How to Create Engaging PowerPoint Presentations

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1. Introduction
There is little question that PowerPoint has revolutionized our ability to deliver presentations to all types of audiences in all sorts of venues, from the huge rooms and screens at American Association of Equine Practitioners to local Veterinary Medical Associations (VMA) groups at your neighborhood restaurant to client presentations in your practice area. Fortunately, PowerPoint is one of the most straightforward of the Microsoft products to use. With very little training, nearly anyone can create a slide deck in a short amount of time. The challenge lies in how to create a memorable PowerPoint presentation that effectively communicates your message in an interesting and engaging manner.

It is with some humility that I present this topic, because my presentations have admittedly put plenty of students and veterinarians to sleep over the years. At the same time, I am regularly complimented on my slides. The purpose of this presentation is to share my philosophy, techniques, and experiences to create PowerPoint slide decks that effectively communicates your message in an interesting and engaging manner.

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2. General Philosophy
Slides are important. We are visual people. Attractive and well-composed slides can make a tremendous difference in the effectiveness of any presentation. When I first began my academic career, I did not believe that I was a great presenter, so I knew that I had to make great slides. My goal was to make slides that people not only wanted to look at but wanted to stare at. I knew that there had to be motion and something attractive or interesting to see. Because attention spans are short, each slide should not stay on the screen for long. Although my techniques have evolved over the years, my philosophy was, and continues to be, that veterinarians are no different from toddlers transfixed on Sesame Street, in which the actors capture kids’ attention with short, attractive, and seemingly simple skits. After 15 years of presenting, I have also learned the value of showing one’s personality and telling at least one story. The latter will depend on the type of presentation and meeting, but, for the most part, everyone enjoys the mental break that a story provides.

3. Know Your Audience
This is one of the most important considerations for any speaker. For the most part, your target audi-
ence should not be the smartest person in the room or the person with the most expertise in your area of focus or study. The most effective presenters are able to reach everyone in the room regardless of their previous level of knowledge or experience. Unfortunately, many speakers have become so focused on their specialty that they can no longer recall their baseline knowledge on the topic. Effective speakers ensure that they bring everyone up to speed, without being condescending, before launching into the complexities of their study or presentation. Doing so will engage everyone in the room and increase the reach of your message. In general, most speakers, especially those early in their career, overestimate the general knowledge level with the idea that “everyone knows that.” One slide is often all it takes to bring everyone up to the same level. In so doing, you may even teach the other experts in the room a new way to present this seemingly basic information. There is little doubt that we all learn from each other during presentations, albeit at different levels.

4. Know Your Venue

The size of the venue and location of the screen(s) should affect the composition of your slides. In a small room in which attendees are sitting close to the screen, more information can be included on each slide. If the room is large and the screen relatively small, a presentation designed for a small room will be much less effective. This is especially true for meeting rooms that are long and narrow, in which people enter from the back of the room. This presents the most challenging situation for a speaker. There is often only a single, relatively small screen in the front of the room. In such cases, content is often very challenging to see by the majority of people in the room. In general, the larger the room, the more real estate your images and videos should occupy on each slide. Although this will result in a larger number of slides per presentation, this alone will not increase its duration.

In very large rooms, such as those used for the Annual American Association of Equine Practitioners Convention, multiple screens are often used. The presenter may not be able to see any of the screens, because they are often located in front of the presenter. This can be very disconcerting. For this reason, it is a great idea to explore the stage during a break to familiarize yourself with the layout of the room, stage, and screens. In such cases, a laser pointer may be ineffective to direct the viewer to a specific structure or lesion. Even if the presenter can use a laser pointer, it can only be directed to one screen at a time. Animated arrows can be used instead to direct the eye toward a lesion. Arrows will show up on all screens and will remain in place long enough for all viewers to be directed to the lesion or region of interest. It should also be mentioned that effective use of the laser pointer is a skill in itself. It is quite challenging to hold a laser still on a particular lesion, especially when nervous and/or over-caffeinated.

