



POINT OF VISION

Is PowerPoint Killing Your Brand?

PowerPoint has been dubbed a “killer application” for corporate America. But is it also a killer application where your brand is concerned?

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PowerPoint is an enormously popular application. Microsoft estimates that people present 30 million PowerPoint slide shows each day. What's behind the popularity? Ease of use. Anyone can point and click his way to creating a brand new slide show.

The problem is, everyone does. And since individuals all have their own styles, the slide shows they create tend to look very different from one another. That's OK if you want people to get in touch with their creative muses. But if you're a company that's trying to create or maintain a strong brand, you know that PowerPoint – and the inconsistency it breeds – can be a brand killer.

Your company's brand is created through the experiences people have with your business. Your salespeople's PowerPoint presentations are among those experiences. So if their presentations don't match up with what you have in mind for your brand, you can bet that those slide shows are diluting, even damaging, your brand.

If you've gotten your hands on a few of your company's sales presentations, you've probably seen a few hair-raising brand assaults. Logos that are "enhanced" with drop shadows, different colors, maybe even special effects. Marked departures from the company's colors and typefaces. Language that's unlike anything you'd ever approve in a brochure or on your Web site. Witness a few slide shows by your most creative salespeople, and you may be ready to wipe PowerPoint right off their hard drives.

Tempting, yes, but not the best solution. Because you want salespeople to customize their presentations. It makes them more comfortable in their delivery and, therefore, more effective at selling. From that perspective, you want every PowerPoint presentation to be tailored to the personality and style of the person giving it. You just don't want your brand getting tarnished in the process.

So maybe you try the obvious solutions. You hand out a strongly worded identity guide full of "thou-shalt-nots" regarding use of the logo, colors and typefaces. Maybe you even invest the time to develop PowerPoint templates with the company's official blessing.

But if your experience is like others' we've seen, neither of these approaches may make much difference. Because neither one gives your salespeople what they really need: a clear understanding of what your brand is and why it should matter to them.

Creating the right kind of rules

Promoting a widespread understanding of your brand means more than just providing your employees with a list of approved logos, colors and styles. Instead, it requires that you give them a peek behind the curtain, into the world of branding that too often is the secret domain of the marketing department.

First and foremost, it requires that you understand your brand and express it clearly. This requires that you develop a brand framework, an articulation of your company's brand. A brand framework has two components: brand definition and brand presentation.

Brand definition includes:

- Position: the one big idea behind the company, usually expressed in just a few words.
- Promise: a statement of the one thing your company can be counted on to do every day.
- Differentiation: the evidence or proof behind the promise – what makes people believe you can do what you say?

Brand presentation includes:

- Message: the main ideas you want to impart to each of your major audiences.
- Voice: the language and tone you use to present your company.
- Appearance: appropriate colors, symbols, typefaces, imagery and other visual elements.

Your company may already have something like this in place, although you might not use the term “brand framework.” If you haven’t built this kind of framework, for the sake of your brand, take a day or two with your executive team – and maybe an outside consultant – and figure it out.

A brand framework can help unify all your company’s communications, so that each piece of communication looks and sounds as if it belongs to the same family. It also can transform your company’s operations, encouraging everyone from personnel managers to product developers to receptionists to “live the brand.”

A brand framework also can help squelch the PowerPoint problem – without forcing the marketing department into the role of logo police. When people truly understand the essence of your brand, they’re better equipped to develop their own good judgment about what does and doesn’t fit with the brand. Over time, you’ll find you can give them more artistic license, because you’re no longer setting them loose with a blank canvas and a can of spray paint. When you give people a brand framework to follow, you can get unity without insisting on uniformity, and give people some room for customization while still protecting the integrity of your brand.

The brand is everybody's business

Here's the catch: You don't get much value from simply having a brand framework. The real value comes from sharing it. Sometimes, brand frameworks are created with great fanfare, and at great expense, only to end up collecting dust on the marketing director's bookshelf. A neglected brand framework does nothing to bring consistency to the brand.

If marketing departments do share anything, often it's only the "appearance" piece of the brand framework. That's the element that usually manifests itself in logo/corporate identity guides and rules to control specific types of communication, such as PowerPoint.

Perhaps marketing directors and brand managers don't want to bother their salespeople with the big brand picture. So they just lay down the appearance-based rules. But when they do so, they give salespeople no context for the rules. And having no context, the salespeople sometimes think the rules are arbitrary and tend to dismiss them.

That's why the complete brand framework must be accessible to everyone in your company. It has to be easy to find, easy to understand and easy to follow.

First, you must put the brand framework into the hands of everyone who represents your company. That includes executives, too. They're often just as guilty as salespeople when it comes to abusing the brand in PowerPoint presentations. Your company's leaders are crucial representatives of the brand, even more so than salespeople. So be sure that vice presidents, CXOs and their support staff become well-versed in your brand framework.

Second, the brand framework document you distribute must be understandable. It can't be full of marketing speak that bewilders people. It must use plain language that makes sense to people at all levels of your organization.

Finally, your brand framework document must be simple for people to apply to the situations they encounter every day. The document needs to include concrete advice on how to present the company in terms of appearance, language and message.

Sun Microsystems has done an exemplary job of sharing its brand framework. Sun defines its brand as "big and bold." Its brand guide states this up front, then translates this thesis idea into specific guidelines.

For instance, when it comes to selecting photography, Sun's brand guide instructs, "Sun's photographic expression is big and bold. Never shy or apologetic. So it's usually best to use a single image instead of a collage."

Three things make Sun's approach effective:

- 1) It gives simple, useful advice: As a rule of thumb, use one image, not a collage.
- 2) It empowers people with a right choice instead of merely prohibiting the wrong choice. Many companies would say only, "No collages," and leave it at that; and
- 3) It explains the foundation behind the rule: one powerful image fits the brand framework of "big and bold." Sharing your rationale makes people more likely to value the rule and less likely to brush aside the guidelines as an oppressive manifesto.

What's in it for me?

No matter how well you write your brand framework document, people will still go astray unless you show them how protecting the brand benefits them. You must make people see how a stronger, more consistent brand will make them more successful.

A global travel technology company struggled for years with inconsistency in its PowerPoint presentations. The company tried providing templates and establishing a firm set of rules, but it didn't help. Undeterred, the salespeople ripped the templates apart, changed what didn't appeal to them, and even continued using unapproved versions of the logo. Things were just as bad as before the company issued the rules, if not worse.

So the company tried again with new templates. But this time, it went one crucial step further: it explained why the rules mattered. It used sales meetings as a forum to discuss the essence of the brand. Most important, the company brought in branding experts, who explained to the salespeople that brand consistency would translate into more sales. Top leadership backed up the efforts with a letter to the sales force detailing why a strong brand matters. Within months, the PowerPoint problems faded away for good.

Make things better, before they get worse

It comes down to this: Solid brands are built on consistent experiences. And every PowerPoint that's inconsistent with the brand you want to portray sets you back from your branding goals. So if you're serious about having a strong brand, you must bring PowerPoint and every other form of communication under the same brand umbrella. And you have to do it now.

Every new version of PowerPoint has more built-in templates. More clip art. More special effects. If you wait, or if you keep throwing the same ineffective solutions at the PowerPoint problem, your brand could soon be suffering more than ever.

Point of Vision (POV) is an Atlanta-based marketing communications firm that understands the unique needs of B2B companies. POV helps B2B companies uncover their core promise, develop effective messages and create communications to get results.



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