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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- PP

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — PP

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Some years ago while among the crowd flowing out of an auditorium after a conference presentation, I overheard someone say, "You know, if you bullet nonsense, it's still nonsense." This off-the-cuff clarification struck me as insightful and funny. I've always remembered it.

Today the remark would be a near-commonplace, but this was early in the **PowerPoint** era. Most of us in that room probably hadn't as yet given a **PowerPoint** presentation and maybe hadn't witnessed more than five or six of them. We were still getting used to these presentations that were slicker than what we'd seen before. In those days it was possible to be dazzled by **PowerPoint**, even a little intimidated by people who used it. Who could have known what an instrument of mass tedium had been set loose?

We know now. In all storms of animosity against **Microsoft**, no lightning rod is higher in the sky than **PowerPoint**. If you doubt that, just call up **Google** and key in "hate powerpoint." In "Results 1-10 of about 61,600," you'll see these headers and links:

I hate PowerPoint

I hate **PowerPoint**. Category: Stupid Stuff I found this great parody ...

Why I Hate PowerPoint

Why I hate **PowerPoint**. It's blah and unimaginative.

Why I Hate PowerPoint

Why I Hate **PowerPoint 2**. You don't have to be a Picasso to use it.

gtexts — full-tilt rantzone

"IF YOU HATE **POWERPOINT** ..." you'll like this. ... Not that I actually hate **PowerPoint** — it has its place — but this was pretty darned funny. ...

Nicholas Allen Strategic Communication Partnership

So why do I hate **PowerPoint**? And I do mean hate. I ... Having said all that, I don't really hate **PowerPoint**. Even though I ...

If these entries are somewhat Hamletlike, the gist is still clear. There's no need to page onward to Results 11-20, let alone any further, to find a cogent **PowerPoint** appraisal. For that, simply track down **PowerPoint**'s most eminent critic, **Edward R. Tuft** (www.edwardtuft.com).

Tuft is a Yale emeritus professor who in retirement has become something of a cult figure through several books about analytical design published by his own **Graphics Press**. *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, the first of these, gave **Tuft** a platform which he uses to demonstrate how complicated phenomena can be beautifully and clearly presented. While at it, he has also become an at-large cultural critic, at least within the domain of graphic display. And



he has left no room for doubt on this: **Tuft** hates **PowerPoint**.

On his Website **Tuft** offers for sale a 27-page booklet entitled *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*. In this essay, parts of which were published in *Wired* magazine, **Tuft** elaborates on what he considers the program's defects:

"... foreshortening of evidence and thought, low spatial resolution, a deeply hierarchical single-path structure as the model for organizing every type of content, breaking up narrative and data into slides and minimal fragments, rapid temporal sequencing of thin information rather than focused spatial analysis, conspicuous decoration and Phluff, a preoccupation with format not content, an attitude of commercialism that turns everything into a sales pitch."

Along the way **Tuft** shows how decisions informed by **PowerPoint** presentations contributed to the 2003 space shuttle Columbia disaster, skewers a "witless" series of **Harvard School of Public Health PowerPoint** slide templates, compares **PowerPoint** to a drug meriting worldwide product recall, lavishes attention on a **PowerPoint** parody based on the "Gettysburg Address" (w), displays an hilarious parody poster of his own (for sale on **Tuft's** Website), and in a brilliant mini-critique within his larger critique, refers to **PowerPoint** much of the time as "PP."

Search your serials database and you will find **Tuft** and other critics; but you will also find that **PowerPoint's** published friends far outnumber foes. After all, where do you turn when you have a presentation to give? "Conferencing for Big Business" is a representative magazine article; "Learning to Love PowerPoint" coaxes novices along; "Try Lightening the Mood with a Bright and Entertaining Template" is a set of intermediate pointers; and "A PowerPoint without Bullets is Possible, and Beautiful as Well" is, of course, for the advanced presenter. What the next two articles say about the state of the skin trade I am not sure, but dutiful database searchers will find that "Posters à la PowerPoint" was a feature in *Dermatology Times*, and that "The Savvy Physician's Motto: PowerPoint or Perish" ran not long ago in *Cosmetic Surgery Times*.

Cosmetic surgeons are not the only savvy ones, of course: Everyone uses **PowerPoint**. A 2001 "Annals of Business" feature in *The New Yorker* reported that the software resides on two hundred and fifty million computers; that the co-inventor of **PowerPoint** retired a wealthy man and today spends time collecting antique concertinas; that **Microsoft** estimates thirty million or more **PowerPoint** presentations are delivered daily; and that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered US bases around the world to simplify their presentations because

continued on page 73

Leaving the Books Behind from page 71

participation. It was like the AIP badge that comes into motion as you pin it on your shirt ... lit up and circling the world with direction and purpose!

