

Communication vs. Presentation

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The efforts of many analytical projects today result in a deliverable consisting of PowerPoint slides, either used in a presentation or sent as a substitute for a written report. But is this the most effective way to deliver intelligence and competitive recommendations? Does the medium match the objective?

This topic is particularly relevant to SCIP, as we have instituted a "PowerPoint-free zone" for 22 sessions in the upcoming SCIP 2010 annual meeting. The goal of this action is to increase the interactive aspects of these sessions, where CI experts share their knowledge directly with the conference attendees and respond to their current interests. We have taken the deliberate step of removing the PowerPoint barrier between speaker and audience and creating an environment where all are involved in actively exchanging ideas. In these sessions, we have eliminated the passive environment of hearing a speaker repeat line by line what appears in prepackaged slides.

In general the standard PowerPoint slide format is too restrictive to effectively convey intelligence insight and tell intelligence stories. All of us can remember the mind-numbing effect of watching a presenter read their slides line by line. When people are bored, they will not remember the substance of your conclusions and your recommendations, let alone be motivated to act on what you say.

It does take a substantial shift in thinking to approach a presentation without a PowerPoint crutch. We have to tell a story through a combination of words and pictures, make our storytelling richer and more meaningful to our audience. The key to effective storytelling is knowing the learning styles and background of your listeners. It takes more work on the presenter's end to understand what motivates the audience to examine and learn from your analysis, and how to persuasively share your conclusions and recommendations. Presenters should keep the key points of immediate interest to the audience in the forefront and succinctly convey them.

Delivering intelligence can take many forms beyond simple PowerPoint slides, including information graphics and visual language diagrams. In some situations, whiteboards or flipcharts can be effective means of presenting analytical conclusions. When analysts and their audience together build representations of issues, outcomes and recommendations, the executives stay engaged and create their own 'aha' moments, which helps them own the results. Developing a dialog between analysts and their executives and presenting applicable insight into their strategic or tactical business problem creates the environment where they are more likely to integrate the intelligence insight into their decision-making.

Good storytelling doesn't always involve visual aids, but presenting convincing intelligence evidence requires some type of presentation. Determine what element of the analysis needs a visual supplement, and what can be conveyed verbally. When possible, replace words with images. Use images in particular when presenting data, demonstrating trends, simplifying complex issues and visualizing abstractions.

Many different analytical frameworks and models can generate these visual components. Presentation richness can be enhanced by applying multiple methodologies that either converge or contrast with one another. (See Babette Bensoussan's and Craig Fleisher's two analytical methods books, *Business and Competitive Analysis* and *Strategic and Competitive Analysis* for insight on selecting and applying over 40 analytical techniques.)

Another element that works against the use of PowerPoint presentations is the ongoing generational shift to decisionmakers who are much more visually oriented. Based on their access to and use of video and visual media, many have developed a preference to absorb information through patterns. This is also another reason to be vigilant in not assuming that your own personal learning style is the same as those of your audience.

For the most part, the specific techniques and methods applied to communicate intelligence findings and recommendations are secondary to creating a successful communication environment. Although some situations do not provide the option of providing an in-person briefing, it is by far the most effective and preferred way to develop a dialog about the relevance of the intelligence and how it can be integrated into the executives' decision process. PowerPoints create a barrier to establishing this dialog, and often the results end with the audience understanding the intelligence message perfectly, but either not accepting it entirely or in a half-hearted manner, which impedes its translation into action.

Another issue is time allocation. When delivering intelligence results and recommendations, the presentation itself often takes the vast majority of the time analysts have available with their executives. Little time is left for discussing the potential impacts of the analytical conclusions and how it is viewed by the key executives who, on the basis of this presentation, will decide if and how much of the intelligence they will apply to the relevant issues. In the optimum situation, the analyst spends the minimum time necessary to present the intelligence insights (no matter how delivered) and the maximum time engaging their executives in a discussion that addresses their questions, concerns and opinions. Dialogue creates acceptance, which leads to action.

In the end, the importance and impact of the intelligence questions demand that the insight created by their analytical answers be communicated, discussed, modified as needed, and their impact on actions decided. This is not accomplished through a presentation, but through effective communication by the analyst, an open discussion (with open minds) with the executive group, and the development of a decision-based outcome. Reasoning, creativity, and interaction creates an effective communication environment, which can bring all concerned individuals to a common understanding and decision.