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Public Speaking, Presenting and Performing

At a glance: Impressive public speaking requires a sound structure for a presentation, along with the effective use of data and slides, as well as interlacing elements of character.

A question comes to mind as we reach this stage of the book. I suspect I know the answer before I even ask. But here we go anyway:

Has the title of this chapter set your heart racing and prickled your skin with sweat?

If so, don't worry. You're far from alone. Surveys repeatedly show that public speaking is among the most daunting ordeals of modern life. But we're also well aware that professional, polished and powerful presenting is a much admired and widely desired skill.

Should that sum up your situation, if you need to be able to present well but fret you'll never be able to do so, then fear not. Help is at hand.

Come join me on this scary but critical next step of your conquest of the kingdom of compelling communication.

The Elevator Pitch

We'll begin with a gentle loosener of a concept to build up some confidence and get us into the spirit of public speaking. You may have

heard of the elevator pitch, but in case you haven't, a word of explanation.

It's a very brief talk designed to engage interest. That's whether in what you do, or the work of your business or organisation. As the name suggests, it comes from this scenario:

Imagine you're at a conference. You're about to take a lift from the floor where the trade show is being held to your room. As the doors are going to close, in walks your perfect customer, business partner or investor. It's just the two of you, no one else. You have their captive attention for the time the lift takes to move between floors, which is anything from twenty to thirty seconds. Opportunity is smiling upon you like the glorious rays of the summer morning sun.

But! What if you don't have an elevator pitch to mind? Perhaps you're rather flustered by the arrival of Mrs/Mr/Ms Professionally Perfect, beautifully gift wrapped and kindly delivered by the fates. And so the scene plays out this way:

Um, err, hello. Nice weather, isn't it? For the time of year, anyway. The conference is awfully good, don't you think? Wasn't that speaker just now super? Lovely hotel, as well. Pretty wallpaper and carpets. Great food, too. Did you try the full English breakfast? I'd thoroughly recommend it. Anyway, I was, umm, err, wondering if . . .

But then the doors open and away they go. Vanishing before your eyes, as your nonsensical babble tails off into nothingness and you quietly deflate. Your perfect customer, business partner, investor or maybe even employer has gone. The opportunity is lost, never to come again, and you'll be cursing yourself for days, if not months, and quite possibly even longer. Nasty.

Whereas! If you have a slick, smooth and appealing elevator pitch all lined up and ready to go, the outcome is very different. You come away with their business card, having made a glowing impression, and you're all set to line up a meeting for next week.

The elevator pitch is ideal for beginning our public speaking journey, as it has some important learning to offer. It's also incredibly useful to have in your mental back pocket, ready for when needed. Because if there's one thing I can guarantee in life, it's that the pitch will be required when you least expect it.

Queuing for the toilets? Yep, that one's happened to me, however odd. Staring at the departure boards in an airport? Yes, there too. Helping yourself at a breakfast buffet, and waiting for one of the chefs to bring out more of those delicious sausages you know you really shouldn't have but are going to anyway? That's another from my collection of moments the elevator pitch was needed.

So, let's have a look at a sample of a pitch, break it down, and see how it works. We'll begin with mine for Creative Warehouse, as you know the company well enough by now. I've numbered the points for ease of reference, but in reality this would be one continuous spiel:

1. We can solve all your communication problems with style and a smile.
2. We've already done so for scores of businesses, from small start ups to companies worth hundreds of millions of pounds. We can look after everything from building, writing and producing websites, to pitching for investment, to attracting impressive media coverage.
3. We're Creative Warehouse, I'm Simon Hall, Director of the company.
4. And if you give me your card we can set up a meeting to talk more.

Now let's break down the key elements which make up an effective elevator pitch.

1. The hook

Point one, and the most important. Remember yet again, modern attention spans are short. If you don't catch the interest of your victim in the first few seconds of your elevator ride together, they're likely to be engrossed in their phone and not listening.

So don't forget what we discussed about striking starts, way back in Chapter 2. Hit them with your best line to begin, summing up your story and making them want to hear more.

Even better if you can include a sense of your character as well. I did so by talking about solving your communication problems with style and a smile. Trying to produce a cheesy grin or two is very me, as you've doubtless sadly concluded by now.

By the way, although I've outlined a pure elevator pitch, it's worth noting, in practice, you'd soften the opening instead of leaping right on in. That might require a few words to establish a connection of some sort, however tenuous. Perhaps a brief preamble like: *As someone prominent in this field of work . . .* or, *Given the company you run, I thought you might like to hear about . . .*

That should help to ease you into a conversation, but without greatly reducing the impact of the opening line of your pitch.

2. Credibility

Any fool can make all sorts of overinflated claims about themselves or their business, as indeed they often do. So next in the recipe for our perfect elevator pitch, at point two, we need to establish credibility.

For me, it's talking about the many businesses Creative Warehouse has helped, along with the work we've done for them.

As the substance of your elevator pitch, this can often be the hardest part to write. Not because you haven't got anything to say, but quite the reverse. The danger is trying to say too much.

Remember another of our lessons from earlier in the book, the beautiful art of less is more. Just summarise your most important appeal, assets or offerings in a couple of sentences, no more.

It might be all the investment money you've raised if you're a start up business, along with perhaps an insight into your new technology. It could be the awards you've won as a service, or your impressive number of customers. If you're pitching in a personal capacity, it might be your long track record of achievements and prestigious employers. Anything so long as it marks you out as a serious player, not just a windy braggart.

3. Introduction

You should, of course, introduce yourself. It's only polite.

But you don't have to do so in the traditional way, via your opening line. So the introduction can come later, as it does in my sample pitch, at point three.

It's more important to seize the attention of the listener before anything else. Without being rude, it's unlikely your name is the most interesting thing about you. Unless it's Elon Musk reading this. In which case, would you mind writing me a testimonial for the next edition of the book, please?

4. Call to action

OK, you've done some great work, engaging the interest of your victim, establishing your credibility and introducing yourself. Now what?

The answer is to make sure that excellent impression isn't wasted. It's no use if Mrs/Mr/Ms Professionally Perfect now wanders off into the proverbial sunset, never to be seen again. Which means, at point number four, comes the call to action.

Mine is very standard and rather retro, with an exchange of business cards. But that's because I'm an old guy and it's what I'm used to. In these modern times, the call to action could be swapping email addresses on your phones, a social media connection, a coffee later at the conference, or whatever you wish. Just so long as you have the chance of a follow-up meeting to further explore opportunities.

And that's it, the art of the elevator pitch. Remember again to keep it short and simple. You've only got the time it takes the lift to travel between floors. Mine was about eighty words, which equates to around twenty-five seconds of time. If you aim for anything between seventy-five and ninety-five words, that should be about right.