I have experienced many conferences as a spectator, an exhibitor, a speaker and organizer. Nowhere in my experience, have I encountered such an energized association of people. The excitement carried me through the next year's courses until I could again attend the **Charleston Conference** to be rejuvenated. Much of our life is filled with the routine of our daily lives, but once a year in November, we travel to this magic city and renew our friendships, share new information and begin to formulate more research plans for the future's solutions to burning questions. Each year's new student group from **USC** comes with eyes ready to absorb all the sights and sounds of that year's offerings in knowledge and research. In 2003, the group took on the task of summarizing each day's events and left its mark on each pastel page of information. It was fun to help in that project and see people grabbing for those sheets. We can't be everywhere at the **Conference** and sum-

maries help everyone catch up on sessions regrettably missed.

We hope, as students, to be contributing to the **Conference** in any way possible, as the rewards we reap are bountiful. Please do not fail to meet us and share with us your deepest professional concerns and your wide knowledge. At this point in our careers, we are mostly sponges absorbing as much as possible, but one day you will see us at the podium, next to a poster, or just chatting in the hallway. We will be contributing members coming to share our new knowledge, pointing the way to new ideas and compromises. For now, it is left to me to thank all of you for making us feel at home in the beginning of our new careers. The **School of Library and Information Science** at the **University of South Carolina** has been discussing the possibility of sharing the students' views of the profession, their questions and their newly acquired "learning" through a regular column in *ATG*. We would welcome your views on this subject given to this author through emails, so that our planning could be completed. If there are any topics of interest, please include them in your correspondence. We hope to keep you informed of the new methods of education in our schools today and the many issues we find of interest in the profession. Thanks for your help in this project.

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations from page 72

emailed PowerPoint files were “clogging up the military’s bandwidth.”

Paid advice on improving PowerPoint skills is easy to find. Last week, for example, I received in the mail a colorful advertisement for a workshop entitled “How to Build Powerful PowerPoint Presentations.” This Microsoft-certified course was scheduled for nearly twenty sessions in early 2004, including several in New England. The flyer itself was a glossy, colorful eight-page beauty, with bold section headers, many punctuated with exclamation points, with graphics simulating PowerPoint slide transitions, and, of course, with many, many bulleted points. Under the “Who Should Attend” section the workshop is bulleted as a “must-attend” for trainers, sales representatives, teachers, managers, public officials, and for “Advertising associates and marketing professionals whose high-powered proposals must stand out among stiff competition to reel in high-dollar accounts.”

If you are a Yale emeritus professor as clever as Edward Tufte, of course it's very easy to deconstruct all of this in a highly amusing way. And if you are anyone at all who by now, deep into the era of PowerPoint, has witnessed easily hundreds of dreadful, droning bulleted sessions, it seems a modest reward, and one hard-earned, to savor every word of parody, ridicule, mockery, and scorn

that Tufte and others have aimed at PowerPoint. But, what's the alternative?

Recall, if you can, pre-PowerPoint days. Is it all coming back? If so, an honest appraisal would have to allow that the strongest argument in PowerPoint's favor is, probably, overhead transparencies. Slide carousels would be another. Flip charts, likewise. Presentation atrocities via these technologies were far from uncommon. The dimmed lights, the jammed carousel trays, the transparencies crooked on the projector glass, the slides in wrong order, the flip chart scrawlings in multi-color Magic Marker, the easels impossible to see from the room's back corner.

What's changed is that PowerPoint has made it so easy to prepare presentations. Slides, transparencies, flip charts, these were not easy in any way. As Tufte put it, “The fans of PowerPoint are presenters, rarely audience members.” Or, as my brochure made the point, “Whether you need to crank out a last-minute presentation to bring team members up to speed on a project or develop a slick product presentation for a new client, PowerPoint provides the tools for delivering your important points powerfully and professionally ... you'll discover how to move beyond the black-and-white overheads ... of the past and leap into the world of computerized presentation graphics.”

Most of us have been there alright, cranking out that last-minute presentation. PowerPoint encourages this, since even with minimal mastery of the application, many

speakers can and do put it all together at the last minute. It's nearly ritual for some, who don't think a lot about what they have to say, in favor of tinkering with the mechanism they will use to say it. Does everyone need visuals in the first place? Why not just talk? Tufte recommends handouts. “Rarely,” he says, “do we want to attract attention to the methodology of presentation; instead just give a nice straightforward talk accompanying the printed material.” Who would question that we have a lot more conferences and presentations in the first place today, thanks to PowerPoint? It's like karaoke, a technology that puts a lot of people with no business being there, up in the front of the room.

No doubt about it, PowerPoint is a busy avenue of vendor-library communication. Conferences, workshops, product demos, sales presentations; it's hard to find a session unpaved by PowerPoint. And they're not all bad, by any means. A thoughtful, organized, well-prepared presenter can put PowerPoint to good use; the same for overheads; the same for blackboard and chalk; the same for no props at all. But it's so easy to go through the motions. Click, click, click; any questions? Nobody has to use PowerPoint. Next presentation, try it some other way. Or if that's too bold, turn off your projector after awhile. People might thank you. They might listen harder. Save PowerPoint for another time. It's become, after all, one of the principal ways that we don't talk to one another. 🐛