



# *Presenting* *to Small Audiences*

Switch off the Projector!

Andrew Abela

If you are designing a presentation to deliver to a small audience—one, three, perhaps five or six people, then even the best presentation advice available will steer you wrong, because it is designed for presenting to *large audiences*.

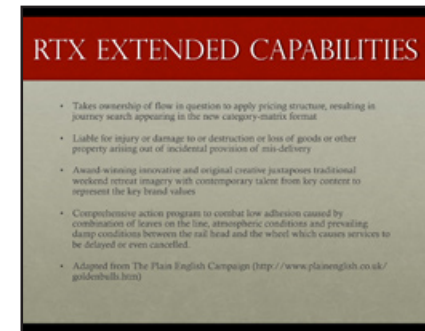
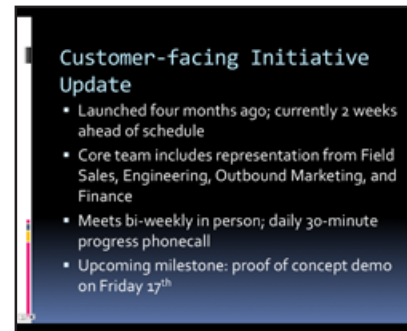
This is a problem, because the majority of presentations made today are to small groups or single individuals.

A sales pitch to a new prospect, a business proposal to senior management, a summary of research implications for your clients, a project update to your colleagues, an investment pitch to venture capitalists: these are the kinds of presentations that most of us are involved in, much more frequently than we give large, ballroom-style presentations. Presentations to small audiences are critically important, with business and career success often depending on them.

Yet they are usually not very effective.

## *Why are presentations to small audiences not very effective?*

The typical presentation to a small group today is designed just as if it were being made to a large group in a big auditorium. We follow the same advice in creating our slides, and then we turn on the portable projector and inflict slide after deadening slide on our audience—vintage Death by PowerPoint:



Too much of this effort is wasted. There is ample research evidence that projecting lots of text and speaking at the same time is so distracting to your audience that it is less effective than projecting your slides and *asking your audience to read them* while you remain silent, or *speaking with no slides at all!*

More recently, a new and much more attractive style of presentation has arisen, where slides have minimal text and appealing, relevant graphics:



This is a tremendous improvement over what we have seen in the past. Yet it is still inadequate—even highly inappropriate—for presenting to a small audience. *Why?* Because presentations to small and large audiences are vastly different from each other: a sales presentation to one or two buyers is *entirely different* from a speech to a sales meeting of hundreds or thousands of reps.

## *How is a presentation to a small group different?*

The critical difference between a presentation to a large or a small audience lies in the *objective* of the presentation. The objective of a presentation to a large audience is usually to provide the audience with some information, to motivate them, to get them to think about something, or—often—to entertain them. A presentation to a small group, by contrast, generally has a *much more focused goal*. You are trying to get the audience to take a specific action: buy the product, approve the proposal, implement the recommendations, or make the investment.

To recap:

We design our presentations as if we were presenting to these people.



But usually we are presenting to *these* people.



And often to *this* person.



These are very different audiences, and need to be communicated to in radically different ways.

## *Why does this matter?*

The objective of the presentation makes all the difference. If you want your audience to make a decision to do a specific thing, then you will design your presentation very differently than if you are just trying to inform them about, or motivate them, towards some broader course of action. This is because it is much *more difficult to get people to agree to take a specific action* than it is to have them concur with some general point that does not have an immediate effect on their lives. If you are asking them to do something specific, no matter how logical and sound your argument is, they are going to resist it—particularly if it is going to cost them or put them at risk in some way, as it usually will.

We know from research that logical arguments only play a small role in changing people's attitudes. People find it very hard to change their beliefs, even when faced with clear logic. They tend to focus on information that supports their existing beliefs and ignore or discount evidence that challenges those beliefs.

This tendency to cling to our existing beliefs, even in the face of contrary evidence, is even true for supposedly objective, fact-based people such as scientists. In an interesting experiment some years ago, researchers compared the problem-solving approaches of scientists and conservative Protestant ministers. The two groups were chosen because the former were supposedly purely objective and the latter ostensibly biased by their religious convictions. The study found no significant difference between the two groups in terms of belief change, with both groups having a tendency to bias themselves in favor of supporting their ingoing hypothesis. (The researchers actually found that the Protestant ministers were slower to jump to conclusions than the scientists).

When people hold strong, opposing attitudes, logical arguments can actually cause them to “dig their heels in” on their current beliefs: the stronger the contrary evidence, the more effort they put into

their counter-arguments. So if people tend to cling to their beliefs, and the more you provide logical argument, the more they cling, what should you do?

