

# Slides from Hell

## *How to make truly horrendous PowerPoint Slides*

**By Ray Blake of GR Business Process Solutions**

Let me take you back to the days of my childhood in the 1970's. In many ways, this was a more carefree time, of course. People had respect for their elders, the village bobby was always welcome for a chat at the garden gate, pop records had real tunes and you could understand the words.

Back then, there were 3 channels on the TV and the programmes for us children would run out before the 6 o'clock news. Many's the day when the strains of the Captain Pugwash closing theme would fade out and the strident chords of the BBC News bulletin would cruelly break in long before I was sated. In desperation I'd watch the opening minute or two of the news in the hope that there might today be a special version for children with cartoon characters.

The daily disappointment was sometimes tempered when the shot cut from a talking head to something cooked up by the BBC Graphics department. It might be some bullet point text listing the key points from the budget, or some stick men, boats and fish depicting the day's manoeuvres in the Cod War. But always I'd stare in awe at these screens, marvelling at the technology which allowed such things to be brought to us in full, black and white glory.

Nowadays, of course, this god-like power is easily available to all of us, thanks to PowerPoint and products like it. Sadly, though, this is rarely backed up by the sort of design aptitude and formal layout training that I'm sure the BBC Graphics department used to insist on for its staff. Not to put too fine a point on it, the majority of PowerPoint presentations

we are all now subjected to contain some of the most heinous design crimes since the 'Vision On' Gallery closed its doors.

I'd like to share with you some of the most widely-perpetrated of those crimes, through examining some slides I've gritted my teeth to create specially for the purpose of lambasting. If, whilst looking at these slides and reading my diatribes, you spot some of your own sins, then please be reassured that there is not a single error I will highlight here that I have not at some time made myself; indeed, I am in several respects a multiple recidivist. Console yourself also with the thought that I have no formal design training either, and that this critique represents merely the opinions and prejudices of a man who has already freely admitted to an attachment to children's television from the early 1970s.

That being said, let's start with a truly hideous example of what is possible in PowerPoint. Have a look at Exhibit A.

So, where do we start with this one? This slide has a number of errors:

1. I think the first point is that the sidebar and the slide title are vying for attention quite loudly. It's a battle that either of them could win, but your text stands little chance of scoring a hit in such heavy crossfire!
2. And speaking of that sidebar, it has stolen a good 20% of your screen space. Up on the wall, that's a huge acreage which you can't use for anything else.

3. Your logo is also cramping your space. Without the contrived short bullet at the bottom, you've lost another third of the remaining slide space. And what is that logo doing there on every slide? Do your people really need a constant reminder of who they work for or which company is presenting to them? A logo belongs only on your welcome slide. Have this showing for 10 minutes prior to the start of the presentation, and anyone wandering into the wrong room will as a result of your logo quickly realise their mistake and be on their way.
4. Typographically, there's a lot going on for a single slide, including text oriented at three different angles. As a general rule, no more than two fonts should be used per slide (one for the heading, one for body text) and these ought to be consistent between slides. Any orientation other than horizontal, left to right should be used very sparingly for extreme emphasis and only once on any one slide. If you need to know which fonts 'go' together, do a web search for 'font families'.
5. And what about the words themselves? Do they support what you will say, or do they replace it? To appropriate an old analogy, a PowerPoint slide should be used rather as a drunkard uses a lamppost: for support, rather than for illumination. If your slide says everything you are going to, just send the slides and stay in bed. The first two points could have said just, "Lead generation" and "servicing" instead of stealing the speaker's thunder entirely.
6. When bullet points span more than one line like this, you should really put more white space in between them to make them stand out as individual items.
7. That last bullet point says an awful lot about the speaker, and nothing that's good. A skilful speaker will not need this pseudo-cheerful, pseudo-jokey prompt because he will have created a fun element already. An unskilful one will find that the only humorous response this bullet provokes is ironic and at his expense.
8. While we're on the subject of bullet points, they should be used sparingly. Slide after slide of the damned things are dreadfully tiring, ultimately resulting in a phenomenon known as 'death by bullet point' in which the audience's attention leaves the room after three slides, followed after three more by their will to live.

Exhibit B is another prime candidate for PowerPoint Room 101

There are some good things about this slide. Notice how the title is at the left rather than

the top. This sort of variation from slide to slide will help to maintain interest. Also, there is the recognition that linking concepts to pictures will aid retention.

Problems?

1. Look at the big image to the left. It's a picture of somebody talking, so theoretically it

matches the concept it is used to represent. However, the man actually looks quite angry, almost as though he is snarling the words. In view of the three things we're highlighting, this is highly

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### What we need to do this week

- Spend as much time as possible with key lead generators and find out what we can do to increase the flow of business leads
- Try to find four new sales each from servicing activity outlined at the national conference
- Have fun!



**Exhibit A: So much to say, so little room**

inappropriate. It's the picture which will linger in memories, not the words.

2. Notice how contrived some of the links are. Powerful = weightlifter? This is a sign of the designer having three things: (a) a mistaken belief that here needs to be a picture for everything; (b) a small clipart collection; and (c) a limited imagination.
3. The graphical styles here are completely at odds with each other. Stick men, cartoon heads and photo-realism shouldn't be together in the same presentation, let alone on one slide.
4. The typography of the main heading to the left needs work. Having the word 'new' all alone on the line strikes a discordant note and inappropriately emphasises newness. Stretching the text box slightly would put matters right.
5. On the right hand side of the slide, we have what is fundamentally a bullet list, albeit one decorated with pictures. Moving the second picture to the left and putting the word 'successful' to its right would break up the tyranny of the vertical list.
6. If a picture really does paint a thousand words, given that we have put an appropriate picture on the slide, why bother with one word? Could the picture stand alone, particularly since the speaker will be filling out the detail when he speaks?

And while we're on the subject of clichés ("a thousand words"? For goodness' sake!) have you seen any of those clipart pictures before?



**Exhibit B: A visual salad nicoise**

There are clipart clichés as well as verbal clichés. Many of you will remember the days of Word 6 with its tiny clip art collection. For a few years back in the early 90s, that bald man scratching his head and the angry man thumping the table must have been on the screen more often than Carol Vordeman. The next time you use the little stick men in a

huddle to represent teamwork, or the flashing lightbulb to symbolise an idea, at least consider whether there is any other way you could depict these concepts.

Of course, there comes a time when the PowerPoint amateur discovers two very dangerous tools indeed. Custom animations and slide transitions have

recently been classified by the UN as 'weapons of mass destruction' and cited at the War Crimes tribunal in The Hague on more than one occasion. As far as both of these tools are concerned, my advice is the same: pick a style and stick to it. Potentially there is boredom if every slide element skates in from the right or fades in from the background. It might be tiring for each slide to segue into the next using a diagonal wipe. But if the alternative is a dizzying combination of mismatched zooms, shrinks, checkerboard wipes and pirouettes then boredom is a very small price to pay.

In closing, let me reiterate my earlier confession; I have committed all of the offences I have described, some of them many times. But I like to think of myself now as a reformed character, and if my admissions can show others the way to stay on the straight and narrow, then at least some good will have come from my sorry and sordid story.

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