talk about context, or ad-lib about aspects not covered on your slides? The former style is strongly preferred in Japan, while the latter may be more effective in Brazil, for example. Should you underline key points through expressive body language (Italy) or strictly control and limit your movements (China)? Invite interruptions to stimulate lively discussions (France) or state that you will take questions at the end (Thailand)?

None of these choices will make a good, well thought out presentation irrelevant. But knowing about cultural preferences and adjusting your style accordingly may boost a presentation from good to great – which could make a big difference for the outcome of your business interactions.

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.

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