



Kill Bill's Idea

Van Hoenserlande Patrick

Transformation is all about a continuous creation of ideas for solving challenges and turning the best ones into reality. It would then not be surprising that the ability to sell an idea is key to success. One of the main events in promoting an idea to a big public is to brief. So giving a good briefing should be an art mastered by all who are serious about exploring beyond the limits of the usual. And good briefs are supported by good visual aids. In our current age, it is common to use PowerPoint slides to enhance the perceived value of an idea. Why, then, are we not good at it (to put it mildly)? The briefing starts, the light goes out.

Do not worry; this article is not just another lesson about how to make good slides. I would not dare to waste your time with yet another set of rules for nice slides. That would challenge neither you nor me. Let's turn the story around. Meet Bill.

Bill is a staff officer working in our HQ. He's rather smart and has fun doing his job. He understands that transformation is hard work. The realisation of an idea demands perseverance and resistance to frustration. He feels fine with that as he sees himself as a hard worker rather than a Picasso. However, from time to time he comes up with a bright idea that he sells to all who lend him an ear. I would not call him a PowerPoint ninja, but he knows the software quite well. Templates and animations are no problem. His briefings look better than average. Given the right amount of time and guidance he will set up a briefing that supports his presentation and he will sell his idea to the audience.

Allow me some literary freedom to promote you – unless you're already a branch head of higher – to become Bill's superior, or any other position up his chain of command. Unlike in the movie, your mission is not to kill him – no, this time, if you are willing to accept it, you have to kill Bill's idea without telling him you don't like it. Mission impossible?

Let me help you. There are some easy tricks to kill Bill's idea with his own presentation. These seem so commonplace that he will never suspect any ill will on your part.

The template trick

Provide him with a template that he has to stick to. Just explain that the template follows the house rules for visual identity. And the template does just that. It draws the audience towards the images of the HQ, of Transformation, of the branch... away from the content on the slide. Away from his idea. It places a very big title with less big subtitles on top of the slides and combined with all the other 'need to be on', the master slide leaves little space for the real message. Make sure that the background has a bright, attractive colour so that the focus will be on the slides and not on the speaker. Remember most briefing rooms are rather dark, so Bill will be almost invisible next to a bright screen. The final touch, the coup de grâce: be certain to add the slide number slash total number of slides in the right corner. Make it big. Do not forget to stress the utility of the first, summary, question, and other types of slides, all with small space for actual content. These serve to increase the total number of slides to the level that its revelation will demotivate the public. Who can stay focussed after seeing the first 10 uninteresting slides of a package of 90?

To intensify the negative effect of the template, send it to Bill a few days before his deadline to complete the briefing. A simple e-mail with a friendly reminder that he must not forget to use the template in the attachment will do wonders. The adaptation of his briefing, because you took great care to use non-standard settings, will absorb most of his time, leaving almost none to intelligently adapt the content to this new template.

The hand-out trick

Insist that the briefing should also be usable as handouts. This will limit the use of animation to support the message. A narrative should be present too and complete. You are not able to understand the purpose of a specific slide, if you don't have the corresponding speaker notes. And you want to be sure that the message is right. Don't you?

Written speaker notes are another good way to kill an idea by PowerPoint. After receiving Bill's proposal for the briefing, take extra good care of those notes and make sure you change the style. Change it into something you know that is not Bill. And then insist that the notes are strictly followed. There is no better way to bore an audience than a speaker that reads out loud notes that feels unfamiliar or artificial. If the briefer does not adhere to the narrative, how can you expect a public will adopt the message?

To make sure that Bill delivers the right briefing and that the slides are well prepared, you give him a deadline. Ensure the deadline is set well ahead of the actual brief, so that you have ample time to waste and that he's not allowed to make any last minute changes. Bill will surely reflect on his briefing and the briefing should ideally be adapted to these new insights. Ignoring him the chance for last minutes changes will broaden the distance between him and the slides. A fact his audience will detect and mirror.

The Russian slide trick

Insist that he goes into all the details. Details are immensely important to understand all the nuances. Help him to find those details that at first glance have nothing to do with the idea, but explain to him why they are nevertheless pivotal. It will not only increase your stature as a leader of manager, it will also suffocate his main idea. The ease of adding details and text in PowerPoint demands a strong and experienced briefer to resist. A little push by a superior is all it takes for a staff officer to willingly plunge into the marshes of details, a perfect place to drown the attention of the public.

You also can reach the same effect by shortening the time allotted for the brief while keeping the same aim. Bill will try to run through the slides, and in his effort to finish in time, he will lose his audience. When pressed hard enough, his presentation will turn into a 20-minute hurdle run, killing the interest with every slide he jumps over. Ramming a 50-minute package through a 20-minute time window because you were told just before entering the room, is a sure way to get an idea rejected while thinking you did a good job.

The above mentioned tricks demand some preparation from you as a superior. The next one is brilliant in its simplicity. It is widely used – realty beats the most fantastic stories – and it does not require any work from your side. Give Bill the opportunity to brief his idea. Ask him how much time he thinks he needs, but give him a bit less. After he has prepared the briefing, tell him that it is a very

good one, but don't forget to give him some suggestions to make it even better. Look happy and congratulate him about this good product. As Bill walks out of your office, ask him how many slides he used. Show your worried face and tell him that he has to reduce that number to half, explain to him the 2-minutes-per-slide rule, or come up with another stupid figure. You can use the total number of slides on the template as the excuse to limit the number of slides. Urge him to reduce that number, but stress that he keeps the same level of information and detail.

If played right, Bill will simply reduce the number of slides of the briefing by putting more information per slide. I call this "Russian slides" because I witnessed such briefings and all their slides were crammed with detailed information. Even their Cyrillic writings were less scary than the tsunami of details. The love for details is an inherent part of their Dostojewskian soul. Lover or hater, our short memory capacity does not exceed the number 7 and we can only count to six in a blink of an eye. Forced with an unreasonable limitation on slides, Bill will surely go far beyond these human limits. He will wear out his audience in a few slides. He will start a war of attrition and they will be knocked out before he begins explaining his idea, resulting in an ending filled with apathy. Another idea lying dead on the PowerPoint killing field. Transformation missed another opportunity.

Sure, if Bill was a seasoned PowerPoint ninja, he would have easily circumvented this senseless limitation. With a bit of creative use of the tool, you can condense an attractive briefing onto one slide. Not that this is a useful exercise, but it can be done. Unluckily for Bill, he is not that good.

Epilogue

After his unsuccessful briefing, convince Bill he did his best, but that unfortunately some ideas need time to come to full fruition. It was obviously too soon for this one. You do not want him to be completely disappointed, after all he's a good staff officer.

And do not tell him that:

- Good slides support the presentation and guide the audience through the message.
- Content is much more important than the template. A visual aid should highlight the message, not the visual identity.
- You do not exceed the limit of 6 bits of information per slide. More slides with limited information is better than more information on each slide.
- Titles are nice, but they should not be the eye catcher. A slide must help the audience to focus on the content, your message.
- People should see and feel your connection to your ideas. Do not blind them with a bright screen. The spotlight must be on you, the seller of the ideas.

If you do, he could become a real PowerPoint warrior, hitting the mark every time he shows up in a briefing room.