

TO SERVE & PROJECT



10 TIPS TO HELP YOU KEEP YOUR POWERPOINT PRESENTATION FROM SUCKING*

By Tim Harrower

Still using slides? You're a dinosaur! Everybody's gone digital — though at last fall's SND workshop in D.C., it was surprising how poor those e-slideshows sometimes looked. For a society of design professionals, we really ought to upgrade the quality of our visuals, whether in print or onscreen. So before you launch your next presentation, here's a few helpful pointers:

1. Get a remote.

There's nothing less engaging than watching someone deliver a speech hunched over a keyboard, talking to the monitor, ignoring the audience. It's bad teaching. And it's poor showmanship.

So choose one: give a speech, or stare at your laptop. You can't do both.

For 50 bucks, you can buy a remote control that will advance your slides with the push of a button. (An infra-red remote is good, but its range is short and if you don't aim it exactly right, it won't work. Myself, I prefer the Keyspan radio-frequency remote, left, which works from anywhere in the room — even in my pocket.)

If you're going to be giving more than even one speech, buy a remote. Or make your paper buy one. It's worth every dime.

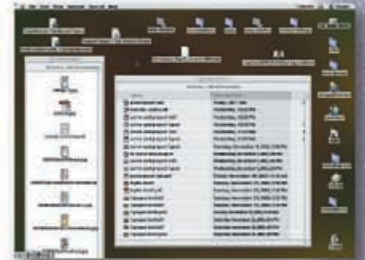


2. Spare us your desktop doodling.

I recently attended a speech where the presenter spent 10 minutes rearranging his desktop, opening folders, clicking this and closing that while his audience stared slack-jawed at the screen. By the time his speech actually started, our eyes had glazed over. Is there anything more mind-numbing than watching someone else noodle around on a computer?

It's like a rock band that re-tunes between songs, forcing everyone to listen to every *pling-pling-pling* and *twang-twang-twaaaang*. It's distracting. And it's un-pro.

So mute while you noodle. Many projectors, believe it or not, have a mute button. Or try this: plunk a coffee mug in front of the projector lens, to block the image (and give the audience's eyes a break) while you adjust your files in private.



*We realize that "PowerPoint" is a trademark of Microsoft, Inc., and if we keep using it generically, we'll get a pissy note from their lawyers. And besides, many of us don't even USE PowerPoint software for our "PowerPoint" shows. So instead, let's coin a new term: *e-slides*. As in, "I'm scanning some *e-slides* for the *e-slideshow* I gotta do next week."

3. Maximize your image size.

When you give a speech, you may be surprised at how gorgeous your slides look. That's because *you're standing five feet away from the screen*. But what about those poor schmucks sitting 100 feet away — in other words, most of your audience?

Trust me: Your fabulous pages lose their fabulousness when they look like fuzzy postage stamps. (In fact, that may be one reason why those big, sexy, single-image pages are so popular at conferences. They're the only pages that make sense to viewers sitting a mile away from the screen.)

Curiously, this wasn't such a problem back in the days of film slides (remember slides?). But it *is* a problem with e-slides. For some strange reason, images often shrink when we create our digitized presentations. Here's why:

A NEWSPAPER PAGE ON A SLIDE (projected onto a screen)



When shot as a slide (back in the old days), this newspaper page filled the frame from top to bottom. Then, during the speech, the slide was projected as tall as possible onto the screen. Thus, the page looked huge, and it was easy to see.

A NEWSPAPER PAGE IN AN E-SLIDESHOW (projected onto a screen)



This newspaper page has been artfully indented into the e-slideshow background. Then, during the speech, the image from the laptop's monitor is artfully indented on the screen. Which makes the page look much smaller — about half the size of the example above.

So remember to make your image as big as possible. When you're importing JPEG pages into your e-slideshow, run them as tall as you can — right to the top and bottom of the window (which usually means making them roughly 7.5 inches tall.)

And when it's showtime, project that image as tall as the screen allows. My rule of thumb is: If it's not uncomfortably big for the front row, it's uncomfortably small for everybody else.

4. Build your slideshow as a SQUARE.



After giving a bazillion speeches in countless hotels, schools and newsrooms, I can confidently report: *Most of the screens on Planet Earth are square-shaped*. Bummer. I wish they were mostly vertical, because most newspaper images are vertical. It would even be nice if screens were mostly horizontal, because our computer monitors (and slideshow templates) are horizontal.