5. Know Your Projector

Many veterinarians have witnessed presentations with images that were so dark that they were unreadable on the screen, especially of imaging studies. Invariably, the presenter will often apologize profusely for the darkness (or brightness) of their images and mention how much better they project on their laptop. This clearly does not help the meeting attendee and can quickly become annoying if the presenter fixates on this problem throughout their presentation. I have been guilty of this and have learned to prevent this situation by testing the projector before my scheduled presentation time. If the images are too dark, the projector brightness can be easily adjusted by selecting the menu button on the projector and searching for the image or picture menu to find the brightness and contrast settings. With the exception of very large venues, the projector is almost always sitting on a table that is very accessible to you as the presenter. I routinely adjust brightness settings on the projector, even if the AV person discourages me from doing so. It only takes a few minutes and makes a huge difference in the viewer’s experience. You have probably spent countless hours putting your presentation together. It only takes a few minutes to make these adjustments and it is time very well spent.

6. Number of Slides

Many presenters become fixated on a specific number of slides for a given presentation length. Whereas one slide per minute of presentation is sometimes used as a general guideline for many presenters, this is not set in stone and should not be relied on. I have given 20-minute presentations with 60 to 70 slides and 1-hour presentations with 40 slides. Much of this depends on the design of the room, which affects the amount of content on each slide and therefore the number of slides in a presentation. As mentioned above, more slides and less content per slide in large rooms will enable better viewing from far away.

Speaking time per slide is dependent on the amount of content discussed per slide and how much is actually stated. Although intuitive, many presenters crowd a slide with so much content in an effort to “reduce” slide numbers and to meet a predefined number of slides. In effect, this accomplishes little to reduce speaking time. By spreading the same content onto two or more slides, the information will become more visible and pleasing to the eye, without affecting the time to deliver the content.

7. Slide Design and Composition

There is nothing worse than sitting through an entire day watching presentations with a blue background and yellow or white text, yet this “guideline”
continues to be perpetuated as a standard for veterinary presentations. There are countless slide designs and color schemes available on PowerPoint, Microsoft Online, and other online sources. Additionally, color schemes can be easily modified within PowerPoint to suit individual tastes. It is recommended to test how some brightly colored schemes will project on the screen, because they may appear dramatically different than on your laptop screen. Presenters should also keep in mind that green and red, colors commonly used for arrows and other indicators, cannot be differentiated by those who are colorblind (8% of men). Given the current demographics of equine practitioners, this can be a problem for a percentage of attendees.

Text
Text should serve to guide both the presenter and the audience through each slide and should summarize the main points of the slide. Neither entire sentences (unless quotes) nor entire paragraphs should be included on slides. Too much text is overwhelming to the audience and prompts them to read and not listen to your message. Additionally, text should only be included on a slide if it will be discussed. Presenters should not assume that attendees will read text that is not presented. Font size should also be considered. In larger rooms, a larger font will improve visibility for attendees, especially in long, narrow rooms in which attendees tend to congregate in the back of the room near the door. In contrast, a very large font can be obnoxious and give the impression that you are “yelling” at the audience, similar to using all caps in e-mails.

Images
Images improve the viewing experience. My goal is generally to have at least one image per slide, ideally to support the concept being delivered on the slide but also for aesthetic purposes. Many presenters effectively use horse images of all types for this purpose. If these images are “borrowed” from the web or from others’ presentations, the source should be revealed to represent the person who acquired that image. Copyrighted images should not be used without the owner’s permission.

Images can be easily cropped within PowerPoint with the use of the crop tool under the Picture Tools menu. Photoshop is not necessary for this purpose. This is especially useful to crop identifying information on imaging studies to protect patient anonymity. This is important for all horses, but especially when a horse is recognizable at the local, national, or international level. Another advantage of using PowerPoint to crop images is that you can later uncrop the image on the slide to reveal the patient information. Image brightness, contrast, and multiple other settings can also be adjusted within PowerPoint. Increasing or decreasing the brightness can also be effective to alter how the images are projected on the screen. This is especially useful when a projector is out of reach and cannot be adjusted. For an even more polished look, the background of images can be removed to show only the horse or limb itself. This can easily be performed within the Mac version of PowerPoint but unfortunately cannot be performed with the Windows PowerPoint version. Non-Mac users can use Photoshop to remove the background, although this is much more cumbersome and time-consuming. Images should be saved as .png files to preserve the background transparency (Fig. 1).