Next, a challenge for you. Pick out the hook, credibility, introduction and call to action from this elevator pitch of my irrepressibly strange imagination:

Would you like all your administration hassles, from invoices, to tax returns, to travel arrangements and expenses sorted in an instant? Amazing AI Admin Assistants have done just that for hundreds of businesses and executives, and with an average rating of nine and three quarters out of ten for our service. I'm Orinoco Omnipotent, CEO of the company, and if you fancy a coffee I'll be happy to give you a free ten-minute demonstration.

Did you spot all the key elements in action? Yes, I suppose it was a trick question of sorts. The order was the same as with my patter for Creative Warehouse. It went: hook, credibility, introduction and call to action.

A pitch doesn't have to be structured that way. There are no rules in the communication trade, as we've said many times before. But the way I've outlined is a useful guide, at least until you get more confident with your elevator pitch and feel able to play around with it. Just so long as the key elements are all present and correct.

- Exercise: Finally for this section, write an elevator pitch for yourself or your business. Then practise until it flows smoothly and easily, elegantly and effectively, ready for when you need it.

Now video the pitch on your phone and watch it back. Notice particularly how you're delivering it. Do you look and sound confident? Is the pacing right? The way you project and modulate your voice? What about your body language?

We'll build on these points as we journey further into the world of public speaking and presentations.

Building on the Basics

Now we've warmed up with a brief public speaking exercise, it's time to start looking at longer form talks.

Although it's most likely your elevator pitch will be presented to an audience of one, it's quite possible you might have to offer it to a room full of people. That's a standard request at many a networking event, and might be intimidating enough. What then, when you come to face a packed lecture theatre or conference hall, with all those expectant eyes fixed upon you, and you have a much longer talk to deliver?

Are those shivers and sweats running through you again, by any chance?

In which case, I'll stop tormenting you and we'll start work. First of all by building on the basics, how to begin and then conclude a presentation.

I know we looked at starts and endings earlier in the book. But there are some extra elements you need to remember for powerful public speaking.

Super Striking Starts

Yes, that's right. Not just striking starts, but super striking starts. We've upped the ante. Why? Well, imagine these two scenarios, which will probably account for the vast majority of presentations delivered on planet Earth come any particular day.

1. The conference

How many speakers does a conference typically have? Yes, I know it depends on how long it lasts, and the duration of their talks, and other factors besides.

But the point is that it's unlikely you will be the only speaker. Far from it. I suspect you've been in the audience for these events. It can feel like waffle after whine, blabber after bluster, as presenter after presenter does their thing. It's not long before all their messages start to merge into one and you begin to zone out.

But, by starting in a way which really impresses and engages, you can lift your talk above the mundane and make an audience take notice. That – along with the other tricks we'll cover – can help to make your presentation the one which gets remembered.

2. The report

If the first scenario set your nerves on edge, prepare yourself for a shock. This one is worse. But it's very common, not to mention important, so we need to think about it.

Imagine you've been tasked by your employer with investigating an issue. Perhaps it's the possibility of introducing an innovation, maybe a way to react to a competitor's move, or to handle a new piece of legislation.

You've spent months carrying out your work and it's time to present your conclusions. There are far fewer eyes on you this time. Just a handful, in fact.

But! They're the eyes of your boss, and your boss's boss, and your boss's boss's boss, and so on up the food chain, perhaps even to the very top.

These super senior people have not the time, patience or nature to sit through a rambling, ineffective or plain impenetrable beginning. You simply have to impress them from the start, or they may be offside for everything else you say.

Now is it clear why a super striking start is an essential part of your presentation? Which then raises the question: how to make sure that's exactly what you produce.

The good news is the three principles we covered back in Chapter 2 will help. You still need to set out your story from the very beginning. You should also establish your authority and character. And, critically, you need to hook the audience right from the off.

However, now we're talking presentations, rather than just words on a page, you need other elements too. This is a doctrine which will run through our work on public speaking, so I'm going to emphasise it in my usual not terribly subtle way:

- It's not just your argument an audience buys into, it's you as well.

What does that mean for how you begin your talk? To coin a common phrase: it's not just what you say, it's how you say it.

Let me give you an example based on a company I work with. They help farmers increase their yields by using image recognition technology to estimate harvests far more accurately than was previously possible.

One of the challenges we faced with their presentation is that farmers can be a difficult group to win over. They tend to be wary of change, and more than a little cynical. So we worked hard on the opening line:

- We can increase your profits by around 10 per cent on average, by cutting your use of pesticides and ensuring you employ just the right number of pickers.

We were reasonably sure that would get their attention. As indeed it did. Notice also how it fulfils the three principles of a striking start. But there

was still more work to be done, because we knew the farmers would be scrutinising the presenter, in addition to listening to his words.

So we played a little trick for dramatic effect. Because we wanted to avoid the usual beginning to a presentation, when the speaker himself has to ask the audience to settle, and you have that awful hiatus:

- *Hello, hello, OK, are we ready to start? Hello! Is everyone OK to get going? Thank you.*

Instead, we had a colleague call the room to quiet. And when the farmers were paying attention, the presenter let a couple of seconds run as he looked around, calm and confident, eye contact for all, before beginning. He was also sure to stand up straight, not fidget, and smiled to warm the atmosphere, as well as demonstrate that he wasn't cowed by the moment.

OK, it was a little of the yours truly tendency to showbiz. But that's part of the game when it comes to presenting. You're putting on a performance and an audience likes to be entertained, as well as informed. So work hard on your words, but think also about how you're going to deliver them. We'll look more at that later, when we cover body language.

There's one more point to mention for super striking starts. As with elevator pitches, you should introduce yourself. But you can do so in the second, third, or even fourth line, after you've hooked the audience.

Enduring Endings Extras

Yep, I've done it again and upped the ante once more. Not just enduring endings, but enduring endings extras. That's a big ask (as well as quite a mouthful). But it'll be worth it, I promise.

So, what do I mean by enduring endings extras?

Once again, the principles which we explored back in Chapter 2 still apply. You should sum up your story, memorably and emphatically. Also, pay attention to the way you deliver the words. As with super

striking starts, don't rush. Stand up straight, make eye contact with all in the audience, smile, and deliver your line with heart and soul.

But as if that wasn't enough to remember, there are two more points to bear in mind for the conclusion of a talk:

1. Call to action

Every presentation is an opportunity, which means you should consider a call to action, just as with elevator pitches. If you're pitching for investment, it might be to fund your company. Should you be in front of the board, you might ask them to support your conclusions and implement them.

If you're only at the stage of floating an idea, or carrying out an investigation, you could ask the audience to fill in a brief survey. Or visit your website to leave some feedback.

Whatever it might be, the call to action usually comes at the end of a talk. For example, with our farmers:

So, to increase your profits, cut your use of chemicals, and make your farm fit for a prosperous future, come talk to us afterwards about our range of services.

