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Presentation skills development

Message crafting

Presentation design

Advanced PowerPoint technique

Executive coaching

One-on-one skills training

Organization-wide workshops

Recommendations for the ThinkHR Webinar Series

Training with a Purpose presents with a voice of authority and the weight of accomplishment. The company has practiced consistent branding, has incorporated an attractive logo, and created a clean slide design that is unobtrusive.

In fact, the webinar presenters rely on their slides a bit too much. In a word, their execution of the webinar was *reactive*: there was a distinct feeling that the slides were driving the presenters instead of the vice-versa. This is not an alarming fact; in my experience, just about every organization in the world suffers from this in one form or another. Here are the areas of improvement that ThinkHR can focus on:

1. Better interplay between presenters and slides.
2. More awareness of when slides become "stale."
3. Cleaner interaction between presenters.
4. Better use of photos.
5. More sequencing of information that is dense or complicated.
6. General "un-busying" of slides.

This review will discuss each of these in turn.

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Presenters need to drive the narrative

Perhaps the most important piece of advice I could offer anyone presenting in public is this: *You are the presentation.* The minute you make your slides more important than you, you do everyone in attendance a disservice, including yourself. Both presenters created the impression that the slides were the focal point of the presentation and that is not healthy. Don had to wait often for slides to advance before he could continue, as if he did not know what the next topic was (it appeared as if he was not advancing his own slides and it seemed evident that he did not have a general roadmap of topics). At 16:35, Preston said "this is one of my favorite slides in the deck," as if they were viewing vacation photos. What I would have preferred to hear was "this is one of my favorite topics."

Don did the same thing right from the outset ("as Preston and I were going about putting together this PowerPoint."), and at around 17:30 with the Double Play slide. In so doing he missed an opportunity to really drive home a strong story. I would have liked to have heard him start that narrative before advancing to the slide, with maybe something like this: *When a manager and a subordinate are both trained on a critical topic, that is like [display slide] when infielders practice a double play. Each can train on his own, but when they train together, the effect is so much stronger.*

When presenters drive the story and lead the slides, the pace is better, attention spans are better, and the overall experience is more crisp. This requires that presenters really know the story they want to tell and can see in their heads the chain of topics. They should practice without any slides at all, and when they develop a feel for the rhythm and meter of the narrative, that is the time to integrate slides. The litmus test for a well-prepared presenter: Could you give your talk with no slides at all?

I think it is also critical that Don advance his own slides (it seemed as if he was asking someone named Chris to do that for him).

More awareness of the stale-slide quotient

One of the most challenging aspects of leading a webinar is how to handle the delivery of fully-formed thoughts. In a room, you can spend two or three minutes on a topic and command the room with gestures and eye contact. In a webinar, three minutes can seem like an eternity if your slides lose their relevance to the topic.

This happened to Don right out of the gate when, at the 9:15 mark, he was confronted with the compliance slide. He had to explain the relevance of these three news items, give his audience the time to read them, and then frame his own story of compliance. The audience did not have sufficient time to read this text and his narrative did not directly pertain to it. In fact, this slide stayed up for over four minutes, as Don was on a completely different topic.

That slide could have had major impact; instead it was a visual distraction. Anything would have been better, including the public-domain coffee cup that I found in about 15 seconds.

This occurred again at the 22:00 mark with the ageism quote. Granted, that slide appeared before Don was ready for it, but overlooking that, it should have been read, discussed, and then dismissed. As soon as Don began talking about "hire for attitude," the visual should have changed. Whether you decide to play it straight or go edgy, simple text-light images are better backdrops for extended narratives.
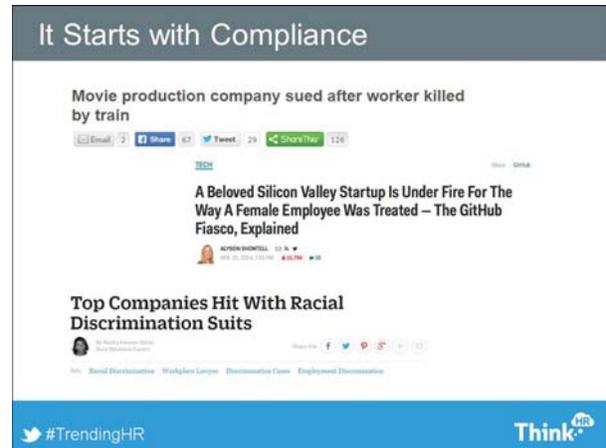
Cleaner interaction between presenters

With nothing more than a disembodied voice, anything that a webinar leader can do to bring some variety to the audible experience is welcome. Don and Preston showed good instincts in tossing subjects back and forth. However, several of these tosses resulted in fumbles.

