

New Business Thinking:

It's easier than you think to stand up and deliver

Many people shy away from giving a presentation. But if you keep it simple and concentrate on the big picture, you can make your point, says Clare Gascoigne

Put together all the people in Britain who suffer from agoraphobia, claustrophobia and arachnophobia and you still wouldn't match the number of people who are scared of standing up in front of an audience and making a presentation. "Most people have a physiological response, which means they lose the ability to think clearly and start to panic," says Nicholas Oulton, CEO and founder of M62 visual communications, a Liverpool-based PowerPoint production company, and author of *Killer Presentations*, a book that aims to improve presentations.

"People want to be entertaining but you don't have that luxury," he says. "You have a job to do and it's not to entertain. Most of us are not performers."

That said, it can help to think of yourself as a showman, according to Christine Cryne, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. "You need to give yourself time and get feedback from an audience," she says. "Keep it simple and use the message on the screen as a trigger. Don't put copious amounts of text up."

Small amounts of information are infinitely preferable to vast chunks of indigestible data. Why do children's books use a large font, bright colours and one or two items a page? The brain takes in information slowly — aim for about five items for an audience to remember, says Oulton: "You can provide extra information as a handout or in a Q&A session."

The key element is to get the right message across — and a business map can be a useful technique.

"One of the biggest problems with presentations is losing sight of the big picture, and a business map can help keep people on track," says Clive Lewis, managing director of training company Illumine. "Business maps are a delivery medium but they can also be used to work out the message."

Business maps are the practical application in software form of the cognitive theories developed by Tony Buzan and others: they aim to replicate the way the human brain works in the way they organise information. Thoughts and ideas are recorded as spokes from a central idea, rather than as a linear progression. No idea should be too trivial or too crazy to be included in the initial brainstorming phase: facts, questions and actions can all be recorded. The software can then be used to order, analyse and prioritise the information — you can jump from a minor point to a major element at the click of a mouse.

"People get hooked on the aesthetics of presentations without thinking about what they want to get across," says Lewis. "This gives you a lot more flexibility."

Jane Langfield, e-learning strategy manager for Birmingham City Council, says: "I was giving a presentation abroad and wanted to be sure it would be immediately accessible, regardless of

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what kit was supplied," she says. "So I created a map and the software turned it into a website with all the necessary links. A map is built around the way you have structured the content, so the message is what comes across."

The element of free association is important as a means of freeing creativity, says Professor Babis Mainemelis of the London Business School. "Most types of industry are aware of the need for creativity as a managerial and organisational skill. But organisations have been built to exclude creativity — the systems put in place were designed to control staff or ensure they performed a set task as effectively as possible."

Freeing creativity can have profitable results. Lewis cites a defence contractor who wanted to change the Ministry of Defence's perception of the company. Using MindManager, it converted PowerPoint presentations into business maps and found that pitching became a different experience.

"It became a much more collaborative and interactive consultation," says Lewis. "The MoD was able to ask questions such as, 'What happens if we combine that with this?' Mapping allows you to get clarification of customer needs in real time, which is a powerful tool."