

TO POWERPOINT OR NOT TO POWERPOINT: THAT IS THE QUESTION!

By John C. Gill, UPS

In the beginning, the salesperson did not use visual aids when they presented products or services to their potential customers. Time marches on and then there were flip charts followed by overhead projectors. Now there is PowerPoint. As sometimes happens with a new seemingly effective tool, people tend to overuse it (without regard for moderation or purpose). In this case, many have suffered. Some have paid the ultimate price: Death, by PowerPoint. Experts in an attempt to solve or reduce the problems rushed to the rescue and offered ways to avoid or reduce these harmful effects. Mathew Christian of Marshall University (an engaging presenter) penned one such attempt and called it a 12 Step program to “overcome the affliction.” (I particularly like Step 6: Fonts are like donuts, you really shouldn’t have more than 3 at a time).

After years of abuse, on April 17th of this year, Google, an innovator in many areas, announced the pending release of its entry into the presentation market. Google said, in part, “It just made sense to add presentations to the mix; after all, when you create slides, you’re almost always going to share them.” Create slides? I guess every epidemic needs an efficient carrier. Salespeople beware: we are not immune to the infectious sue of slide presentations.

In fairness, Microsoft engineers developed PowerPoint to help create more effective and efficient communication. In the final stages of

the sales process, the kind of one-way communication that PowerPoint tends to enhance may be appropriate. However, earlier in the sales process, I prefer more interactive approaches to sales presentations (such as white boards for process mapping) for 3 basic reasons:

1. Good sales presentations facilitate learning (for the seller and the buyer).
2. You never know when a customer will want to advance the sale (be ready).
3. Sometimes the decision maker is late to the party.

The following discussion examines in detail each of the three reasons for more interactive communication in the early stages of the selling process.

Good sales presentations facilitate learning (for the seller and the buyer)

At its core, an effective sales presentation facilitates learning. The salesperson learns about the customer’s business and specific issues while probing for ways to help solve the problems uncovered along the way. In turn, the buyer learns about new products, services or processes which can be applied to their issues while weighing the cost and benefits of a change.

Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer of adult learning, introduced four key principles of adult learning in his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*. They are:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.
2. Experience provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning about subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.

Interactive sales presentations versus one way presentations are generally more effective because they are more aligned with the four principles of adult learning (above). For example, a seller may use a whiteboard to outline what the seller knows about the buyer's business model and recommend an interactive approach for filling in any gaps uncovered. During the interchange of thoughts and ideas, the seller can plan to explore possible pinch points or solutions that the seller can provide. It is also possible that the buyer may recommend that the seller focus on specific areas of the business model where they (personally) have problems or influence. This will allow the seller to broaden the conversation to meet the buyer's wishes (even if it was not planned in advance). Thus, the whiteboard approach allows the seller to be flexible and accommodate the buyer's preferences. In addition, the buyer was involved in the planning process and is better positioned and motivated to be engaged in the learning process. The ensuing interaction/presentation will likely include the remaining components of adult learning. The seller can more easily make it active, relevant, and problem centered. The salesperson may not end up covering **all** the points contained

in the PowerPoint presentation, but the interaction covered those issues or points important to the buyer (which may not have been anticipated and available on a developed PowerPoint presentation). Even customers that seemed uninterested can surprise you with ideas once they engage in the learning process and the creative juices start to flow.

You never know when the customer will want to advance the sale (so, be ready)

Most salespeople agree on the importance of uncovering or developing customer dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction is a necessary for change. Most salespeople are familiar with the concept of offering product/service solutions that relieve buyer dissatisfaction. Solutions create the compelling reasons to change. Salespeople can struggle, however, to navigate a path between buyer dissatisfaction with the current situation and a compelling reason to change. PowerPoint can further limit the salesperson's ability to navigate this path.

Neil Rackham, author of *Major Account Sales Strategy*, studied the behaviors and results of 10,000 salespeople on 35,000 sales calls. Based on his research, he created a circular model for the buyer decision process. The buyer:

1. Changes over time
2. Recognizes needs
3. Evaluates options
4. Resolves concerns
5. Makes a decision
6. Implements the decision
7. Repeats the process

Salespeople typically get called into the process when a customer begins to recognize a need for change (stage 2). Rackam said about his research, "Our first finding was simple but crucial. Successful people ask a lot more questions during sales calls (as a means to developing dissatisfaction) than do their less successful colleagues. We found that these less successful people tend to do most of the talking. They become involved in product discussion very early in the sale. Frequently, they give presentations as a means of generating customer interest." You can imagine how a successful salesperson, interested in asking more questions, could leverage a white board as support media during an interactive sales presentation. Equally, you can imagine a less successful salesperson using PowerPoint to "generate customer interest."

One of the most critical points in the decision (sales) process is when the buyer recognizes the need to change and shifts to evaluating options. A good salesperson is right there in the conversation ready to influence the buyer's decision criteria. Ready to influence the way the buyer views his products or services relative to the need at hand. In that moment, it is better to circle the areas of dissatisfaction on the white board with a big red pen and shift the conversation accordingly than it is to finish the deck.

Sometimes the decision maker is late to the party

I don't have empirical evidence to help prove this hypothesis. However, in 20 years of sales and facilitation, I have given or witnessed hundreds of mostly one-way presentations (as PowerPoint tends to be mostly one-way) out-

lining buyer options. These presentations are typically tailored to the not-so-engaged decision maker. Often, influential colleagues of the decision maker request these presentations in hopes of compelling the decision maker to change. Often, the strategy fails.

Although late in the sales process, these presentations were missed learning opportunities. Additionally, I can't remember a time a decision maker called to recommend a solution that wasn't outlined in the one-way presentation. Alternatively, as mentioned, in a learning environment, the decision maker has an opportunity to discover his own, likely broader, needs. Equally powerful, the decision maker gets the opportunity to share in the development and choice of options. Successfully layering the learning process later in the sales cycle can result in the decision maker:

1. Opening up to other benefits of the product or service.
2. Engaging other departments in the sales process.
3. Agreeing to a road map for competing the sales cycle.
4. Becoming less sensitive to price.
5. Thinking of the seller as a business partner.

By the way, at this point the seller is no longer just communicating the company's message; the salesperson is now a part of the company's competitive advantage.

Conclusion

The engineers at Microsoft designed PowerPoint to help people communicate more effectively and efficiently. Although effective

and efficient communication is an important part of a good sales presentation, sales presentations often require more. Sales presentations require learning and presentation media flexible enough to facilitate it. Through learning and discovery, a buyer and seller give themselves the best chance to identify problems and solutions that create compelling reasons for change. The seller is responsible for creating a learning environment and should start with an more interactive media. So the choice is yours: PowerPoint or not to PowerPoint. It may depend on the stage of the selling process and your specific goals.

John C. Gill is the UPS Sales Training Manager for the North Central Region. He has 20 years in Sales with UPS including direct sales, sales management and sales training.