One solution is to involve your audience in your presentation, to draw them in so that they interact with your ideas. If people are going to be persuaded, they need to digest the ideas in their own way and at their own pace—and feel that they can counter-argue and have their objections addressed. Research supports the notion that the processing of new information is strengthened when presentations are interactive. If you want to persuade someone to do something, therefore, your presentation needs to be **interactive**: about the worst thing you could do is sit that person down in a chair and proceed to talk at him or her. Yet this is what our standard presentation approach does. The audience sits down, and the presenter starts talking and propelling PowerPoint slides at them.

If people are going to be persuaded, they need to digest the ideas in their own way and at their own pace—and feel that they can counter-argue and have their objections addressed.

The second thing your presentation needs if you want to persuade people to take a specific action is **details**. At one level, the need for details is obvious. If you want your audience to say “yes” to your proposal, then you have to give them the necessary details of your proposal: how much, when, what, where, to whom, why. Beyond that, however, details add interest, credibility, and persuasiveness to communication. We know from extensive research in advertising, for example, that consumers are more attracted to print ads that contain detailed information. Ironically, this is the case



even when *they do not read the details*. The very fact that the details are present—even without knowing what they are—appears to be enough to convince most people that you are presenting substance. David Ogilvy, the advertising guru, knew this long before any such research was done. He wrote “I believe, without any research to support me, that advertisements with long copy convey the impression that you have something important to say, whether people read the copy or not.” The same seems to be true for presentations: slides with lots of detail are more convincing.

The real challenge, of course, is how to design a slide with all the necessary detail in a way that it doesn't overwhelm your audience—because a third requirement for persuasion is that you need to make it easy for your audience to absorb your information by ensuring that **there are no distractions**. You need to be able to design your slides to convey lots of details *without* distracting your audience from your main message. Color and ClipArt can also cause harmful distractions. Research on color suggests that unless it is used to play a specific role on your slide—highlighting a particular column on a graph, for example—then color can be quite counterproductive, harming rather than helping communication. This is because part of your audience's minds are absorbed trying to decipher the meaning of the different colors on the slide, even if only subconsciously (“Why is that border brown? And why is that square green? Is it somehow related to the green circle below it?” etc.) ClipArt is similarly unhelpful. The empirical evidence on this is unambiguous: irrelevant images draw your audience's attention away from your message, instead of reinforcing it. Eliminate all irrelevant images from your presentations, or, as Nancy Duarte puts it, “If you feel tempted to use a picture of two hands shaking in front of a globe, put the pencil down, step away from the desk, and think about taking a vacation or investigating aromatherapy.”

## *Different presentation styles*

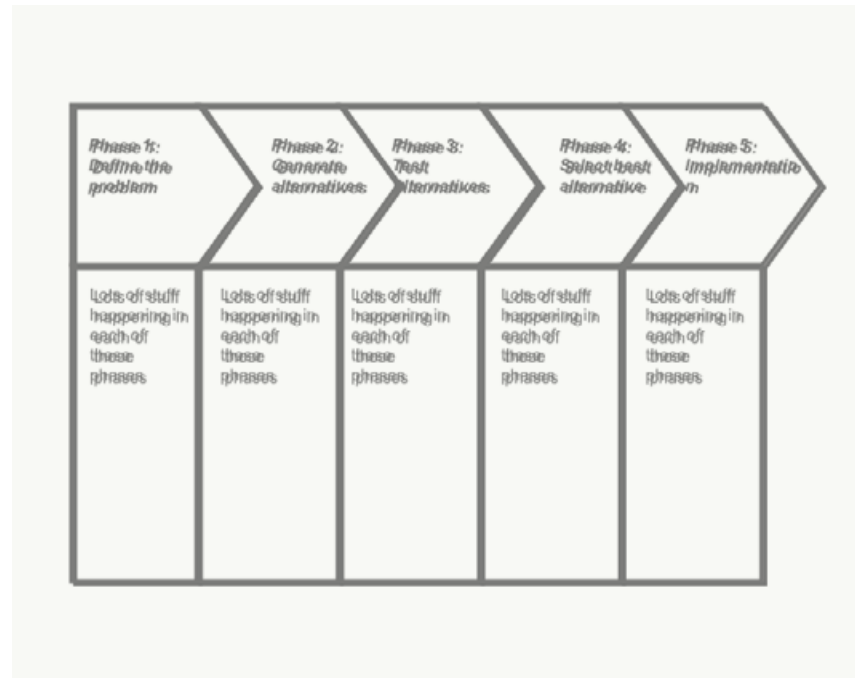
What we have been describing so far is an entirely different style of presentation design. Success in presentation, it turns out, comes in large part from matching the appropriate presentation style to the situation, and particularly to the size of the audience.

The attractive kind of slide we saw above, with few words and appealing, relevant graphics, projected on a screen, is an example of a *Ballroom style* presentation. Ballroom style presentations are highly appropriate for informing or entertaining large audiences, such as those gathered in a hotel ballroom.

