

Tell Me in Pictures

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Do your speakers think of the speaking platform as a classroom? Do they assume that if all those people out there are looking up at them and the PowerPoint is clicking away, people are paying attention?

Not a great assumption. When employees are subjected to a speech that bores them, they probably won't walk out, job security being what it is. But it's a good bet they'll *tune* out. And all those nice pie charts, and the 200-word bulleted slides on the company's strategy might as well not have been created.

Outside audiences have even less incentive to listen -- unless they decide after the first few sentences that there's a very good reason for them to stay tuned in. Add "too long" to "boring," and a speaker can do real damage to her reputation. Even to her company's.

So how do you increase the chances people *will* listen?

One way to do it -- assuming the speaker has something to say, which is a subject for another column -- is to paint pictures. You can paint them with words, with props, with video or sound clips. If you're using PowerPoint, you use that, too; you just have to use it the right way. Diagrams that nobody past the third row can see will definitely not do the trick.

Here's an example of a great picture painted in words.

When John Kerry was running for President, Vietnam Era activist William Sloan Coffin said, "Kerry has a face that looks as though it could be moved up on Mt. Rushmore without going through the White House."

Bam. Instantly, that Jay Leno chin appeared before your eyes.

Here's an example of picture-painting with PowerPoint, from a speech I wrote for an executive at a sales recognition event. The theme of the event was "Magic."

It started with a story about how beloved MIT Professor Harold "Doc" Edgerton, the inventor of strobe photography, took the famous picture of a bullet piercing an apple and seemingly stopped in mid-air on the other side.

We used PowerPoint to show the photo, which Edgerton called “Making Applesauce at MIT.” While it was up on the screen, the speaker described how Edgerton took it and then made the point that what appears to be magic is often just great skill -- the kind these top sales folks demonstrated on the job every day.

Short rhymes are another way to paint a picture that sticks in memory.

Case in point: A while ago our local paper ran a story about the now-famous Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, noting that the Church of England “was founded by King Henry VIII, who had eight wives and beheaded seven of them.”

Whoa. It’s been a while since I took English history, but I do remember that Henry had six wives, not eight, and his beheading quotient was two, not seven. The reason I remember? A little rhyme that goes “divorced, beheaded, died . . . divorced, beheaded, survived.”

Finally, painting pictures with props.

If the speaker is talking about a new product and it’s smaller than a car, bring it on stage. Think Steve Jobs and every new Apple product he’s introduced. If the product is too big to bring on stage, show a video clip of it operating, making it clear how it will benefit users – hopefully, including people in the audience.

Audiences bore easily. So give them things to capture their imaginations – and help make sure they won’t mentally walk out.