At 14:40, Don asked Preston for feedback and he delivered, sharing his surprise at how easy it was to find examples and how widely shared they were across social media. This was a good toss and Preston's interjection added value to the discussion.

Subsequent ones were not as smooth, as each talked over the other or was not ready to speak when prompted. At the 36:00 mark, Preston essentially took over the webinar without any explanation. He introduced a man named Bob who didn't speak until six minutes later, and asked Don for feedback when he wasn't ready to offer any. The net result here is that Don got marginalized at his own webinar.

That said, Bob's contribution was effective and his toss with Preston at the 48:00 mark was a good one. ("Not only do you have to do it, you have to do it right.")

With that quote, Preston offered good advice for how to execute repartee between presenters. It needs to be planned, choreographed, and maybe even scripted. Each of you needs to know when you are going to ask the other one for an interjection, you should plan on an exchange, ask questions, have prepared answers, and maybe even indulge a debate or disagreement. This brings great texture to the story arc and shows that you are not just a couple of shills.

And that is the last word here: Preston needs to be careful to not end a majority of interjections with "that's a great point, Don." Webinars do not make good environments for mutual admiration societies.

Go all in with photos

If you find a photo that fits your topic, don't create a postage stamp; go for it! Fill the entire slide with the image. And if you can't find a photo that fits, don't use one at all. Witness these two slides: the first one is a bad stock photo that has nothing to do with a learning culture, while the second one is a vibrant, provocative, almost violent image that was spot on with the topic. Kudos for running it edge to edge.

Sequence dense, complicated slides

If you have made the determination that information you want to impart must be shown on screen, you then owe it to your audience to determine the best way to show it. In the case of dense, chunky slides like the ones shown here, rarely will be the answer be "all at once." When you do that, you make your audience drink from the fire hose, and whether they react consciously or subconsciously to that, it is not comfortable for them.

When you use PowerPoint's Animation engine effectively, you become a better storyteller, as you are more able to control the pace of the story. Stories should have beginnings, middles, and ends, and when you sequence the information on a busy slide, you make it more digestible and enable your audience to better appreciate your narrative.

The real opportunity here is the Business Case for Training. It was a powerful story and a slide that sequenced each piece of the equation in symphony with Don's progression woud have been extremely effective.

Create less busy slides

With slides that are not complicated, the focus should be on eliminating text and decluttering them. You do not want your slides to repeat what you say; that compels audience members to question why they showed up. "Why didn't you just email this to me," is the classic response to this variant of Death by PowerPoint.

Don and Preston were not guilty of this very often. The two missed opportunities in my view were the Roadmap and the In-person vs. Online question. In those instances, there was too much repitition between the spoken and displayed word. Granted, the Roadmap was sequenced, but unlike the slides on the previous page, it doesn't warrant that kind of treatment. I would like to see a version of this slide with the text cut way back.

Ditto for the How Should We Train section, whose initail slide with two nice photos was inexplicably removed from the webinar. Watch how much different of a feel I can give to this question by blending simple text messages with evocative imagery:

Summary

A good presentation consists of three things:

1. What you say.

2. What you show.

3. What you give.

Your objective is to make all three of those things as good as they can be. Your spoken word will carry the day as the most important part of the presentation. The visual component of the presentation should complement the spoken word and provide texture and context without overpowering or taking over. And finally, all of the details you would want your audience to take away should come in the form of a well-designed handout, not just a printout of your slides. (Never just print your slides!)

Because so few people do this, when you achieve it, you will distinguish yourself from 99% of the people giving presentations today. And when audience members see you using the presentation tools so confidently and capably, they will begin to think that maybe you know what you are talking about when it comes to the webinar topic itself.