

The PowerLessNess of PowerPoint

Andrew Thomas, Principal 9-12, Crawford Adventist Academy, Willowdale, ON

Scenario: You hear about a presentation that you would really like to hear and be a part of. You go to the venue of the presentation, you see the white screen pulled down, you see a projected image with the title of the presentation on it, and you are prepared for an exciting delivery with information that is relevant to your career or personal development. The presenter introduces himself and begins the presentation by moving to the next slide. By the time he reaches the fifth slide, you realize that every word he is saying is projected on the screen...every single word, paragraph after paragraph.



If this scenario sounds like an experience you have had or are guilty of, then you understand why I chose to use the word “PowerLessNess” when describing some PowerPoint presentations. I have seen too many people, when given the opportunity to present an idea, use PowerPoint ineffectually, thus killing the idea they had to share before it had the opportunity to be birthed in others. There is hope, however, if you are able to stick to five general ‘bodybuilding’ rules of PowerPoint.

Rule #1: Watch what you eat. Bodybuilders carefully plan each meal so that it will provide them with the right amounts of proteins and carbohydrates. Every presentation should begin with a plan for how the right amounts of information can be efficiently communicated to an audience. A good meal requires healthy ingredients, preferably fresh and potent. In the case of a presentation, the “ingredients” are the images and data used in the slides. Stale information or inferior content are the death of any presentation. Edward Tufte, a professor at Yale University, said “If your words or images are not on point, making them dance in color won’t make them relevant.”

Rule #2: Watch what you watch. Bodybuilders pay attention to their environment. If you work out in a cramped disorderly space, you probably won’t work out much, if at all. If you go to a gym that is spacious and presentable, you are more motivated and willing to work out. The presentation of your presentation is very important; a good presentation needs to have a solid design and layout. A good design and layout enables your audience to focus on the content of your PowerPoint presentation.

Rule #3: Watch yourself. Any good fitness centre has mirrors, often from wall to wall, so that bodybuilders can see themselves while working out. Your first day in the gym may not be the best time to look at yourself for change but after frequent visits you see the change. As a presenter, it is important that you practice, practice, and when you are done practicing, practice again. You may not be the best presenter in the world, but ample practice will notably enhance the presentation experience for you and your audience.

Rule #4: Watch your surroundings. Besides space and equipment, bodybuilders look for a fitness centre with a healthy atmosphere. I know I would feel cheated if I went to a fitness centre that smelled of smoke and served hamburgers and greasy fries as an energy booster.

As a presenter, you need to be aware of your presentation environment and ensure everything is in place to ensure that your presentation is a success. The visual display, sound, lighting, seating configuration, and other environmental considerations can lay waste to hours of work invested in preparing your slides.

Rule #5: Watch others. Most bodybuilders do not invest their lives and their money into bodybuilding so they can look in the mirror and admire themselves. They have a specific audience to which they want to appeal. Before you begin preparing or presenting a single PowerPoint slide, you will want to clearly understand who your audience is, what their level of understanding is on your topic, and what expectations they have for your presentation. While presenting, pay attention to the audience's mood and adjust your approach accordingly. You may need to speed up or slow down, spend more time on a particular subject or skip entire slides, or do something to wake them up or keep them focused. At the end of your PowerPoint presentation, your audience will gauge whether your slides were informative and memorable or powerless.

Administrators, teachers, parents and students . . . if we master the 'bodybuilding' rules of PowerPoint, we will pack more power in the points we have to make in the classroom and in the boardroom.