The requirements for persuading smaller audiences (details, interaction, no distractions) call for a *Conference Room style* presentation. Conference Room style presentations tend to contain lots of details on each slide, the slides are printed, not projected, and every slide must pass the squint test.

## The Squint Test?

A slide passes the Squint Test if, *when you squint at it, so that you cannot read any of the text, you still get something about the slide's message.* Look at the slide below. Assume that the text is all blurred because you are squinting at it. Do you have any idea what it's about?

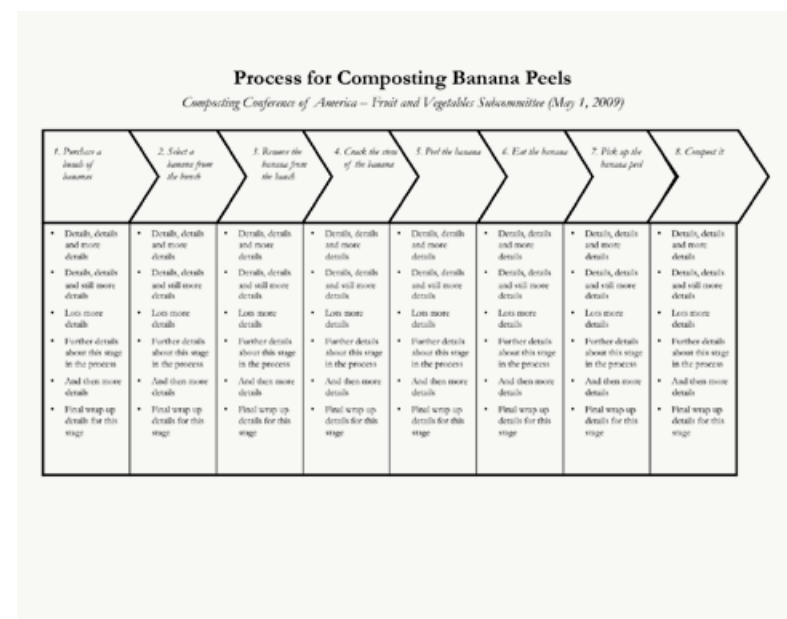


Certainly. Without reading a single word, it is immediately evident that this slide is about some kind of a process. Without saying anything to your audience, and without them reading anything on the slide, they know—the moment that they set their eyes on it—that the slide is about a process.

How do you design slides that pass the squint test? You do this by ensuring that the slide's layout reinforces its main message. For example, instead of showing these eight slides, which describe a complex, 8-step process...



...you would present this one slide, using the process layout we saw above.



Here's the irony: this slide may not be as pretty and colorful as the eight others it replaces, but it is far more effective at persuading your audience! A Conference Room style slide like this one is printed and handed out to your audience, not projected, so that all the rich details on the page will be legible—and so that your audience can take it away with them and begin to implement your ideas. The reason this approach works is that the layout communicates immediately to your audience what the slide is all about, so they do not have to spend the time reading the details to find out, and instead can pay attention to you as you walk them through the slide.

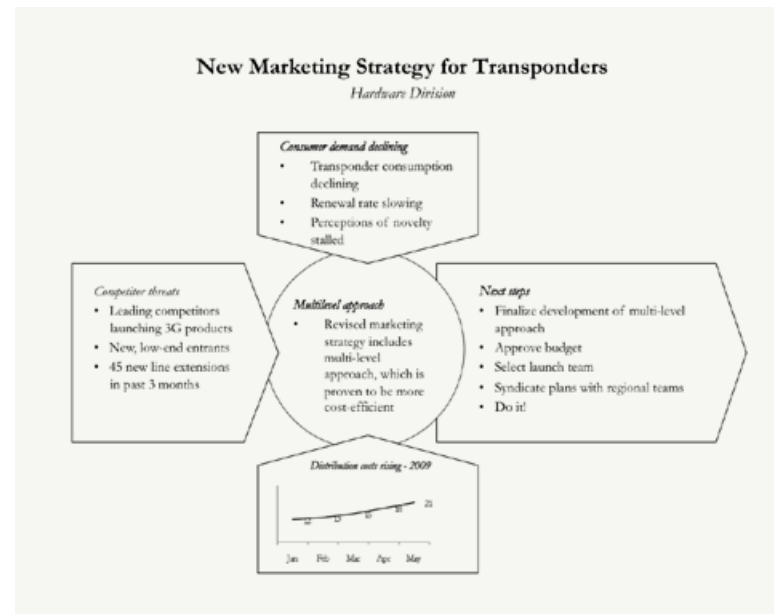
A page like this has tremendous advantages for a small audience. It contains all the details they need on one page—and research suggests that when all relevant information is delivered together, rather than broken up into pieces—across different slides—it is actually more comprehensible. It also gives you an 87.5% reduction in number of slides, which is a great improvement in itself.

