

Los Angeles Times

WEDNESDAY APRIL 19, 2006 SECTION C
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Making a (Power)Point of Not Being Tiresome

Cliff Atkinson turns ordinary slides into a more engaging tool using a three-act story telling structure.

By Claire Hoffman
Times Staff Writer

PowerPoint is:

- Bullet Points
- A Mysterious Jumble of Graphs and Charts
- Utter Boredom

But Cliff Atkinson, who runs a one-man, Los Angeles-based company called Sociable Media, wants to change all that.

Atkinson published a book last year called "Beyond Bullet Points" about how to combat "PowerPoint fatigue": the deadening sameness of Microsoft Corp.'s commonly used presentation software. The book caught the eye of W. Mark Lanier, a Houston-based trial lawyer.

What happened next sounds like an episode of a ripped-from-the-headlines TV crime drama. Lanier, who was suing Merck & Co. on behalf of a man who died while taking the painkiller Vioxx, hired Atkinson as a consultant to help with his opening argument.

The resulting 253-slide presentation was so mold-breaking — so the opposite of boring — that it was dubbed "CSI: PowerPoint."

Reporters covering the trial singled out the slides, with one calling them "frighteningly powerful." Jurors apparently agreed: They awarded the plaintiff's family \$253 million, coincidentally \$1 million per slide. (Merck is appealing that award.)

"I think Cliff turned PowerPoint in a direction that the Microsoft people never dreamed of," Lanier said. "The idea that you could speak for 2½ hours and keep the jury's attention seemed like an impossible goal, but it worked. The jury was very tuned in."

To Atkinson, a 41-year-old, MBA-wielding former Air Force officer who has also dabbled in journalism, that came as no surprise. Since 2001, he has



Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times

MESSENGER: Sociable Media owner Cliff Atkinson studied how the mind works when absorbing images and narration simultaneously. He has been helping PowerPoint users since 2001.

made a living helping people unshackle themselves from the tedium of pie charts. His secret, which he is happy to share with anyone who asks: using the same three-act storytelling structure that screenwriters swear by.

"Hollywood has been communicating using words and pictures for 100 years without text on the screen, so we need to look at what they do," he said recently as he showed a visitor around his Miracle

Mile apartment, which doubles as his office, near Wilshire Boulevard.

In addition to compiling presentations for clients, including the Social Security Administration, Bristol-Myers Squibb Co., Nestle Waters, dozens of trial lawyers and even Microsoft, Atkinson often hits the road to teach others how to make PowerPoint less stupefying.

Atkinson also employs a storyboard artist and a screenwriting coach to help

him hit the right dramatic beats. Then he throws a little science in the mix; he has studied how the mind works when absorbing images and narration at the same time.

Research has shown, for example, that an audience learns better when it is not being exposed to duplicated information. Atkinson pet peeve No. 1: that whole reading from a slide thing — bad idea.

When a black-and-white, Macintosh-only version of PowerPoint was introduced in 1987, it was hailed as a giant improvement over the overhead projector. Three years later, PowerPoint became available for Windows and was integrated into the standardized buffet of applications, including Word and Excel, that made up Microsoft Office, which is used by 400 million people.

For those who have managed to avoid it, PowerPoint provides users with a template to create slides. Features include a range of bullet points, animated text and even “Auto Content,” a fill-in-the-blank template that amounts to a PowerPoint for Dummies.

PowerPoint has its critics. Edward R. Tufte, a Yale professor and an internationally recognized design expert, has written several essays on how the application has negatively affected the way office workers think. The cover of one Tufte’s essays shows a photo of a parade of Communist soldiers lined up beneath a statue of Stalin in Budapest, Hungary. To Tufte, PowerPoint is a dictatorship of ideas.

Atkinson has read Tufte and says he is inspired by his work. Still, he says, it is futile to rail against something that

is so fully integrated into the professional culture.

“There is no organization that is going to give up PowerPoint,” said Atkinson, who first encountered the program while working at a dot-com start-up in the 1990s. Immediately, he saw it as “a tool that is supposed to help us engage with one another, but it’s actually keeping us from communicating.”

Atkinson set out to solve the problem five years ago and won immediate fans.

“The first time I followed his methodology, it really took a leap of faith,” said Lucinda Rowley, publisher of Microsoft Press, which printed Atkinson’s book and has invited him to speak to employees about ways of thinking outside the traditional PowerPoint box.

Rowley said Atkinson forced her to distill her message to an idea, to “focus on the message. It’s a little intimidating the first time because you feel like it’s so different. It’s not just a bunch of boring words on the slide.”

The next step, per Atkinson, is to sketch out a diagram of how the action will develop during a presentation. Stick to simple images and small amounts of information, he says, and arrange points in discrete sections or acts, so the audience can digest one concept at a time.

Finally, he preaches the power of resolution. Summarize the crisis, the climax and the conclusion, he says, of the message you’re trying to deliver.

Atkinson puts all this to use, of course, when he gives PowerPoint presentations on how to improve PowerPoint presentations. Those who

have seen them say he is his own best advertisement for the method.

“I’m used to seeing people with their heads down, taking notes,” said Lynne Hellmer, director of development for California State University, who invited Atkinson to speak at the Fullerton campus in February. When he took the stage, she said, “I watched our audience of adults with their mouths open, because they are wanting to look at him and the screen. They were hypnotized.”

Lanier, the trial lawyer, went up against Merck again in another Vioxx-related lawsuit this month. He called Atkinson, and they crafted another presentation, this time to accompany the closing argument. This one was dubbed “Desperate Executives.”

The slide show painted a picture of Merck executives driven to negligent behavior and reluctant to reveal their product’s alleged risks. Images of high-ranking employees were juxtaposed with allegedly incriminating memos.

Jurors awarded the plaintiff’s family \$13.5 million. Merck plans to appeal.

Lanier still raves. “The visual imagery of Cliff’s presentation, with my text, was compelling enough that the jury not only paid attention,” he said, “they remembered.”

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