

Slideshow or Gallery Walk?

A position paper presented for your contemplation by Roland R. Cavanagh, P.E., Managing Partner of Implementation Partners LLC, a consultancy focused on delivering significant results for our clients.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relative merits of alternative methods of presenting information to small to mid-size groups, in an effort to enable presenters and facilitators to make a more informed choice. Usually, out of convenience and convention, presentations are composed and delivered from a slide-show software system, typically Microsoft's PowerPoint. These slides may be accompanied with flipchart notes and drawings, either previously prepared or created live - for emphasis, reference, or durability during the discussion. Occasionally presentations are made wholly from flipchart pages hung around the room as a gallery of information. It is the former, "Slide-show", and the latter, "Gallery", that are offered for your consideration herein.

Many dimensions can be considered – efficiency of construction, ease of modification, transportability, special effects, consistency of appearance, legibility, most of which would tip the scales in favor of the slide-show, however, it is the Author's contention that these dimension pale in comparison to those of flexibility of flow, control, retention, and overall impact.

Imagine, if you will, two meetings: one with the now traditional laptop/projector/screen configuration, rows of chairs, perhaps a podium, a classroom; and one without seating, the walls hung with flipchart pages or butcher paper, each page continuously visible, an art gallery.

Let's first consider flexibility of flow and control.

The slide-show is linear, start-to-finish. Yes, the deck contains a couple of repeat slides to keep the audience oriented, and the presenter backed up more than once to remind, reconnect and answer questions. She successfully maintained control over the flow – moving slide to slide at her pace, keeping focus on her point, pushing on effortlessly to the crescendo and then the wrap-up.

The gallery is chaotic. Yes, it is laid out in the flow of discussion – “we start here, move this way, end there”, the presenter stated at the onset. Eyes in the audience are everywhere. The presentation is interrupted several times “I have another question about this page here”, creating a pause and reconsideration of a point already touched. Some eyes are looking ahead, even to the punch line – “what's the point, the cost, the return, what's this mean to me” – they're asking themselves.

Which is more important – linearity and control of the flow, or permission to self-pace, to contemplate, and digest the panorama? Avoiding interruptions or expecting delayed clarification? Preserving the “punch” or watching some participants eat dessert first?

It is the Author's position that, with a few carefully designed exceptions, the gallery presentation results in better retention and greater overall impact. The exceptions have been simple, straightforward slide-shows based on escalating thoughts – building to an explosive conclusion. Often memorable, but rarely containing much new information.

Enabling each member of the audience to process the information at their own pace, and revisit for clarification ground already covered (as long as it does not de-rail the meeting), improves retention. Reinforcing the continuity of the content through its constant presence – visually available, all at once – drives comprehension and clarity. Exposing the conclusion or request along with the story supports those for whom a linear continuum is tedious.

There are, of course, drawbacks to the gallery walk: perhaps the presenter does not want certain issues or data to receive scrutiny - click the next slide; time is of the essence – click the next slide; the presenter's depth of knowledge might not match the depth of inquiry – click the next slide; one persistent curmudgeon could incite a riot – click the next slide. Not possible to click with the whole story exposed. Adequate preparation, a solid tale to tell, and good facilitation can manage these risks.

What is more important - control or understanding?

It was the Author's intent to challenge the often un contemplated status quo of slide-shows as the means of presentation in today's small group presentations, and to suggest the important benefits of an art gallery format. Neither is perfect. Considering the effect of the medium on the message is the challenge.

I envision in the not-too distant future, a meeting room lined with HDTV type screens, each a virtual "pad" of flipchart pages – the story, the pitch, laid out around the room as a gallery, each screen the key issues and points, with back-up, drill-down, if you will, instantly available for that issue. Information at the fingertips. "The rest of the story", to quote Paul Harvey.

Except then someone will spend an additional three days to make it "pretty" or give it the corporate "look and feel", and in the process probably lose the point.

And, mid-sentence, the system will crash.

Congratulations, I got you thinking...