2. Ending with a bang

Many times I've seen an otherwise impressive talk somewhat spoiled by an awful ending. And they nearly always go like this:

So, that's it ... I think. Um, yes, that's all. No, hang on, there was something else. Or was there? Err, no, no, actually I don't think so. Which means ... yes, um. Yes, that's it.

This makes me want to SCREAM. To be honest, I could be even more forthright. But this is a polite book so I shall leave space for you to imagine. I find such endings incredibly frustrating because they're so very easy to avoid.

You don't even need to say *And that's it*, or *Now any questions*, or anything so dull or clichéd. All you have to do is add a big *Thank you* to your final words.

The audience will understand, take that as their cue for wild applause, and then you can move on to questions. Simple.

The Golden Thread

Once again, the concept of the golden thread applies just as much to a presentation as all other areas of communication. As we explored way back in Chapter 1, whether it's for films like *Alien*, songs such as 'My Way', or our meandering guide to email activation, you should follow one single, clear and simple narrative.

It sometimes comes as a surprise that a speech, talk or presentation should focus on just one theme. To take a well-known example, you might ask: Don't politicians cover a series of subjects in an address?

But here we can turn to the wisdom of another of our great communicators, who was also a politician. The former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan once said:

- If you have made three points in a speech, you have made two too many.

The most famous speeches in history tend to have a single, clear and simple narrative. Which is arguably one of the reasons they make such an impact. Take John F. Kennedy's 'Ich bin ein Berliner' address, from 1963, just months before he was assassinated. It's often held up as an outstanding example of speechmaking, but has just one, and only one, theme throughout.

Take a few minutes to look up the speech online and spot what it is. You'll find a transcript on the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum website. Then identify the various forms in which Kennedy refers to his golden thread. When you're ready, have a look at my thoughts, below.

The golden thread running through the speech is freedom. It starts with mention of freedom through reference to the fighting spirit of West Berlin. At the time, as a legacy of the Second World War, the city was divided into sectors. It was made up of the Communist East, part of East Germany, and the democratic West, which was part of West Germany (Figure 6.1). Berlin itself was located deep inside Soviet-controlled East Germany, and so was often referred to as an island of freedom in the Cold War.



Figure 6.1 Germany divided on Cold War lines. Map by David McCutcheon FBCart.S www.dvdmaps.co.uk

Kennedy goes on to compare living in Berlin to the freedom of being a Roman citizen (*civis Romanus sum*), a proud boast in those days, and contrasts that with the lack of freedom under Soviet rule. He then talks about American freedom, German freedom and the indivisibility of freedom. Summing up his story memorably and emphatically, Kennedy concludes with a reference to freedom through the perspective of being a citizen of Berlin.

Whichever way Kennedy might refer to it, the audience is left in no doubt. The speech is an exploration of freedom, a celebration of freedom and a commitment to freedom.

That was particularly important as Berlin was on the frontline of the Cold War. The Berlin Wall had been erected by the East two years before Kennedy's speech. It divided the city and prevented East German citizens from escaping. The President left the citizens of West Berlin, and indeed the world, in no doubt about America's dedication to defending them and their precious freedom.

On a rather less geopolitical, historic and significant note, I've mentioned the 'Secrets of Success' talk I give in schools a couple of times. There, the golden thread is spelled out loud and clear in the title. I cover six qualities, all of which are important for doing well in life. The presentation begins with thinking, moves on to teamwork, then dealing with doubt, next comes persistence, then lateral thinking and finally hard work.

As someone who's given the talk many times, I can vouch for this. The clear and simple golden thread which runs through the presentation is a critical factor in making it work well.

Storytelling

I have a gold star award for the finest presentations. To be thus honoured, they have to include a range of features. Many are new tricks, which we'll examine a little later, when we come to the next chapter. But one element that I always try my utmost to include is our old friend storytelling.

Why? Well, for very much the same reasons we explored previously. Storytelling can add humanity, impact and memorability to a talk.

For example, one of the companies I work with is called Boutros Bear. They help people who have suffered serious illnesses, such as cancer, on their journeys to recovery.



Figure 6.2 Sheila Kissane-Marshall

When pitching the business, the founder, Sheila Kissane-Marshall (Figure 6.2), can talk for hours about the importance of their work. She can quote facts galore about how many people suffer a chronic illness in their lifetime, and the costs to the economy, let alone the personal suffering. As she does, an audience will listen, nod along and be sympathetic, understanding and supportive. I know because I've sat in a lecture theatre to hear Sheila speak.

But there's one moment in her presentation which is special. It always stands out because it transfixes an audience.

When she gets to this, I notice the people around me start to lean forwards. Their eyes are set on Sheila, instead of occasionally roving around the room or glancing at their phones. All passing thoughts of what to wear for that event tomorrow, or where to go on holiday, or that awkward meeting are banished. Sheila might as well be in a spotlight and the audience under a spell.

What is this moment of extraordinary connection? Yes, you guessed. It's when Sheila tells a story. And not just any story. This story.

It was a few years ago I received my diagnosis. And it came, as the saying goes, like a bolt from the blue. It sounds like a cliché, but it really is like that.

I had breast cancer. And not just any old boring or usual form. Oh, no. Mine was a rare and aggressive type. Bad news upon bad news, in other words. Things weren't looking good, to say the least. And I had a husband and two young children. You can imagine what was going on in my mind at the time.

Anyway, I listened to my options and I went through the treatment. I won't make you feel uncomfortable with the details, but there was the chemotherapy, and the surgery. And it was gruelling and emotional. On it went, for what felt like months. Some days, to be frank, I wondered what the point was anymore. But I managed to get through it, much due to the brilliant care I received from the National Health Service. And so it was time for me to begin my recovery.

But now came the problem. I knew I had to eat well. I also had to try to build up my strength and keep myself fit. I had to look after my emotional and mental wellbeing, too. But where was the support to help me start living again?

There were bits and bobs, here and there. But nothing comprehensive and coordinated. I got frustrated with trying to find help, so instead I decided to help myself. I created my own nutrition, fitness and wellbeing plans. And they worked. I started to get better, I'm happy to say. As I did, I realised it wasn't just me going through this experience. There must have been thousands and thousands of others struggling in similar ways.

But I also knew I had an answer for them. So I set up the business, and I'm proud to say we're doing well, supporting so many people in their battle to recover from serious illness.

OK, take a few seconds to compose yourself. I know how you feel. I've heard the story a few times and it never fails to squeeze my heart.

That, of course, is another example of the story only you can tell. And once again, it's an insight into the power of storytelling.

You might not have a tale which involves you personally. But I'm willing to bet you have one you could tell from the perspective of your customers, colleagues or business partners. And such anecdotes can help to make your case in a presentation far more effectively than mere facts and figures, however important they may be.

