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Meet the MasterMinds: Cliff Atkinson Goes *Beyond Bullet Points*

Cliff Atkinson is an expert on improving communications using Microsoft PowerPoint, and the author of ***Beyond Bullet Points***. He is the president of Sociable Media, and an independent management consultant whose clients include companies ranked in the top five of the ***Fortune*** 500.

Atkinson is also an instructor at UCLA Extension and a senior contributor to the ***MarketingProfs*** newsletter. His work has been featured in ***Strategy+Business*** magazine, and ***Beyond Bullet Points*** is now used as a course text at Wharton.

MCNews: What are your thoughts on the way consultants use PowerPoint in presentations?

Atkinson: Most consulting firms have their own ways of using PowerPoint, which are deeply ingrained in their cultures. When you look at any organization's presentations, you see a very clear reflection of its underlying culture of communication.

As educational psychologist Richard E. Mayer points out, it can be one of two worldviews. The dominant worldview is ***information presentation***, which focuses only on the display of data and has little or no regard for the impact of the presentation on the audience. From this perspective, understanding is simply not a criterion for success: you drive the data across the slides, and you're done.

The other possible worldview is ***cognitive guidance***, which begins by first understanding how the human mind works, and then aligns a PowerPoint presentation with that understanding. This second worldview produces radically different PowerPoint results because the information has been distilled, broken into chunks, illustrated, and explained in a way that supports short-term and long-term memory. The cognitive approach provides real understanding that someone can apply in the workplace.

Consultants everywhere should take a serious look at their worldview to make sure it aligns with their own strategy and that of their clients.

MCNews: Author Edward Tufte thinks that PowerPoint templates “usually weaken verbal and spatial reasoning, and almost always corrupt statistical analysis.” Do you agree?

Atkinson: I disagree. Almost any medium can be configured in ways that effectively facilitate cognitive guidance. The great advantage that PowerPoint has over other media (like paper) is that it can be easily used to manage multimedia elements that support learning.

Just as there are poorly-produced novels, films, Web sites, business plans, spreadsheets, emails, charts, and PowerPoint presentations, there is also the potential in each of these media and genres to produce something that helps other people effectively grasp ideas.

MCNews: In *Beyond Bullet Points*, you adapt a filmmaker’s three-step approach to producing a script and use it for putting together a PowerPoint presentation. Can you describe the three-step approach and why Hollywood’s techniques inspired you?

Atkinson: Hollywood is very effective at communicating complex information using projected images and spoken words—without a bullet point in sight. They accomplish this by tapping into the classical techniques of story structure that have worked for thousands of years.

Filmmakers adapt these ideas to a multimedia experience by: 1. writing a script to focus their ideas; 2. storyboarding the script to clarify those ideas; and 3. producing the script to engage the audience.

We can learn a lot from storytellers by adapting their process and blending it with classical ideas of persuasion and reasoning to produce a contemporary, human-mediated experience.

MCNews: Can you define storyboarding, and tell us how it contributes to a stronger presentation?

Atkinson: Storyboarding takes on a very specific meaning in my book. It describes a process that is inspired by Hollywood but has evolved to a new form. Where traditional storyboarding might involve sketching selected scenes from a screenplay, a PowerPoint storyboard maps every element of a story back to a PowerPoint file in multiple ways.

Structure your story in advance of working in PowerPoint. Using the Slide Sorter view, you can see each section of your story by reading the headlines across the thumbnail images of the slides. In Notes Page view, you capture what you will show on each slide and, importantly, what you will say with your spoken words. And in Normal view, you see only what will be displayed on any single slide.

Disney’s animation division is beginning to storyboard using PowerPoint, but they might learn a thing or two from advanced PowerPoint storyboarding experts.

MCNews: What’s your view on how much information should be placed on a single PowerPoint slide?

Atkinson: Actually the question should really be: How much information should be presented, both verbally and visually, given the time constraints of a presentation? Whatever that amount, break it down into digestible chunks at an even pace that is appropriate to your audience; then place the corresponding chunks of information in the visual area of the slide, and in the verbal area in the form of the Notes Pages.

MCNews: Aren't there instances when you simply have to have very dense, data-driven PowerPoint slides?

Atkinson: You can show someone data all day long if you are interested only in information presentation; but if you care whether someone actually understands it, you have to accommodate the limited capacity of the working memory.

The great influx of information in our time demands even greater effort to distill it down to its essence in a way that the mind can easily comprehend. There are many techniques that can help with this distillation.

For example, in my book I show how to apply a "logic tree" technique that's as old as Aristotle but as contemporary as Barbara Minto's Pyramid Principle, which is taught at McKinsey, and many other consulting firms.

Consultants are expected to clearly discern what is most important and what relates specifically to decisions clients need to make. Dumping all the data on a deck of PowerPoint slides unfortunately does not reflect discernment, nor does it help people understand or make decisions.

MCNews: What's your advice on how to use headlines in a presentation?

Atkinson: Virtually all PowerPoint presentations I've seen use category headings, which simply name a category of information, and then force the viewer to work hard to figure out what's important among all the items in the bulleted list below the heading.

By contrast, a headline written as a complete sentence provides a clear signal to the audience about what you want to communicate, so their attention can then turn to you.

MCNews: Some people believe that single keywords are most effective for text on slides, while others believe complete sentences communicate best. What tips have you got for how to write text for slide presentations?

Atkinson: When we start talking about text on a slide, it's important to begin by affirming the research: presenting text that is identical to narration actually harms the ability of the audience to understand. Removing the text from the screen improves the ability of the audience to retain the information by 28%, and improves their ability to apply the information by 79%.

Keeping in mind the imperative to minimize text on the screen, the bulk of writing text for a PowerPoint presentation should be in the headlines that form your story structure. Then you write the narrative explanation of each of those headlines in Notes Page view.

Because the words have already been captured in the form of the headlines and notes, the screen is much less dependent on text to convey information and more dependent on you to communicate it with your spoken words and expressions. With this approach, the PowerPoint screen becomes a much more creative and interesting tool that can hold a few words, or no words at all.

One example in my book shows how to create a powerful effect by using only two simple animated words that appear on the screen while you speak.

MCNews: When you see a PowerPoint presentation, what is the most common area you think needs improvement?

Atkinson: By far, it is the critical thinking—or lack thereof—that underlies the presentation. It's common to see presentations that are really "works in progress" awaiting the presenter to come back and distill the information into a form that the audience doesn't have to work so hard to get.

MCNews: Do you have any examples of PowerPoint presentations that you believe are particularly effective?

Atkinson: There are examples in my Beyond Bullets blog, such as the ones at www.beyondbullets.com/2005/02/notespages.html and www.beyondbullets.com/2004/07/title.html.

If any of your readers come across any good ones, they can send them my way and I'll blog about them!

MCNews: Thanks for your time and the great tips.

Find out more about Cliff Atkinson at www.sociablemedia.com, and visit his blog at www.beyondbullets.com.