

Powers of Persuasion

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ABSTRACT

One of the most most telling scenes in the recently released documentary movie, *Startup.com*, a woundingly embarrassing examination of the hubris and absurdity of the dotcom world, is when the ebullient chief executive of GovWorks.com strides into a Silicon Valley venture-capital firm fully expecting to walk out with millions of dollars. But he leaves looking crushed, explaining that the company had brushed him off, scoffing that he had not even prepared "an electronic presentation."

FULL TEXT

Powers of Persuasion

By Robert Templer/SINGAPORE



One of the most most telling scenes in the recently released documentary movie, *Startup.com*, a woundingly embarrassing examination of the hubris and absurdity of the dotcom world, is when the ebullient chief executive of GovWorks.com strides into a Silicon Valley venture-capital firm fully expecting to walk out with millions of dollars. But he leaves looking crushed, explaining that the company had brushed him off, scoffing that he had not even prepared “an electronic presentation.”

A ripple of recognition went through the cinema audience of self-flagellating former dotcomers from New York’s Silicon Alley, for what presentation nowadays is complete without PowerPoint slides? Turning up without your ideas arranged in neat points, set off with a few swirling animated graphs in jewel-like colours following all those handy rules that somehow emerged about seven words per line, seven lines per page—well, it’s almost unthinkable.

Microsoft estimates that 30 million PowerPoint presentations are created each day. This is a figure that fills me with fear. Being paid by the word for most of my work, I’m nat-

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urally disinclined towards anything that introduces too much brevity into the world, but the thought of 30 million people spending hours compressing the complexity of life into bullet points is almost too much to bear. Think of the hours wasted pasting on little borders and making graphics move up and down. Think of the time spent downloading the gargantuan files that PowerPoint creates. Think of all those people in darkened meeting rooms staring numbly at coloured pie-charts, like babies mesmerized by swirling mobiles.

Worst of all, think of the sad fact that PowerPoint is an enormously successful piece of software. Not only do people love it because it takes the fear out of presentations, but it also helps persuade people.

Prof. Robert Cialdini, author of *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* and a leading expert on why people change their minds, found that people presented with information about an imaginary college applicant through a PowerPoint presen-

tation ranked the student’s prospects much higher than those who read about him on paper.

Perhaps PowerPoint is to blame for the whole dotcom bubble. Too many people were taken in by ideas that somehow seemed better on a screen in bright blue Times New Roman 44-point letters. In *Startup.com*, the size of the market that GovWorks.com is after keeps growing until the chief executive is touting the total value of parking tickets and municipal licences in the United States at \$585 billion. Say the figure out loud and you realise how ridiculous it sounds. See it in a blur of PowerPoint slides and you might just believe it.

The whole point about PowerPoint is that it makes presenters reduce their thoughts to a few catchy points (or dumb ones, such as a dotcom presentation I was sent that included the life-altering observation “Cash is important”). PowerPoint has not become quite as ubiquitous in Asia as in the U.S., where *The New Yorker* magazine recently noted that it is now used in 15% of church services. The Ten Commandments have always been PowerPoint-ready, although Seven Commandments would have kept better faith with the rule.

One hopes Asia may look back at its own history and see that reducing life to a few aphorisms isn’t always a good idea. Remember those catchy phrases like “The East is Red” and “Long Live the Great Helmsman”? “Political Power Grows Out of the Barrel of a Gun” doesn’t quite meet the PowerPoint seven-word rule but you can still picture it up on a screen accompanied by a little rifle graphic.

It is fitting that PowerPoint was developed by Microsoft, the ultimate corporate cult. It not only reduces the complexities of any issue into banalities but it somehow inhibits argument. I’ve witnessed rooms full of people dutifully copying down slides but I’ve never heard anyone stand and challenge any points. One of the more egregious aspects of the tech world in recent years has been its reluctance to listen to dissenters and the tendency to dismiss critics, complaining that they “just don’t get it.”

The problem with PowerPoint is it is part of that hectoring culture—it is all about imposing your views on other people, not finding out what they think. So join a new movement whose members already include Sun Microsystems and the U.S. military. They decided that PowerPoint used up too much time and bandwidth—and in Sun’s case, was sold by a competitor. This movement comes complete with a catchy, presentation-friendly slogan: Ban PowerPoint. ■

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