Here are just a few examples of the kind of stories you might use. I've heard similar as part of talks to help persuade an audience of the merits of an argument, and they worked:

- Why are we looking at this new service? Because there's so much demand for it. Listen to a couple of the insights customers have given us about how it could help them . . .
- We're examining this new technology because every time we try to link up with a partner's IT system, it all goes wrong and causes endless hassle. Take this one case in particular, which caused serious disruption to our operations for the best part of a week . . .
- What's the number one frustration in our company? This might surprise you, but it came through loud and clear when we carried out an all-staff survey. Here are a couple of examples in the form of colleagues' stories of hell in trying to get backing for a great idea . . .

Another nifty trick on the storytelling front is to conjure up visions of the future. I've seen this used to good effect in presentations as well:

- Imagine a tomorrow where we've introduced this new IT system. There are no more maddening frustrations in the office, when we spend hours battling with the computers rather than having them help us. We free up more time to focus on our work. We become more productive and profits grow. Bonuses rise too. Staff are happier, better paid, and retention rates rise significantly. Customer service also improves. Now contrast that with the current situation and where we seem to be heading . . .

The stories you can relate as part of a presentation are limited only by your imagination. Which, happily, means they're limitless. But whatever

type you tell, just make sure you tell them. You won't be eligible for a prestigious and highly coveted Hall Gold Star for a talk without a story in there somewhere. And I know that would be devastating for you. Ahem!

To conclude this section, one final point about stories in presentations. I'm sometimes challenged on whether recounting an anecdote is good use of the precious time you've been allocated for a talk.

My answer is always an emphatic yes.

Remember Sheila's story? Or, more accurately, how could you forget it?

That tale of pure and heartfelt humanity is just over 300 words long. It takes her about a minute and a half to tell. And is it worth that time in the presentation?

Oh yes. A thousand times and more yes, in fact. The impact the story has is striking.

Once again, the reason comes back to the emotional power and memorability of stories. After all, what will you remember? My summary of Boutros Bear and the nature of their business? Or Shelia's story recounting how the company came about?

Character

On, then, to the final basic we need to build on to help us with public speaking. Once again, doubtless because of my love of storytelling, I've saved the most important for last. Because arguably nowhere is it so critical that character and content work in harmony than when giving presentations.

As I've said before, and will say again here, Churchill-style, to ensure it gets the tremendous whack the point deserves:

- It's not just your argument an audience buys into, it's you as well.

To whet your appetite a little more for this section, a teaser. We're going to work our way to revealing the golden secret of success for using your personality to produce truly powerful presentations.

So to business. Here I'm going to be traditional Cambridge and set you a research, compare and contrast exercise. Don't groan, please. It'll be simple, brief and worthwhile, I promise.

First, the research element. Look up online videos of these three renowned, but very different, orators, giving three celebrated speeches:

- Martin Luther King, 'I Have a Dream'
- Ronald Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate
- Margaret Thatcher, 'The Lady's Not for Turning'

You don't need to watch the whole of the addresses, although feel free to do so if you have the time. King, Thatcher and Reagan are all masters of the craft of public speaking in their different ways, and well worth studying. But take in just enough so that you understand the theme, or golden thread, of each speech. Then, most importantly for our purposes here, scrutinise the character of the speaker.

Use the approach we discussed way back in Chapter 1. Try to summarise the personality of each in a handful of words. Take a few minutes to think before we compare answers.

So, what did you come up with? Although we might disagree on our exact words, these were my thoughts:

- Martin Luther King: passionate, fiery, principled, determined, strong, charismatic, courageous
- Ronald Reagan: avuncular, thoughtful, calm, gentle, resolute, trustworthy, measured
- Margaret Thatcher: strong, steely, determined, hard, principled, steadfast, daunting

Whatever you might think about the politics of the three, I suspect we can agree that all were highly effective speakers. But equally, all had very different styles. So, what's the key to using your character effectively when presenting?

The answer comes back to another critical concept we discussed in Chapter 1. Yet again, it's all about authenticity. Whether you agree with

them or not, you never doubt that King, Thatcher and Reagan believe in what they're saying. They let that come across loud and clear in the way they speak and their words are all the more effective for it.

So it goes for you when the time comes to speak to thousands of people. Or just a roomful, or even only one, as is often the case with the elevator pitch.

Are you passionate about this subject? Then let it come across. Are you convinced what you're talking about is the way forward? Then show that. Do you have the strength and determination to push through the change you're advocating? Then leave us in no doubt.

If you can get your character and content working in tandem, then you'll always have a top team onside to help power up your presentations.

- Exercise: Think about a presentation you might have to give. How can you be sure to show your character when you speak?

The Slippery Slope of Slides

Soundbite alert! But that title reminds me: don't forget to include a soundbite in your presentation, if you can. Although, as previously discussed, only one, and probably for your most important message. An audience can grow jaded and switch off if you scatter too many soundbites around.

We're moving towards the end of this chapter, which leaves a couple more topics to cover. The material we've discussed so far should allow you to put together a strong talk. But, until now, we've dealt only with words. So the time has come to look at your visuals, because I've seen many an otherwise good presenter trip up and stumble down the slippery slope of slides.

The happy news is that we've already covered the principles we need to ensure our slides are both impressive and effective. Remember the lessons of the angle, simplicity and brevity, not to mention the magical

marvel of less is more? Let them be your guides. Because there is one golden rule to bear in mind when you're creating the visuals for a presentation:

- The audience is either listening to you or reading the slide, **but not both**.

So, how does that mantra feed into creating successful visuals? It means your spiel and the slide have to work together in perfect harmony, strawberries and cream style, to quote a very English example.

Happily, that requires we immediately eliminate one of the most common fails of slides. I see this so often, and it always makes me wince. Sometimes it actually makes me want to cry out to be honest, but I'm polite enough to refrain. Usually.

What is this horror show? Why the big build up? Well, how many times have you been to a presentation and witnessed a visual like Figure 6.3?

