



HOW A 9-YEAR-OLD HELPED A CTO PRESENT BETTER - DEBUNKING TECHNICAL PRESENTATIONS

HOW A 9-YEAR-OLD HELPED A CTO PRESENT BETTER - DEBUNKING TECHNICAL PRESENTATIONS

A few years ago we had the great privilege of working with a big name software company. The opportunity came our way via a pretty circuitous route (proof of the power of referrals and LinkedIn) and we were frankly giddy with excitement. Big name, huge profile and a very senior stakeholder – the CTO. The stakes were high and we couldn't wait to get started.

Things started well. The project was an interesting one, the team assembled by the client was bright, enthusiastic and engaged and our role was clearly defined – help us communicate our technology platform in a more engaging and powerful way. The perfect project...

Yet despite the positive kick off, things started to go awry relatively quickly.

The technology team seemed determined to drag the PowerPoint presentation design into the detailed 'weeds' from the get-go. There seemed a perverse pride in their ability to make things complex very quickly, leaving non-technical schmucks like me on the side lines, confused and befuddled.

In addition, there was clear resistance to the editing out of any of the existing content. Slide after slide of dense content was clutched to their bosoms as if their lives depended on it.

And finally, there was a tendency for the team to obsess about what each slide should look like in terms of animation, content and visuals. Everyone had firmly held opinions and examples of 'killer slides' that had served them well in previous presentations.

It was all very frustrating and not a little worrying – from dream client to nightmare project in the blink of an eye...

As is often the case when in the eye of such a storm, I pulled a trick used by many a consultant – break for coffee. This not only allowed their detail/content/PowerPoint frenzy to die down a little but also gave me time to get some perspective. The power of caffeine and a jolt of sugar from way too many biscuits did the trick – I'd figured out what was holding us back and what to do to fix it.



STEP 1 - RECOGNISE PRIDE NOT EGO

The reason that the team were finding it almost impossible to let go of the detail had nothing to do with ego and everything to do with pride. They'd worked damned hard to bring their collective technological vision to life so, quite understandably, they were keen to show the 'workings out'.

Absolutely nothing wrong with this when sharing their journey with peers who possess the same level of passion, interest and knowledge in the technology. The fly in the

ointment, however, was that I had been pulled in to improve the quality of communication to non-technical audiences which meant all bets were off.

The most important stakeholder in the room was no longer the smartest person but the 'general knowledge' audience facing the presenter.

Getting the technical team to understand this was key to addressing the issue.



STEP 2 - CREDIBILITY COMES FROM COMMUNICATION NOT SLIDES

The client team were incredibly smart people, each possessing qualifications and reputations that put mere mortals to shame. Their credibility was assured...I just had to get them to recognise that.

In my experience, the really smart people, especially those in the technology and science worlds, are often quite insecure. They typically loathe standing in front of an audience and being the centre of attention so naturally default to hiding behind complexity. The net result is a series of mindboggling slides, huge swathes of dense content and a distinct lack of clear messaging. In short, your average audience nightmare.

The trick to getting your technical presenter to step away from the comfort blanket of complexity is to get them to focus on the purpose of the presentation – what exactly is it that you want your audience to do as a result of sharing this information? This simple question completely refocuses the mind of the technical presenter and gives them that all important clarity around messaging. When armed with a clear message, they are better able to shed the noise and complexity that was killing their verbose presentation.

STEP 3 - FIND A 9 YEAR OLD

In my book, 'The Presentation Lab', I talk about how a great message should make sense to a child...and if it doesn't, you've still got work to do in terms of making it simple and engaging. This basic test is a great leveller, forcing brilliant minds to step down from the pedestal and find a way to clearly communicate their message to their intended audience.

In short, simplicity is not stupidity.

The key to this final stage of the process was getting the team to recognise the power of clearly communicating their story. By building a presentation that provides their audience with a powerful message and call to action, they can be assured that all their hard work and fierce intelligence will have an impact and shape the future of the business.

Blinding them with science (and overly complex PowerPoint slides, verbose content and meandering messaging) is likely to have the opposite effect.

So there you have it - it's amazing what a coffee break and a bit of friendly but firm corralling can do. The workshop quickly went from a sense of chaotic paranoia to being focused on developing a core message that would resonate with a clearly defined audience. In short, the focus was on stories not slides...and when that happens, everybody wins.

Oh, and the good news is that 5 years later, we're still working with the company...but now it's across their global network. Just goes to show...

