



Online

Speak up

Bad business presentations could be costing UK business £8bn a year - and the software tools designed to solve the problem are part of the cause. Danny Bradbury reports

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[The Guardian](#)

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If you have ever stepped up to the podium to give a presentation with a dry mouth, pounding heart and clammy hands, perhaps you should visit the Virtual Reality Medical Centre in San Diego, California, where stressed executives pay \$120 (£70) per 50-minute session to practice in a virtual world.

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After subjects don a virtual reality headset, they experience standing in a virtual room with a computerised audience. As the speakers run through their presentation, doctors measure heartbeat and skin temperature. They turn up the pressure as speakers become more comfortable. Mobiles ring and audience members are made to look bored: they begin whispering or even leave the room.

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"In addition to treating fear, a lot of executives come to practice their skills," explains the centre's director, Brenda Wiederhold. "They can bring their speech and put their PowerPoint slides directly into the virtual environment."

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It is no surprise that people are so concerned about speaking to colleagues. Max Atkinson, a visiting professor at Henley Management College, says boring business meetings cost UK businesses £7.6bn a year. He assessed how many managers in the UK earn an average of £30,000 per year, extrapolating the cost for all to attend an hour of presentations per week. "What it didn't take into account was the time the presenter spent preparing, or costs such as venue and equipment hire," he says.

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Atkinson assumes that all time spent in meetings is useless, adding that most presenters' downfall is the very thing supposed to enhance their performance: Microsoft's PowerPoint software. "I have asked hundreds of people how

many lively, inspiring PowerPoint presentations they have seen," he says. "Most people struggle to come up with a single one."

In his 28-page anti-slideware manifesto, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*, Yale professor Edward Tufte criticises it for being too presenter-focused and simplistic, creating a rift between audience and presenter. Atkinson agrees, arguing that nervous presenters can hide behind the technology by simply reading the bullet points, distancing themselves from the audience. "People don't plan. Once they have a series of bullet points together, they think they're prepared, and they just waffle."

The dreariness of text stems not just from this inherent repetition, but also from the written word's incompatibility with slideware, says Atkinson. In a business context, the written word is meant to convey detail (something impossible in a slide format), while inspiration, which is generally what presentations are meant to provide, is best provided by the spoken word.

But if managers are relying on text in their presentations it could be because bad practice is hardwired into the system. Most of PowerPoint 2003's pre-prepared slide templates rely on text for at least half the content. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Microsoft has steered away from coding best practice into its newer generation of meeting aids.

Microsoft's Livemeeting, for example, is a hosted web conferencing service that lets people interact in a virtual "room" online. Presenters can run through their PowerPoint slides, use animated laser pointer and highlighter tools, and even allow people to take control of their desktop PC screens, explains group marketing manager Neil Laver. With more than a hundred possible attendees, it is also possible to poll the audience, who can also register instructions for the presenter, such as "slow down".

If middle managers are not adept at presentation and meeting management, wouldn't it make sense to put in templates with such things as proper agendas and reminders to keep the meeting on track?

"We need to be realistic," says Laver. "Organisations have a responsibility to ensure staff are properly trained. Although [people such as Tufte] sound like they're [running] PowerPoint down, they're probably doing a good thing by making organisations recognise that you can't just stick software on desktops and make people productive."

The distance technology puts between a presenter and an audience can be a good thing, says Nigel Stevens, senior vice president of enterprise technology services at publishing giant Reed Elsevier. He regularly uses Livemeeting to help

executives get together, and likes it because it can help reduce jitters. "There are people who hate the thought of walking into a room where there are 100 people, and doing a PowerPoint presentation," he says, but with Livemeeting, it is different. "You don't feel as though you're presenting to 120 people."

Tim Savage, director of Toltec Network, an organisational development consultancy, disagrees. "It doesn't address the issue. People can avoid the areas they need to improve on if they're relying on technology."

But unlike PowerPoint, remote conferencing technology doesn't just allow presenters to distance themselves from the audience. It also lets the audience disengage, as they do during teleconference calls. Stevens regularly works on other tasks during remote conferencing sessions. Do the presenters know this? "I think there is a different mindset. What you can't see, you don't worry about."

Savage believes this distancing effect in virtual meetings can lead to long-term cultural damage within an organisation. He prescribes a mixture of structured objectives, effective chairs who keep meetings on track and, most importantly, dialogue. Knowing they could be called on for comment keeps attendees alert and helps them feel involved.

But some of these techniques seem fundamentally incompatible with online presentation software. It is hard to strike up a dialogue with an attendee you don't even know is there. Executives from WebEx, a rival to Livemeeting, argue that meetings should be less structured, not more, to avoid becoming boring.

There is at least one way to find a compromise. Savage suggests investing time in a business relationship early on, with intensive face-to-face meetings to establish bonds between people who will be working together. These can help avoid the relationship atrophy he associates with over-reliance on remote meetings. For managers who use PowerPoint as a crutch, cutting the text and leaving only well thought-out visuals is one part of the equation; using traditional techniques such as engaging your audience with eye contact and encouraging dialogue is the other.

All this might frighten managers not used to looking at their audiences, which brings us back to the Virtual Reality Medical Centre, and to at least one thing it cannot do. Imagining your audience with no clothes on might work for presenters in more conventional settings, but perhaps it is just as well the centre's software doesn't include a virtual nakedness function. Some features are best left uncoded.

Links

Livemeeting : www.livemeeting.com

Max Atkinson: www.speaking.co.uk

Toltec Network: www.toltecnetwork.com

VRMC: www.vrphobia.com

WebEx: www.webex.com

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