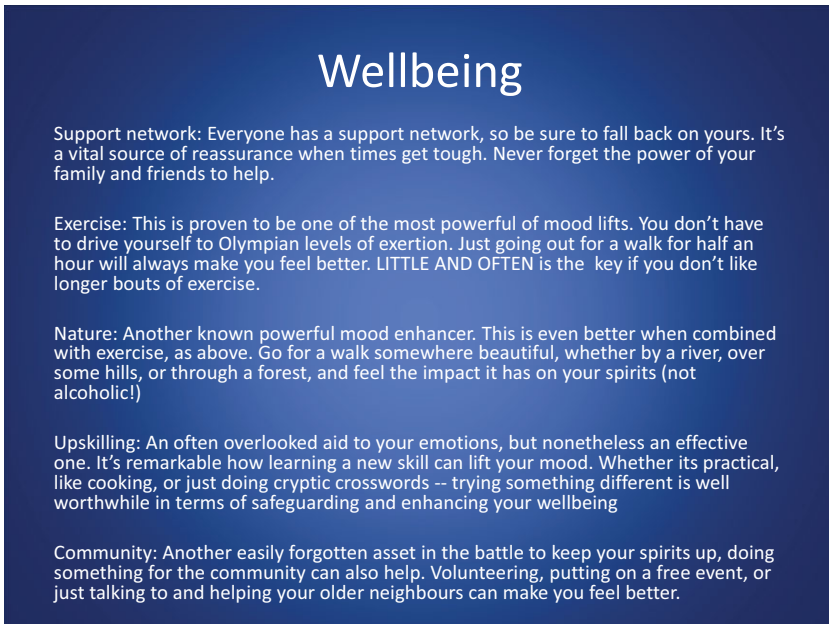


Figure 6.3 A text-heavy slide

Not content with having filled the screen with a bombardment of words, the speaker then proceeds to read exactly what's written before you, line by tedious line. Aaaaarrggghhh!

In such situations, I often wonder why I bothered to come to the talk. Surely it would have been easier for the presenter to email the slides out to the audience and we could then read them at our leisure.

Look around the room the next time you're placed in such an unfortunate position. At best, you'll notice people reading the slide well ahead of the speaker, then returning to their phones to check their emails and messages. At worst, they'll be far away and elsewhere, in a land of more pleasant imaginings.

So, how do we make sure we keep the audience engaged and avoid such nightmares on slides street? This is where we come to another useful guideline. I don't entirely agree with it, hence using the word guideline, rather than rule. But it's a simple, memorable and useful thought to bear in mind:

- Don't put more information on a slide than you would see on a T-shirt.

I like this concept because it's easily visualised. Most T-shirts have a picture and a few words. So should it be with slides. Which, coming back to our wellbeing example, gives us a far more appealing alternative (Figure 6.4).

This time, instead of assaulting the audience with words, the presenter could reveal the slide and say: *I'd like to talk next about the subject of wellbeing, something which is so important in our busy modern lives.*

Now the slide and commentary are working in harmony. The audience understands what's being discussed from the visual and its title, as well as the words being spoken. They don't have any option to start reading the slide instead of listening to the presenter. And they get a lovely image to help keep them engaged.

But what about the rest of the information the speaker wants to get across? All of that mass from the wordy slide. Well, animations exist for



Figure 6.4 A text-light slide

a reason. Thus the presenter comes to their point about the importance of having a support network. And so they trigger the animation (Figure 6.5).

The speaker then says: *Everyone has a support network, so be sure to fall back on yours. It's a vital source of reassurance when times get tough. Never forget the power of your family and friends to help.*

From there, each point is covered by a new animation. The audience has nowhere to go except listening to every element that's being explored as the story unfolds. That's step by step, through the subheadings about exercise, nature, upskilling – or learning new skills – and community (Figure 6.6).

How much better and more effective was that, compared with the blizzard of words which hit us on the first and entirely lamentable slide?

Notice also how clarity of message comes into play. Each slide should have only one angle. Anything you talk about follows the golden thread



Figure 6.5 A text-light slide with subheading



Figure 6.6 A text-light slide with a series of subheadings

which that determines. With the visual above, the angle is wellbeing, and the subheadings encompass the various strands.

If the angle was how to start a talk, that might also be the title. The image could be of a presenter at a podium. The three points would be, as you know by now: Set out your story from the start, show your character and authority, make the audience want to find out more.

The subheadings, or bullets, could be summaries of the three points, animating in turn. Those areas would be chatted through by the presenter. And the whole slide would then look something like Figure 6.7 (excuse the scary lecturer).

Incidentally, I find this technique of titles and subheadings is invaluable in guiding me through a talk. They're helpful prompts, reminding me of what I'm going to say. It's like having my notes up there on the screen.



Figure 6.7 A text-light slide with a series of subheadings



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Figure 6.8 How to start a presentation slide. Taken from the Compelling Communication Skills course, reprinted with kind permission of Cambridge Advance Online © University of Cambridge.

OK, now we've covered the principles of how to put together slides which look smart and work well, it's time for one of my challenges. Don't sigh, I think you'll like this one.

The game is called Good Slide - Bad Slide. Funnily enough, that's exactly how it works. I show you a slide, you decide if it's good, bad or somewhere in between.

Are you ready? Then here we go. By the way, don't worry about whether you like the graphics, fonts, colours or any other design features. Just focus on the effectiveness of the slide. So, your opening question, on Figure 6.8: good slide or bad?

What's your verdict on that? Good or bad?

I'd say good. It might not be inspired in terms of the image or design, but it tells an audience clearly what's going to be discussed. It also leaves them no room to read anything else on the slide. In short, it follows the T-shirt rule and works because of it.

So, on we go with our jolly game: Figure 6.9.

Process to create our product

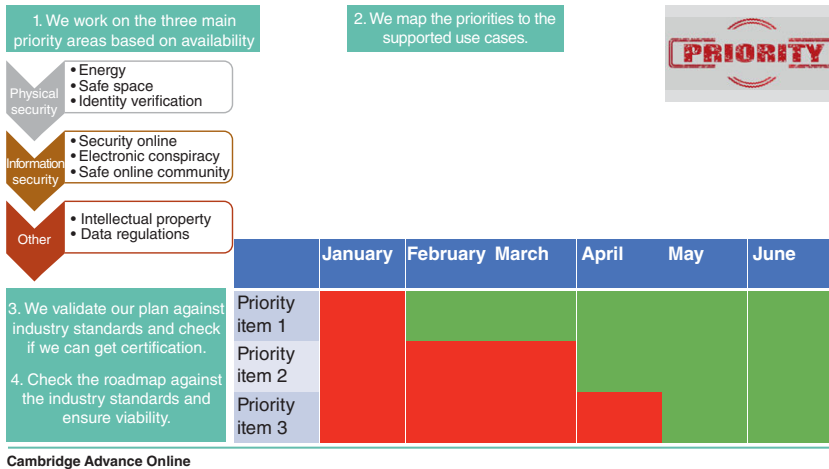


Figure 6.9 Process to create our product slide. Taken from the Compelling Communication Skills course, reprinted with kind permission of Cambridge Advance Online © University of Cambridge.

What about this slide? Have a think for a moment.

Here, as it is, I'd say bad.

The angle is confused. Is it about the process to create our product, or the timeline? There's also a lot of text, where subheadings would work better with the accompanying words being spoken by the presenter.

So, how to save this slide, if the information was important to convey. What would you do? Again, have a brief ponder before I offer my suggestion.

Personally, I would turn this slide into two. The first for the process, the second for the timeline. Cutting the amount of text to the bare minimum and animating subheadings to cover the key points for each slide would also help.

