First...Write the Script

Becoming a more efficient presentation design team

By

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First… Write the Script

No Hollywood producer or director would begin to shoot a movie without a script. But this is exactly what teams do when they start their presentation creation process by making slides. Presentations designed and delivered by a team can be very effective. However, the team design process can be messy and time consuming.

The key to being more efficient in presentation design is to first create a presentation script or outline. The idea is to get all basic items thrashed out early. This means meeting and discussing/debating all that will go into the presentation. This meeting should be done weeks or even months before you begin to put the final pieces together. The goal of the discussions is to create a presentation script or outline. For maximum efficiency this should be done in a single session. The meeting may take 4 to 8 hours and needs to be led by a facilitator. Creating the script comes before any visuals (slides) or support material is created.

Use Word, write out the script on paper or a flip chart or sticky notes. **Never start in PowerPoint** and never start with a previous set of slides. (Although they may be very useful later). The basic things you'll need for your script are the main or core message, the content components and an opening and closing.

The script /outline can be fully written out or be in point form. The team writing the script should be small, 3 or 4 people. More people than that can lead to too many opinions. All these opinions can cause much discussion and can be very time consuming.

Script creation begins with creating the main or core message of the presentation.

"We make visuals to match our words, not words to match our visuals."

Glenn Gibson – Before the Mic

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> *"The message is the soul of the presentation. Without a soul, a presentation is just a collection of facts."*
>
> *Jon Steel - The Perfect Pitch*

Create the main/core message

Crafting the main message of the presentation is the first thing to do. The main message drives the whole presentation design. It's the one thing that the audience needs to understand or believe. The first step in crafting your message is understanding the audience. The better you understand the goals, vision, dreams or mission of your audience the easier and faster it will be to craft the message. The message needs to be something they will remember long after the presentation has been delivered.

The key features of the main message are:

- A sentence with a verb
- Written in spoken language
- Contains the words *You* and or *Your*
- Is about a benefit or result

Outline the content areas/key points

The content's job is to support the main message. Write down all the key areas and points you need to make to support/verify/prove the message. **Do not select slides yet**, old slides will take you down an old path. That path will never be exactly the path you are on now since no two audiences are exactly alike.

Once all the content pieces have been identified, sort them into 3 or 4 big category "chunks". Ideally the chunks are named after benefits or results, not features. I find using sticky notes can be useful in this phase of script creation.

Ideas for visuals can be jotted down during content creation. But slides should not be created yet.

Craft an opening and a closing

The opening and closing sequences are the most critical moments in a presentation. Within seconds the opening must peak the audience's interest. It also must bring them into the presentation. The opening sequence must also answer the question every audience member is thinking, what's in it for me?

The opening must connect the audience to the main message. Ideally, the opening also introduces the visual theme of the presentation. The main presentation message is revealed to the audience in the opening sequence.

The closing sequence has 4 functions. It tells the audience that the presentation is wrapping up without having to use those words. It reviews the main content chunks one last time and it states the main message for the final time. The closing should also have a call to action. What is the next natural step to take with the audience?

Figure out the cast (the presentation team)

Who's speaking and when, who's opening and closing? Are there any outside experts being included to support the presentation? What are they saying and when? The most knowledgeable person may not necessarily be your best presenter. But the most knowledgeable people will be required to be present during the question period. A team leader should be designated but the leader does not have to be one of the presenters.

Putting it all together

Once a good first or second draft of the script/outline is complete you can then move into the next design phase, creating or selecting slides. The script often dictates a visual theme for the presentation. This theme as well as the color / font scheme should all be decided before slide creation begins.

When creating the slides, the script can still be tweaked, additions made, and items removed. This design phase is a good time to bring in an outside presentation designer. They can help refine the presentation structure, clarify the messaging and create visuals and graphics. Complex multi-product/service, multi-speaker presentations can be very challenging to put together. It may be useful to bring a presentation designer in earlier in the process with these types of presentations.

In the words of business guru Seth Godin – thrash early. Get the basic presentation structure figured out first. Then move into creating visual support materials.

A presentation is a narration supported by visuals (slides), it's not the other way around. Keeping this concept in mind helps a team be the most efficient in presentation creation.