But sadly, we must compromise. Otherwise, if you create a presentation that fits nicely on your computer monitor, your vertical images — i.e., 90% of your material — will look too small (see tip #3). And if you zoom up the projector until those verticals fill the screen, your horizontal images will be insanely over-wide.

So build the show, in your e-slideshow software, as a square. As you make those vertical images as tall as possible (say, 7.5 inches tall), make the horizontals 7.5 inches wide, too. Think of it as a traditional slide show, where slides may load vertically or sideways — but they always stay the same length.

5. Maximize your image resolution.

WARNING: The following information is both a) boring, and b) doomed to become obsolete very soon.

The biggest problem with digitally projected images is fuzziness. The colors are loud, yes. And you can view the show in a brighter room than you could with slides. But the details just aren't as crisp. Which is frustrating.

If you're working with pre-existing JPEG images (downloaded from the Web, for instance), there's not a lot you can do to increase their clarity. But if you're reworking PDFs, importing photos from a digital camera or digitizing old slides, the rule seems to be:

Use high-resolution images, and compress them as much as you can.

After relentless comparison testing, here's the best way I've found to process images:

◆ **STEP 1:** Open an image in Photoshop. If you're converting a PDF, import it in Photoshop rather than exporting it from Acrobat.

◆ **STEP 2:** Resize it. Under IMAGE SIZE, make vertical images 7.5 inches tall; make horizontal images 7.5 inches wide. Make the resolution 200 pixels/inch. I realize you've been told to make images 72 pixels/inch. But if you do that, they'll be blurrier. Long story. Just trust me.

◆ **STEP 3:** Make sure your colors are RGB.

◆ **STEP 4:** Save your image as a JPEG. When you see the dialogue box offering different JPEG options, choose "low quality" of 2 or 3, optimized.

Images processed this way will create files of around 200K, a reasonable size for slideshow images.

6. Zoom in.

When you're talking about newspaper design, it's nice to show full pages. But if you want to focus on details — which you usually do — then *zoom in*. Show us what you're talking about in *closeup*, not with a satellite view. Re-cropping or reshooting images may take extra work, yes — but it'll make your speech much more entertaining, and your audience won't have to squint and strain to see the microscopic nuances that you're yakking about.

7. Keep it simple.

Spiffy transitions! Kooky sound effects! Wacky backgrounds! They're fun! And they're distracting as hell! So decorate your slide show the way you'd decorate your newspaper: with restraint and subtlety. Using simple black or white backgrounds and smooth cross-fades between slides keeps everyone focused on the images — not on your goofy gimmicks.

And speaking of *focusing*: creating slides with teensy type is like running 7-point text in your newspaper. There's a limit to what's readable, especially to someone with bad eyes in a bad mood in the back row. Keep your words bold and brief; avoid type smaller than 24-point.

8. Avoid disastrous laptop meltdown.

How screwed are you if your computer locks up? Totally! And so far, I've found three sure-fire ways to choke a laptop:

- 1) Try running a big Powerpoint show from a CD disk, instead of copying it first to your hard drive.
- 2) Keep your laptop running too long. (Laptops seem to run hot anyway, so after about four hours, they get buggy and bomb.)
- 3) Make excessive multimedia demands, like adding music to slideshows, or dropping in jumbo Quicktime movies.

Interestingly, huge slideshow files don't seem to faze most laptops. I've created PowerPoint slideshows containing 200 slides — documents more than 40 megs in size — but it's never caused the computer to seize up during a speech. Yet.



Use CDs for backup, not performance



9. Use your laptop as a teleprompter.

OK: you bought a remote for your laptop (see tip #1). So where do you put your laptop, now that you don't need to futz with the keyboard during your speech?

The best place for your laptop is right alongside the projector. That way, you can stand beside the screen and look out at your audience while you speak — making eye contact with the crowd while you monitor your slides — and you'll never need to crane your neck to stare up at the screen.

10. Trust no one.

Now that you've become totally dependent on technology, do you honestly think you can get through any speech without something going haywire? You're dreamin', pal.

To survive, you'd better get paranoid. *Real* paranoid. Back up your speech onto a CD. Bring extra batteries for your remote. Bring cords and connectors that let you plug into any projector. (Hell, I travel with my *own* friggin' projector.) Find out who else has a laptop like yours, so when yours dies, you'll know where to bum a backup.

Check out the room before you speak. Get there early so you can test your gear, move the screen (it's always too far away), and adjust the room lights (so it's not too bright or too dark).

Think someone else is going to do this for you? Think some audiovisual technodork is going to *take care of you*? You're dreamin', pal.