In summary, this is a flagrant breach of our guiding principles of less is more, and keeping it simple. Naughty slide!

So, on to our next contender. What do you think of the slide in Figure 6.10?



Figure 6.10 Designing effective PowerPoint slides slide. Taken from the Compelling Communication Skills course, reprinted with kind permission of Cambridge Advance Online © University of Cambridge.

I'd say pretty good here, so long as each of the hexagons was animated to appear in turn and the words on them were bigger and clearer. Again, it might not be inspired in terms of design, but the slide is simple and effective. The audience is clear what they're hearing about and have nowhere to go but listen to the presenter. This passes the T-shirt test.

Just a couple more before we finish our fun. Next, your verdict on the slide in Figure 6.11?

I'd say bad. First of all, the slide raises a basic point, which we should mention: The simple issue of readability. A visual fails by default if it can't easily be read.

Also, this slide is yet another to fall into the familiar trap of too much text. Bullet points would help, with the rest of the words being spoken by the presenter. This is very subjective, but it also feels to me as though there are too many points being made. I tend to prefer three or four. Once more, let simplicity and brevity be your guides.

OK, next to our final slide on which to pass judgement, Figure 6.12.

How to predict questions for the Q&A

- When you've got a presentation to give, run through it with some family and friends.
- Not only can they give you helpful feedback, you can ask them what questions they would raise.
- You can then work on preparing good answers.
- And when you've done that, if it's a work presentation find a couple of colleagues you trust and do the same with them.
- That will all help you prepare for the Q and A, and mean you're much more likely to perform impressively.

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Figure 6.11 How to predict questions for the Q&A slide. Taken from the Compelling Communication Skills course, reprinted with kind permission of Cambridge Advance Online © University of Cambridge.

How to make a good first impression



BE ON TIME
Too early is better than too late.

DRESS TO IMPRESS
Take care of your clothes and your overall appearance.

BE PREPARED
Do your homework and practice.

CONSIDER NON-VERBAL CUES
Be friendly and confident.

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Figure 6.12 How to make a good first impression slide. Taken from the Compelling Communication Skills course, reprinted with kind permission of Cambridge Advance Online © University of Cambridge.

Here, I'd say largely good. The slide is clear, and if each of the four points was animated to appear then the story would be easy to follow. The only caveat is that there's probably too much text. The words below the

headings BE ON TIME, DRESS TO IMPRESS etc. could be removed and instead spoken by the presenter. That way, this slide would also pass the T-shirt test.

- Exercise: Look at the slides in a presentation you've given. Would you redesign them now, on the basis of what we've explored?

Character in Slides

We've talked repeatedly about the importance of finding your unique voice in order to become a compelling communicator. But it might surprise you to know that your character can also emerge in your slides.

Take a look back at the couple designed by me, on wellbeing and how to start a talk. The pretty wellbeing one featuring the person on the bench I mean, not the version which comes across as a mess of words. Is there anything unusual you notice about this pair of slides? Have a glance at another of my visuals, Figure 6.13, to help.

You might have noticed that I fill the entire screen with the image and then add text on top. That's part of my style, or character with slides. I'm a keen amateur photographer, so delight in collecting pictures to use in my presentations. I love the photos I take and want to make the most of them. So I remove any boundaries and use all the available space.

Some communication advisers say you should never put text over pictures. I understand why. They worry about the legibility of the words, which should always be the priority. But I use images where I can fit in easily readable text, so this trick works well for me.

The technique has another advantage. It forces me to be disciplined with the words I put on a slide. There's simply no room for lots of text when you're overlaying photographs.

This is just my style. It might not necessarily be yours. But it's worth playing with the functionality of whatever system you use to create presentations in order to develop a character of your own.



Figure 6.13 Character in slides

It might be a small point, but it can still make a difference to how your talks are received. And any advantage to help you make a good impression is worth taking. I often get compliments about my use of slides, and that never fails to make me smile.

We'll be looking more at photography later in the book, by the way. It's an essential part of your communications toolkit, relatively easy to master in our smartphone era, and much fun as well.

The Dos and Don'ts of Data

You may have noticed a significant missing link in our discussion of visuals thus far. Do I sense you thinking: *This simplicity and brevity, with putting bullet points over pictures, is all very well. But what about when I need to use data?*

Good point. But fear not, I haven't forgotten. Data is critical.

So, finally for this chapter, given the importance of facts and figures, let's have a look at the dos and don'ts of data in slides.

Happily, there's yet another simple rule to help us. And, would you believe it, once more it comes back to the principles of simplicity, brevity and clarity. What a truly wonderful trio they are. When creating a slide using data, always ask yourself this question:

- What's the single, simple point I'm trying to make, and what's the MINIMUM amount of information I can use to make it?

There's a dangerous temptation with data. You've got a bucket full, so you're going to use it in order to impress an audience, right? They're bound to be awed by all those statistics, surely?

Wrong, wrong and wrong again. Just like with that awful word storm slide on wellbeing, people will stare at a screen full of data, try to puzzle out what you're talking about, and so stop paying attention to you. And that's the best case scenario. They're equally likely to be left with no clue whatsoever about the point you're attempting to make.

Instead, remember the beauty of the KISS. Keep it simple, silly. What's the one point you're trying to make? And what's the minimum amount of data required to make it?

Here's an example. Imagine I was selling Creative Warehouse, and I'm pitching the company to a room full of potential buyers. I've got lots of data about the various projects we're working on, from websites, to videos, to media campaigns, plus customers, revenues and profits. I'm a data diva, make no mistake. Just look at it all (Figure 6.14)!

I could pop that in front of the audience and talk them through it. But hang on. How much would they take in? Might I be in danger of trying to say too much? After all, how long is it taking you to work out what's going on as you follow the various lines, try to discern what they represent, and the sort of figures I'm attempting to convey?

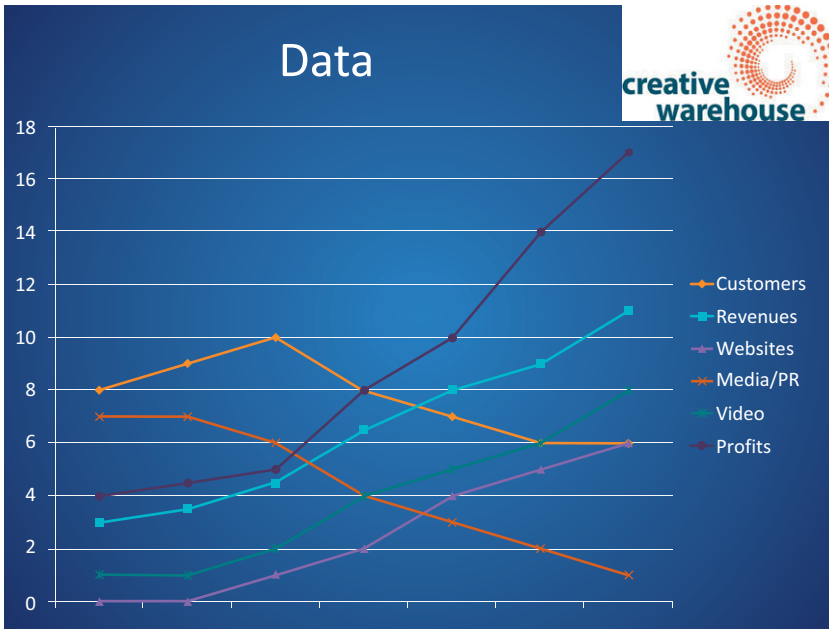


Figure 6.14 A data-heavy slide

A rethink is required. These are potential buyers, which means I need to make the company look as appealing as possible. So, what's the key point that I want to establish?