General Composition
The composition of a slide should create a balanced and pleasing look. It is not necessary to select the exact slide format from the layout menu, because images and videos can be inserted into any slide layout, and text boxes can be readily altered in size. Text should not extend to the edges of slides, especially at the bottom, where it may be cut off when projected. Images should be large enough to be visible from the back of the room and generally should not be smaller than one fourth of the slide. A suggested rule of thumb is no more than two images per slide, because more than two images will often crowd the slide. If images are placed side by side, their size can be adjusted with the use of Picture Tools with PowerPoint to make them equal in size, when desired. Although images can be moved...
anywhere on the slide, “nudging” with the up, down, right, or left arrows will allow images to be positioned exactly as desired.

When considering the position of text and images, many presenters tend to place text toward the top of the slide with images below the text and toward the bottom of the slide (Fig. 2). If the images are the primary focus of the slide and you are presenting in a small and flat room, people in the back of the room will find it difficult to see the images over others’ heads. This is especially true if the projector screen cannot be raised very high. In such cases, it is recommended to place the images toward the top of the slide and the text near the bottom (Fig. 3).

8. Revisit Your Message

After all slides are made, it is recommended to step away from your individual slides and look at your presentation from a more global perspective. This is the time to revisit the message(s) that you hope everyone will take away from your presentation as they leave the room. Ask yourself if the presentation has effectively illustrated those messages. Especially with scientific presentations, it is easy to get lost in the details of the study or focus too much time on side tangents that your main conclusion(s) and take home messages do not come across in the presentation.

9. Effective Use of Animation

There are countless ways to animate slide content. I use animation extensively to lead myself and the viewer through each slide. It helps to keep me on track and prevents viewers from “reading ahead” and not focusing on the topic at hand. Several animation techniques will be demonstrated during the presentation. It is possible for animations to be overdone; some may believe that to be true for my slides. Over the years, however, I have reduced the variety of animation types used for text and images. My preference is “wipe from left” for text and “dissolve in” for images.

Arrows are useful to direct attention to lesions or anatomic structures on images, especially when animated with the use of “wipe” up, down, right, or left, depending on the desired direction. Arrows are very useful when a laser pointer is either challenging or impossible to use, as discussed above. This is especially true for novice presenters who may be quite nervous and shaky. It is often shocking to discover how much the laser shakes, which only makes the shaking worse. Presenters tend to counter this by making big sweeping movements on the slide that do not necessarily direct the viewer to any one location. Laser pointer stability can be improved by bracing the elbow or arm against the body to reduce shaking. Animation for videos are discussed below.

10. Videos

The ability to insert videos into slides has transformed presentations to allow seamless transitions from static images to movies, but nearly every presenter has a horror story about their videos not playing in a presentation. This should not deter their use, because the most common reason is a basic lack of understanding of PowerPoint’s functionality with videos. Most importantly, one must understand that movies are not completely imported into a slide. For example, if you have inserted a movie named “Spot LF.mpeg” into the slide, you will see the first frame of the movie displayed on the slide itself. When you click on the movie to make it play, you are essentially asking PowerPoint to function as a movie player (similar to Windows Media Player, QuickTime, etc). PowerPoint will then
“search” for that file name in the folder of the presentation and then play it on the slide. It is therefore critical that the movie be located in the same folder as the presentation, so that PowerPoint can find the file and play it. This is the most common reason why a movie will not play in a presentation. It is also important not to alter the movie file name after it has been inserted into the slide. For example, if we decided to change the name of the movie “Spot LF.mpeg” to “Rosie LF.mpeg,” PowerPoint will continue to look for “Spot LF.mpeg” because that was the file initially inserted. Because PowerPoint can no longer find Spot LF.mpeg, the movie will not play. This can be fixed by deleting and then reinserting the movie with its new file name or by changing the file name back to its original name.

