

Presentation Tools That Go Beyond "Next Slide Please"

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Data visualization luminary and Yale professor Edward Tufte famously suggested that PowerPoint would have been a presentation medium well-suited to a communist dictator. The program's linear nature, its tendency to discourage interactivity, its inability to easily share the information it contains, and its potential to limit communication with the audience can sometimes obfuscate rather than clarify. Indeed, Microsoft's recent web-enabled improvements to the longstanding business application suggest that change is coming to presentation tools in a business world increasingly shaped by online collaboration and increasingly powerful internet applications.

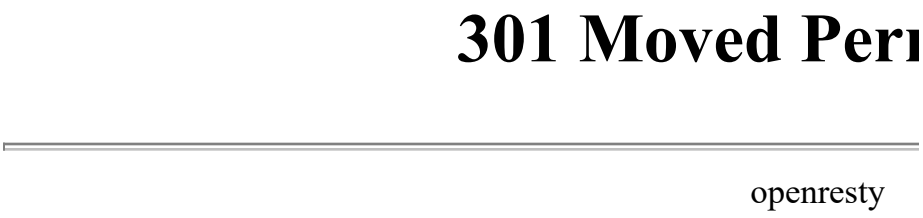
Today, users have unprecedented access to data at their fingertips and powerful applications to process them in real time. We use this data for everything from understanding how to set our home thermostats to monitoring NASA satellites in outer space, and we need ways to analyze, visualize, share, and explore data to improve our decision making and way of life. This new need is driving the development of communication and presentation tools, posing a fundamental challenge to the hegemony of PowerPoint.

The best presenters tend to show rather than tell, creating opportunities to engage and persuade. They feature fresh, exciting information. By soliciting feedback and helping listeners feel ownership of the ideas under discussion, they inspire audiences and ultimately create a bond with them. Great presentation tools should have the necessary elements to support questions and intellectual digression, to allow as little or as much data to be presented per idea to communicate effectively, and should discourage the user from accidentally or intentionally "suffocating key data and conclusions" with what Tufte describes as "Chartjunk."

From nonlinear story canvases to streaming in-presentation visualizations, new online

presentation tools provide unique opportunities to do just about anything one can imagine an internet application doing. A new class of digital presentation tools are cropping up to answer these needs.

One of the more challenging aspects of engaging an audience is breaking away from the linearity imposed by past presentation tools. After all, a great presenter's goal is to communicate and discuss a few key ideas rather than to present a story in its entirety. Traditional presentation tools presume a fixed order, and encourage presenters to move from one slide to the next, regardless of how the audience reacts. But that's not the only way to structure a presentation. Prezi, a San Francisco based start-up, has created an exciting solution to this problem by creating a descriptive canvas that the speaker zooms into and out of as necessary to underscore the relevant points. This allows the presenter to adapt the storyline in real-time to the audience response, and encourages presenters to solicit audience feedback throughout the presentation. Its radical concept is well executed with beautiful graphics and animations that effectively use motion and slick transitions to keep listeners attentive and interested.



Not only can new presentation tools adjust the order of a presentation, they can also help it stay up to date in real time. Until recently, presentation tools have largely been static, creating an artificial boundary between the presentation and the outside world. With the ability to integrate internet applications into presentations, it is now possible for a presenters to bring the real world into their presentations with simple embed codes to explore current inventory levels, receive tweets, show video, or view real-time stock prices during the meeting. While most modern presentation software allows presenters to embed internet windows into their presentation for real-time browsing, some also allow users to directly embed live data from outside applications. Zoho Show, a component of Zoho Docs, has the ability to allow users to embed pictures, videos and data from 26 online sources, including Salesforce, Facebook, Google, and Yahoo, which update in real time. And in the future, based on the code embed capabilities that start-ups like SlideCaptain are offering, one might one day soon expect the capability to incorporate functionality into presentations from any online source.

View Example Graphic

Standard presentation tools have even shaped the way we do Q&A, training us to spare presenters questions they cannot reasonably answer during their linear, one-sided presentations. This often happens in research meetings where team members present their findings to a group for constructive discussion of the analysis. With direct and real-time access to the data, as well as to analysis and graphing tools, audience members can discuss and replot datasets from the presentation during the meetings to test hypotheses and move the discussion from a theoretical to a hands-on interactive level. My own company, Plotly, has a platform that creates interactive, collaborative graphs that are attached to specific datasets behind them. Presenters can open the graph during the presentation and examine or replot the data to promote discussion. Plotly also has the added benefit of streaming data into the presentation such that the graphs are always up to date, and real-time data can be viewed or accessed.

The final big change in presentation tools incorporates the level of collaboration we've come to expect using document-sharing applications like Google Docs. Online presentation platforms are increasingly common in the business world, allowing multiple creators to build a presentation at the same time. This is a must-have for virtual companies with remote team members, but it is also generally a better way for collocated teammates to jointly author slides. Another feature originally developed for remote collaboration that is also a terrific tool for in-person working meetings is the ability to switch presentation computers on the fly, to allow users in the same room to seamlessly take control of the presentation to display their own screens. This allows impromptu semi-prepared visual input from any meeting participant and can help to democratize meetings and share ideas more effectively.

Many of these tools are early on in their development and so won't fully replace PowerPoint right away. Microsoft is firmly entrenched and is responding to the emerging competition by incorporating some of these elements. But for top presenters looking to give presentations that are dynamic, collaborative, and real-time — and to incorporate data — the answer is to do more than just add another slide.

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