I'd say it's this. I've reduced the number of customers we have, because some weren't, frankly, very interesting. Plus they didn't pay well. Instead, I've focused on the most interesting clients, who are far more rewarding to work with. And I mean that both professionally and financially.

The result has been less pressure for our team, which has made them happier and more creative. The work we're doing is also more fulfilling. The customers we've retained are receiving a better service, which they appreciate. And our profits have gone up.

That's what I want to say, the single, simple point I need to convey. Fewer customers, bringing benefits all round. So, what's the minimum amount of data I can use to make this clear? Perhaps as in Figure 6.15.

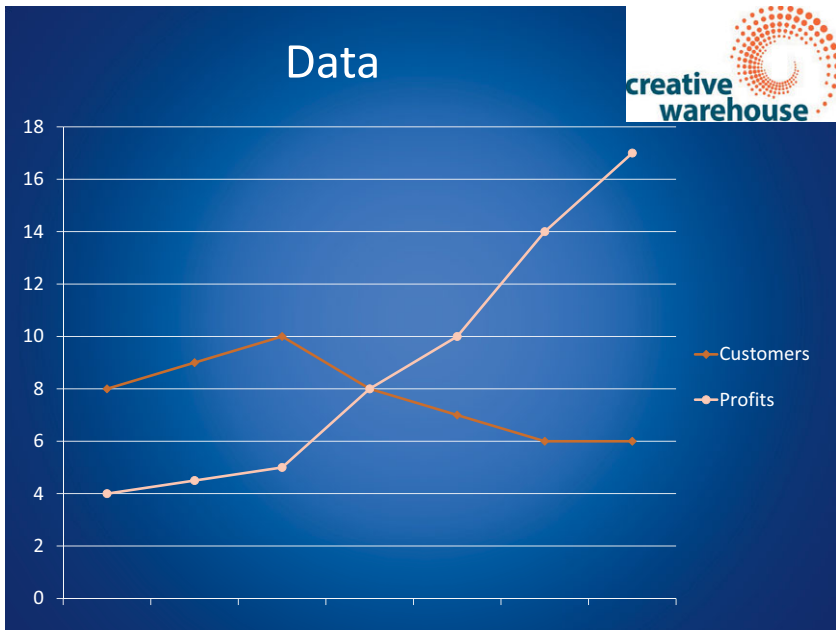


Figure 6.15 A data-light slide

How much easier to take in is that than the first version? Everyone gets it in an instant. Customers deliberately down, profits happily up. A message which is simple, appealing and memorable. Splendid!

By the way, notice there's usually no room for background images when dealing with data. They can over complicate a visual, and audiences have enough work to do understanding the message. Slides can't be pretty all the time, sadly. Practicalities come first in presentations.

Now let's put the principle of the single message and the minimum amount of data into action. It's exercise time again. Imagine that I'd like to expand Creative Warehouse. We currently operate in the east of England. But I want to find another region of the UK to grow our business.

I've done an analysis of all the competitor companies across the nation, region by region. They range from media and PR, to web and design, along with video and strategic communications. Figure 6.16 shows what I've found.

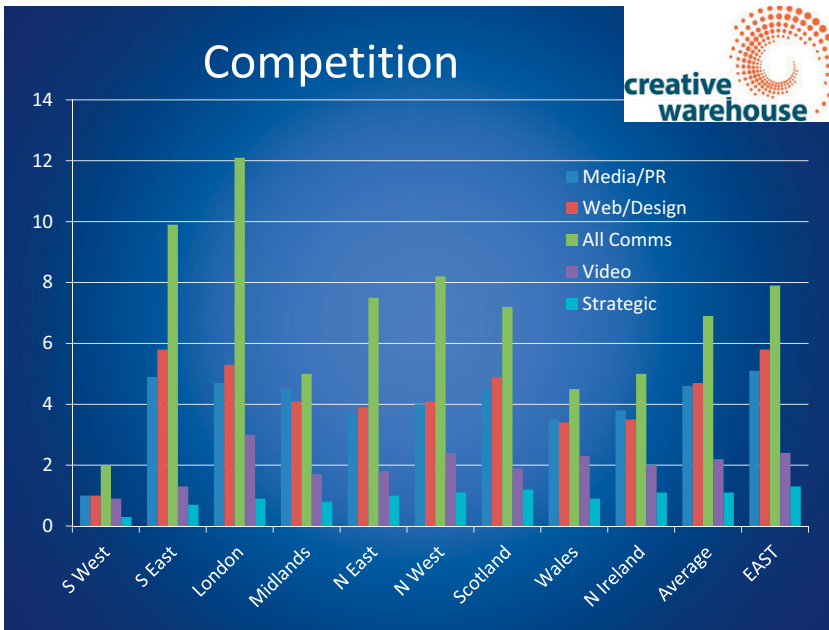


Figure 6.16 A slide containing a large range of data

I've got to present this data to my team, to convince them that the south-west is the region to target. That's logical. It's where there's least competition. But I'm not happy with the slide I've produced. It feels cluttered and challenging to interpret.

Can you help me simplify it, so the team will immediately understand that the south-west is the place to go? Remember to keep in mind the single point you're trying to make, and to use the minimum amount of data needed to do so.

Sketch out some thoughts, then have a look at my suggestion, Figure 6.17.

Did you come up with something similar? By stripping away the categories of communication companies and focusing only on the totals in each region, the graphic becomes much simpler and easier to digest. It's clear at a glance that the south-west has the least competition, so that's the region to target.

