

Slides Rule

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You've got to hand it to Scott McNealy -- he never misses an opportunity to try to stick it to Microsoft. A couple of years ago he went so far as to try to ban the use of PowerPoint at Sun Microsystems, claiming that employees were wasting colossal amounts of time preparing slides.

It was a dramatic gesture, but this is one tide that isn't about to roll back on command. PowerPoint and other presentation software are de rigueur now wherever business people meet to communicate... well, I was about to say "face to face," but that isn't quite accurate, when everybody's staring at the screen. The technology has even created a new unit of measure for meting out access to senior management. It used to be that you got ten minutes of the CEO's time; now you get three slides to make your pitch. And corporate employees can download master slides with approved fonts, colors, and logos, along with helpful design guidelines to help them avoid the ransom-note look that's a sure sign of the newbie.

Inevitably, the ability to prepare a slide presentation has become an indispensable corporate survival skill. Rank novices can start with the templates that come with the software -- "Reporting Progress" (Kandinsky-like blue and red rectangles) or "Communicating Bad News" (a suggestive shade of brown).

But most managers have come to realize that slides are too important to pick off the rack or to leave entirely to the discretion of the creative services people. It's remarkable how quickly people have come up to speed. Corporate types whose interest in media aesthetics used to be limited to watching Siskel and Ebert have become adept at discussing the use of arcane filmic effects like builds, dissolves, and wipes. Or if you're too busy or too old to learn the new tricks, you can always have recourse to the postmodern ploy of appropriation -- a strategy particularly favored by senior managers. Employees with a portfolio of good slides can find themselves as much in demand as a kid with a Nolan Ryan rookie card.

What effect is all this having? For some, the presentation software explosion is part of a general decline in public speaking -- as Stanford professor of communications Cliff Nass puts it, "Try to imagine the 'I have a dream' speech in PowerPoint." But it isn't as if that tradition was exactly flourishing before PowerPoint came along. It may a long way down from King's address to Ross Perot's TV charts (a medium he probably mastered during his early days at IBM, the Fertile Crescent of the presentation culture). But it isn't as if he was exactly vivacious when he left the AV aids at home. And you have to give the benefit of the doubt to any technology that promises to make the average corporate talk a bit less numbing than it used to be.

But slides aren't intended just to accompany talks anymore -- they're increasingly taking on a life of their own. No one asks for a memo or report anymore; now it's just "send me your slides." Conferences post the slides of their speakers' talks; professors post the slides of their lectures; the clergy posts slides of their sermons on the Web.

Of course it isn't always easy to make sense of slides in isolation -- it can be like trying to reconstruct the social life of ancient Pompeii from the graffiti that its inhabitants left behind. But that hasn't stopped the format from spreading to other genres, like the Web. The slide aesthetic has even made inroads in the book, the last bastion of connected prose. The other day I went to the business section of a local bookstore and started opening books at random. I had to do this twelve times before I came to two facing pages of text that were uninterrupted by a subhead, illustration, figure, sidebar, or some other graphic distraction.

And like the book and other communications technologies of the past, this one is having its effects on the structure of thought itself. The more PowerPoint presentations you prepare, the more the world seems to package itself into slide-sized chunks, broken down into bullet items or grouped in geometric patterns that have come to have an almost talismanic force. A friend of mine who works for a large Silicon Valley company maintains that no proposal can win management buy-in until it has been reduced to three items placed along the sides of a triangle.

You could think of all this as the New Illumination. In a lot of ways we've become the most visual culture since the High Middle Ages. Still, we probably don't want to toss out all the achievements of the age of print. There are some useful communicative tools

that are left behind in the move from connected text to bullet items -- verbs, for example. And as lively as a good slide show can be, there are some ideas that are better absorbed in a more leisurely, discursive way, with the aid of older technologies like an armchair and a good reading light. Are you sitting comfortably?