Stop your presentation before it kills again!

Sometimes the best presentation is... no presentation. Ditch the slides completely. Put the projector in the closet, roll the screen back up, and turn the damn lights back on!

Especially if the slides are bullet points. Or worse... paragraphs... or if critical data is presented in a form that leads to brain-death.

The second you dim the lights and go into "presentation mode" is the moment you move from a two-way conversation to a one-way lecture/broadcast. It's hard to be interactive when you're behind your laptop, at a podium, watching your slides on the small screen.

Then there's the phenomenon of "talking to the slides", where the speaker is constrained into following a script. Although some can do it, most presenters (including me) aren't capable of dynamically reconfiguring their slides to customize in realtime for a particular audience. So the speaker just forges on, slide after slide, saying what's already ON the slide, regardless of what he learned about the group. Then again, asking the attendees for feedback is dangerous when you're following a script, since it's tough to really incorporate anything they say.

But given how many people hate slide presentations, why is it universally assumed that where there is "a talk", there's PowerPoint (or its much cooler cousin, Apple's KeyNote)? Conference coordinators rarely ask speakers if they'll be projecting slides. They send out the slide templates, then start demanding your slides several weeks before the show. Saying you don't have slides is like saying you'll give your talk naked. "You mean... you're going out there with nothing???"

I know the arguments in favor of slides:

Visuals are more memorable than words alone.

True... But bullet points are still the prevailing content of most slides, and they usually add nothing unless the speaker truly sucks, or has such a dramatically hard-to-parse accent that it's the only way you can get the info.

You have no choice when you're presenting something that must be shown.

There are times when the very content you're speaking on directly relates to something you need or want to show. A screen shot, a design, a building, an animation, etc. Often you need to show quantitative data in a chart or graph. These are completely valid reasons, and slides might indeed be the best way. But they aren't the only way to show that data. Handouts and giant poster boards (for small rooms and a small number of items to show) can often work better.

But yes, there are definitely times you need slides, and at the end of this post I'll mention where you might look for info on making kick-ass presentations.

It keeps the speaker and presentation on track.

I'm sure you all realize what a lame-ass excuse that is, but I've heard it enough times to know some folks believe it. I won't even go there.

Now, I'm not an expert on presentations, and not a particularly good presenter myself, so take this with a

grain of salt. But I am applying what we've learned over the years about the brain and learning, so this isn't just a wild guess either. Here's the recommendation I used to give our Java instructors:

The "Do You Need Slides" Test

1) Is what you're showing absolutely dependent on the learners seeing something you cannot simply describe in words?

- If YES, is the room small enough to use a flipchart, white board, or posters?
- If the room or audience size is too large, can you use handouts?

2) If NO (your content does not require visuals), then what are you trying to achieve with the slides?

- If you think it's because the attendees want slides, think again. Expect them? Yes. Need them? No.
- If you think it's to help you stay on track, find another way! Use note cards. They're far easier to rearrange at a moment's notice, especially if you can keep your talk more modular/fine-grained.
- If it's to keep the attendees awake and alert and add emotional hooks and increase memorability or understanding, then you've got a point. But in that case, you need to apply the other test:

The "Do My Slides Suck" Test

1) Do your slides contain mostly bullet points?

2) Do you have more than 12-15 words on a slide? [Other sources suggest 6 words or fewer – Gord]

3) Do your slides add little or no new info beyond what you can say in words?

4) Are your slides, in fact, not memorable?

5) Are your slides emotionally empty?

6) Do your slides fail to encourage a deeper connection to or understanding of the topic?

7) Do your slides distort the data?

8) Do your slides encourage cognitive weakness?

A "Yes" to any of those could be a huge red flag that something's wrong.

If you're still committed to slides, or if you're certain you need them, here's my favorite overall recommendation:

Put each slide on trial for its life. Ask it to defend itself. Show no mercy. Make it beg, make it plead, make it sell itself. If it doesn't convince you, kill it. And if there aren't enough left to justify using slides, just say no.

The best presenters, in my opinion, get the best of both worlds. They can dynamically shift between "lights dimmed slide mode" and "lights up, let's talk" mode without blinking. They don't let the slides constrain them to a script, and they don't let the slide equipment keep them trapped behind the invisible wall that separates them from the participants. They can rearrange their slides in realtime. Their slides rock!

But right now, I'm too slow and clumsy and don't present often enough to ever get that good, so I choose (most of the time) the path of interaction.