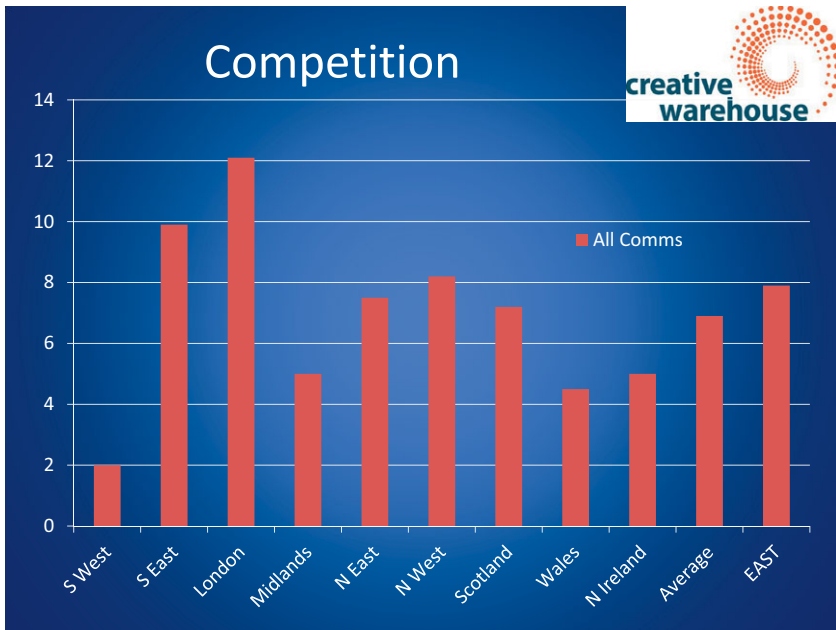


Figure 6.17 A slide containing a limited amount of data

- Exercise: Have a look at some slides you've produced which use data. Could you improve them on the basis of making one single point, using the minimum amount of information needed to do so?

The Killer Fact

The killer fact is your headline data. As with the exercise about where to expand Creative Warehouse, it's the one statistic you think will cut through and make an impression above all others. Once identified, you'll probably find yourself using it repeatedly until your argument is won. It's that powerful.

For example, take the company which helps farmers increase their yields, which I mentioned earlier in the chapter. We had lots of facts to choose from. They included reducing the workforce, increasing productivity,

time saving, positive environmental impact and more besides. But from all those, we chose one key, simple and striking fact:

- We can increase your profits by 10 per cent on average.

We explained why, of course. By optimising staffing levels, and cutting use of pesticides through far more accurate estimates of yields. But we didn't throw around statistics to illustrate those points. We didn't want anything to clutter that single killer fact. Which, we thought – rightly and happily, as it turned out – would get the most attention and attract the most new customers.

If the farmers wanted the data which lay behind our headline claim, we could provide it. We often did, in the question and answer session at the end of the presentation. More on that in the next chapter. But using that sole killer fact was highly effective in terms of making our case.

How then do you choose which fact to wield from all the data at your disposal? I find putting yourself in the place of the audience helps. What would be most likely to impress them? Making more money? Cutting bureaucracy? Enhancing the environment? Offering a significant competitive edge?

With the farmers, it was the profits. They're business people, after all. With Creative Warehouse, when talking about our public relations work, I sometimes say:

- Stories we place in the media average about £15,000 worth of coverage.

Unsurprisingly, that usually does the trick and gets an audience interested.

Here's a quick killer fact exercise, based on a company I work with. It uses artificial intelligence to predict demand in hospital accident and emergency departments, and so make them more efficient.

Imagine you had the following statistics available and you're presenting to a hospital's board of directors. Which would you choose as your killer fact?

Our trials show we can:

1. Reduce wasted doctor and nurse time by 20 per cent
2. Create financial savings of 15 per cent
3. Cut patient waiting times by 40 per cent
4. Reduce abuse of staff by 20 per cent
5. Increase patient satisfaction levels by 35 per cent

Tricky, isn't it? They're all impressive figures. But, for the board of directors, I'd choose point 3. For such a broad audience, all concerned with the hospital's performance and reputation, I suspect that would be the most effective in making an impact and getting remembered.

Your killer fact can change, depending who you're talking to. Always adapt for your audience. If we were presenting to the finance director, I'd choose point 2. Experience tells me the bottom line matters most to them. We could always introduce the other advantages later.

But, whoever you're addressing, strategically wielding a killer fact can help to make your presentations far more effective.

- Exercise: Think about a talk you've given which uses data. What should be the killer fact? Can you strip away most of the other information to ensure it stands out?

A Lifesaver

I have one final sunbeam of wisdom to offer on the subject of slides. And this is where the principle of having a single point to make, and using the minimum amount of data required, could be a lifesaver. It's such an important message that it deserves highlighting in my familiar manner:

- You should still be able to deliver your talk effectively even if the slides fail.

Think about that for a moment. It's a common nightmare. You're about to give your presentation to a high powered group of people. It's an

important moment. You've worked hard at your performance. You're ready to go . . .

And the presentation fails. Just like that, as they sometimes do. It simply refuses to work. No matter what you try, or the efforts of the support team, the slides refuse to cooperate.

Disaster.

Or perhaps not. The audience is expecting you to admit defeat. At best, perhaps the presentation can be rearranged for another time. At worst, this wonderful opportunity is lost. But instead, you smile, make a joke of the IT failure and say:

It's OK. I can still tell you everything you need to know without the slides.

The people you're talking to are certainly going to be interested. And they'll definitely give you a chance to live up to your promise. Believe me, I know, because this has happened to me and others I've worked with.

But how? How can you still tell your story without your precious slides?

The answer is the old-school flipchart. My tip is to always have one standing by, even if, on almost every occasion, you won't need it. The one time you do it will save your life. Professionally speaking, anyway.

Look back at the sections on slides and data. I hope you'll draw an important conclusion, which is this. By simplifying your visuals, you could still give your talk even if the IT fails.

In fact, that's an important indicator of whether a presentation is a good one. Can it still make sense without the slides?

So, revisiting the examples we've discussed: If it's wellbeing you're talking about, you can introduce the topic and chat through the five subject areas: support network, exercise, nature, upskilling and community. You can note those headings down on the flipchart to reinforce your point.

OK, the audience might miss out on the pretty picture you'd planned to show them. But that's nice to have, rather than essential. Critically, you would still be able to convey the important points.

So far, so good. But it's when you need to talk data that simplicity, and the beauty of KISS, really come into their own.

Imagine the selling Creative Warehouse scenario, and the slides failing when I came to outline the point about reducing the number of customers but increasing profits. I would struggle to convey what I was trying to say if I stuck with the original slide, featuring all those lines showing the number of video projects, websites etc. we were working on.

But with the simplified version, the one featuring just two lines, customers and profits, suddenly it becomes far easier. I can draw a rough graph on the flip chart and make a joke about my poor artwork. I might impress the audience with my ingenuity, improvisation and persistence, which would be no bad thing. But, far more importantly, I still get the point across. Number of customers down, profits up. Job done.

Have the flipchart tip on me. I hope you never have to use it. But if you do, it might just prove to be a lifesaver.

- Exercise: Run through a presentation you've given. With the help of a flipchart, could you still deliver it effectively if the slides fail? If not, what does that tell you?