Here's another example. Instead of these slides...

The image shows a grid of six small, dark blue presentation slides, numbered 1 through 6, arranged in two rows of three. Each slide contains text or a chart related to a marketing strategy for transponders.

- Slide 1:** New Marketing Strategy for Transponders  
Hardware Division
- Slide 2:** Consumer demand declining
  - Transponder consumption declining
  - Renewal rate slowing
  - Perceptions of novelty stalled
- Slide 3:** Competitor Threats
  - Leading competitors launching 3G products
  - New, low-end entrants
  - 45 new line extensions in past 3 months
- Slide 4:** Multilevel Approach
  - Revised marketing strategy includes multi-level approach, which is proven to be more cost-efficient
- Slide 5:** Next Steps
  - Finalize development of multi-level approach
  - Approve budget
  - Select launch team
  - Syndicate plans with regional teams
  - Do it!
- Slide 6:** Retailer margins increasing 2004
  - A line graph showing a sharp increase in retailer margins starting in 2004.

... try this one:



What we are doing with these makeovers is not just taking the content of multiple slides and showing them on one page, so that the audience can see the full picture. We are also *adding* information by using the slide layout in each case to show how the different pieces of content relate to each other. Since each slide passes the squint test, these relationships are immediately evident to the audience, so they can just sit back and listen to you. In the first example, the pieces of content on the slide were clearly steps in a process. In the second example, the layout shows immediately that the content from the first three arrows combines to give us the content in the circle, which in turn leads to the content in the arrow to the right.

## *Do we have to print the slides?*

Yes—when you are using Conference Room style slides, you should always print and hand them out. If you project them, the details you need could never fit on a slide and still be legible.

## *Won't we lose control of the presentation if we hand out our slides?*

This is a common concern among people new to designing Conference Room style presentations. You like the feeling of control that you have when you are projecting your slides, because you decide when to click ahead to the next slide, and so you know that you are in control of what your audience is thinking at each moment in the presentation... or are you?

Not quite. Not only are you *not* in control of what is going on in their minds during your presentation, you actually have *no idea* what they are thinking at any moment: are they thinking about your message, or are they thinking “when will this be over” or “what’s for lunch”—who knows?

The advantage of a Conference Room style presentation, with printed slides, is that you can see, at any given moment, who is with you, who is reading ahead, and who is falling behind, by observing which slide each audience member is looking at. If too many in your audience are falling behind, you can adjust and slow down; if several of your audience members are starting to read ahead, perhaps you need to speed up a bit. By using Conference Room style and turning off the projector, you give up the *illusion* of control, and in return you get the *reality* of real-time feedback.

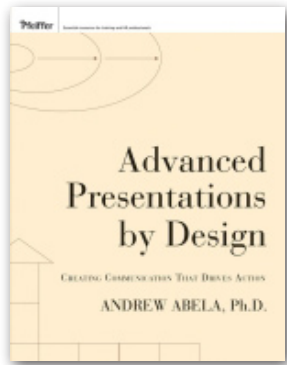
A final concern that some people have is the environmental impact of printing out your slides. Keep in mind that with Conference Room style presentations you end up using far fewer slides, because you can fit so much more content on each page, and so instead of 30 to 50 page decks, you are only handing out typically less than ten slides per person. Using 100% post-consumer recycled paper minimizes the environmental impact, and the cost increase is about a penny a page, which is worthwhile for the dramatic improvement in presentation effectiveness.

When you present to a small audience, it is usually because you want to persuade them to make a decision and take specific action. To be persuasive, your presentation must contain **details**, be **interactive**, and avoid **distractions**. Therefore, you should create a Conference Room style presentation, which contains lots of details on printed slides which show those details well, enable a more interactive discussion, and pass the squint test to ensure that there is nothing distracting on each slide.

→ For more examples and free downloads of slides that pass the squint test, go to:  
[www.ExtremePresentation.com](http://www.ExtremePresentation.com)



# info



## BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Abela's [Advanced Presentations by Design](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Andrew V. Abela is an associate professor of marketing at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and author of *Advanced Presentations by Design: Creating Communication that Drives Action*, which is being published by Pfeiffer, a division of John Wiley & Sons, in September. Dr. Abela provides presentation training and consulting advice to leading corporations, include Microsoft, eBay, and Kimberly-Clark. He lives in Great Falls, Virginia with his wife and their five children.

## SEND THIS

[Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

## SUBSCRIBE

[Sign up for our free e-newsletter](#) to learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available.

## BORN ON DATE

This document was created on September 10, 2008 and is based on the best information available at that time. Check [here](#) for updates.

## ABOUT CHANGETHIS

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at [800-CEO-READ](#) or at our daily [blog](#).

## COPYRIGHT INFO

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](#) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from [iStockphoto](#)®

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.