Video playing can be made even more seamless through the use of Custom Animation features for movies. I use this feature on nearly every video imported into presentations so that I can play a movie from anywhere in the room with a handheld clicker. It saves the steps of walking back to the podium, using the mouse to “wake up” the cursor, then moving the cursor to the movie, and finally clicking directly on the movie. This process is shown in Fig. 4. From the “Animation” menu, click on “Custom Animation” to bring up the Custom Animation menu on the right side of the computer screen. Next, click on the movie itself to select it and enable the “Add Effect” button in the Custom Animation menu. From the “Add Effect” drop-down menu, hover over “Movie Actions” to show its options and then select “play.” This will add the movie to the slide’s animation scheme, as shown in Fig. 5. By clicking on the drop-down menu associated with this file in the custom animation drop-down menu, several options become available to further modify how the movie is played. Although this may seem like several steps, it is quite rapid to learn and use and results in a seamless way to play movies within presentations.

Finally, it is important to realize that the PC version of PowerPoint does not allow insertion of QuickTime movies onto slides. QuickTime movies must be converted to another file type, such as mpeg and avi, and then added to the slide. Multiple video editing programs are available for this purpose. If the Mac version of PowerPoint is used, QuickTime movies can be imported and played within PowerPoint.

11. Slide Delivery

Some but not all seasoned presenters are able to project a single image on a slide and deliver a message that engages the audience without any prompting or notes whatsoever. For most presenters, that is not the case. Some speakers practice extensively until they have memorized their entire presentation. This may work well for first-time or novice presenters, but this is not time-efficient in the long run. Others will type out their entire presentation and read it directly from a script. When performed well, a presentation delivered in this fashion can come off as extremely well-polished, with attendees not realizing that they are being read to. When
performed poorly, it is obvious that the speaker is reading the entire presentation. Although this may be frowned on, it may be the only way to get some speakers through a one-time presentation. It should not be the method of choice on a regular basis.

Ideally, slides should be designed with bullet points that will trigger each speaking point or finding to be discussed. It is acceptable to read some slides, as long as this is not the strategy for presenting each and every slide. Whenever possible, a microphone should be used, unless presenting in a small room. Novice speakers are often reluctant to use a microphone, but most speakers do not have a strong enough voice to adequately project throughout an entire presentation. It is also important to use voice inflections and to pause to take a breath between each slide. Nervous presenters should resist the temptation to click to the next slide before they have finished speaking about the previous slide.

12. Dealing With the Sleeper

In a very large room, it is unlikely to notice a sleeping attendee, especially if bright lights are shining in your eyes. If you are in a smaller room, there is no doubt that eventually you will find a person sleeping during a presentation. It is important not to take this personally or as evidence that you are boring. Some people fall asleep as soon as the lights are dimmed. If this becomes too distracting, it helps to simply not look at them. It may also be helpful to make the audience “blurry” or to avoid looking directly at any one person. Alternatively, identify those who are actively engaged and make eye contact with them.

13. Non–PowerPoint Options

Keynote is Apple’s presentation software program. Although Keynote offers some interesting effects, it may not be supported at large conferences in which presenters are required to upload a PowerPoint presentation. Additionally, Keynote presentations cannot be opened in PowerPoint unless they are first converted to PowerPoint, in which case, features unique to Keynote will no longer be present. For these reasons, Keynote has not gained widespread acceptance despite claims of superior utility by many Apple users. Another PowerPoint alternative is Prezi.com, an online resource to make presentations. Although this may be of interest for some, movements through each “slide” can be very distracting and somewhat disconcerting. Because the presentations are stored online, Internet access is required to deliver the presentation.

Fig. 5. Once the movie is added to the animation scheme of the slide (A), as shown in Fig. 4, several options can be accessed through the drop down menu, including when to start (on click, after previous, with previous), repeat, and many more.