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## Bullet Insanity by Bob Manna & Matt Manna • 6C0542C6(R05)

*“The presenter is always at fault when an audience dozes off in the middle of a presentation because of inarticulate message delivery. And everything about a bullet slide is inarticulate.”*

How can you claim that bullet slides should be eliminated from presentations when 95 out of 100 presenters use bullet slides in their presentations? That question summarizes much of the follow-up correspondence we received to our recently published article entitled, Communication Insanity.

Our answer — not only to the bullet slide question but to every occurrence of replication — is to point out that mindless adherence to familiar practices is common, even when it fails to be productive.

The fact (if it is one) that 95 out of 100 presenters use bullet slides does not rule out the likelihood that 95 out of 100 presenters fail. And we’re not talking theoretically here.

Eight out of ten new product launches fail within three months. The reason why is clear. It’s because the messages used to promote the products do not persuade customers to give them a try. When a new product isn’t tried it’s the communication promoting the product that has failed, not the product itself.

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Presentation failure is likewise. A presentation is a failure when audience members do not take the action(s) desired by the presenter. It's the fault of the presenter when such a failure occurs. It's not the fault of the audience. Often the failure is due to a lack of impact; a condition that is made worse by bullet slides.

Impact is thorny because it simultaneously demands two things. The first is articulation, the second is talent. Articulation means mastery of the technical skills for clear communication. Talent is knowing what properly articulated content *will be* persuasive.

Talent is subjective, but articulation is absolutely not. And everything about a bullet slide renders a presenter inarticulate. Here's why.

Most bullet slides contain more than six facts. That doesn't work because the human mind is only capable of remembering about 6 new facts at one time. This discovery was first documented in 1885 by Herman Ebbinghaus.

Ebbinghaus went on to demonstrate that a violation of the six fact rule will cause facts to be discarded to the trash heap of memory. We call this phenomenon the six fact trash heap rule. An under-recognized downside to the six fact trash heap rule lies in not knowing which facts will be discarded. The discarded fact(s) could be the most important in the presentation.

The six fact trash heap rule raises an interesting question. Could a single six fact bullet slide comprise an entire presentation?

The answer is yes, if the six fact trash heap rule is considered in isolation. However, we have attended and counseled the creation of innumerable presentations and none of them consisted of a single slide.

If a single six fact bullet slide presentation did exist, it would likely ignore another important quality of an articulate presentation, the ability of audience members to recall what the presentation was about.

Recall is dramatically increased when a presenter simultaneously reads aloud the same words an audience member is reading to himself or herself. This is called the multiple sensory reinforcement rule and it is a well established fact.

Unfortunately read rate is twice that of speech rate. That's a problem because multiple sensory reinforcement is only possible when the presenter speaks the words displayed on a slide at exactly the same time as the audience reads them. A mere 4 seconds into the display of text, audience members will have read about 18 words, while a presenter (speaking quickly) will be on word 10 and falling further behind.

This is disastrous because the mind prioritizes when disparate information arrives simultaneously through separate senses. The written word is the mind's top priority. The spoken word is second. That's why people read before they listen and always give preference to written words when they differ from spoken words.

You can test this phenomenon the next time you are at a restaurant seated with 4 or 5 other people. Observe what happens if the waiter hands out menus while simultaneously announcing the specials of the day. Without fail the first persons receiving menus will begin reading and will, at the end of the waiter's announcement, ask, "What was that first couple of specials you mentioned?" It is likewise in a presentation. We'll call this the menu rule.

The menu rule is decisive. The more there is on a slide to read, the less the audience will listen to the presenter. Incidentally, the menu rule is why notes or copies of a presentation should be distributed after the presentation is over, not before.

Back to the single bullet slide presentation. If the decision is made to deliver a single bullet slide presentation, the presenter should display the slide, sit down, remain quiet until the audience has finished reading, and then ask for questions from audience members.

Of course that situation denies the presenter the opportunity to deliver a persuasive presentation. Projecting a bullet slide in a quiet room isn't delivering a presentation, it's disseminating facts. If that's the intent, cancel the presentation and send out a report.

We now have three reasons why bullet slides are inarticulate. The reasons are (1) the six fact trash heap rule, (2) the multiple sensory reinforcement rule, (3) the menu rule. We're not done.

Bullets beget more bullets. A multi-slide presentation we were recently asked to review contained seven bullet list slides, each of which had at least NINE bullets.

Sixty-three bullets seems to us to be just a bit less ammunition than all the armament the allied forces had with them during the invasion of Normandy. We don't know the origin of the term "snowball effect," but we can well imagine that it came from the deteriorating mood of an audience that was forced to endure the dashed hopes brought on by "another boring bullet slide" six times over.

Bullet slides are a pure and perfect example of inarticulate communication. They break the six fact trash heap rule. They violate the multiple sensory reinforcement rule due to the mismatch between read rate and speech rate. And they break the menu rule — the fact that people go deaf when they read.

Only the most gifted presenter (and there are only a few) can pull-off a great presentation when the rules of articulate message delivery are ignored. And we have just scratched the surface.

We did not cover such things as the proper use of text, voice control, presenter visibility, sound track accompaniment, room lighting, and table/chair arrangement. Each is important. Most important is to end mindless adherence to inarticulate communication practices. Doing away with bullet slides is a good place to start.



**This document available at:**

<http://www.mannagroups.com/bulletinsanity/>

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