

Are You Being Ruled By a Tool?

If you use PowerPoint to deliver everything from office party invitations (we've heard people do) to in-depth analyses, send a quarterly print publication to provide "news," or leave nothing behind at sales meetings because people can just "find it on our website," you're being ruled by a tool—and it's time to regain control.

When you become so accustomed to a communications tool that you assume it's right for every job, the tool becomes the decision maker. You can communicate only in the way the tool allows—and that's not necessarily the most effective way to reach your audience and achieve your goals.

In fact, the means becomes the end: You're not delivering a market analysis that will persuade investors, you're simply creating a PowerPoint presentation. You're not impressing supporters with ongoing activism, you're publishing a newsletter. You're not giving prospects needed information, you're building a Web library.

How do you break the grip of your preferred tool? Luckily, it's only a four-step program:

Step 1: Admit that you have a problem. Be honest—when was the

last time you even considered using a different tool? Do you know about newer methods? Do you remember what the other standards do well? Do you assume that what's easy for you will be easy for your audience? Do you even think about your audience?

Step 2: Start each project with strategy. This doesn't have to be a big-deal plan—it could take just a few minutes. Write down answers to these key questions (yes, write them down—it helps you focus): Who am I trying to reach? What kind of information do I have? What do I want to achieve? If you're working on an ongoing project, review your initial plan. Is it still valid? Does what you're doing make sense in light of your answers to the key strategic questions?

Step 3: Review your options. Think of all the ways you could reach

your audience—which tools are they most likely to be comfortable with and respond to? Now think of all the ways you could present your information—which will have the most audience appeal while allowing you to get across your main points and create the image you want?

Step 4: Meet some new tools.

If you've been under the sway of a particular tool, consider other options—including new tools. Do some research or ask an expert. Every tool has strengths and weaknesses, and varying levels of appeal to different audiences. Ideally, you'll choose the tool that's best for the job, not just the one that's easiest or first comes to mind. ▶

P.S. PowerPoint is for presentations, period—it provides visuals and points that underscore your presentation; it's not good for delivering substance. Any news in a quarterly is old news. People have to make an effort to visit your website—if you're standing in front of them, hand them something they can pass around.

Tip File: Business Writing Advice

Looking for tips on business writing and editing? We recently came across a few resources good enough to share:

Ragan Communications (www.ragan.com) publishes nonsense newsletters on corporate communications that feature real-world examples. *Corporate Writer and Editor* focuses on practical aspects; in the March issue, editors share secrets for creating a fresh take on an old topic, and another feature covers how technology is enabling more effective communication. Every issue has "Rewriters' Forum," which improves a published article, and showcases good examples and explains why they work. Other newsletters are the monthly *Web Content Report* and the weekly *Ragan Report*, which takes a strategic view.

The newsletters aren't free, but you can get a free sample, and there are some free articles in the archives. There are also a couple of blogs.

The Business Marketing Association's site (www.marketing.org) has excellent information resources, and a dozen articles are free for the taking on the Publications page. (It's not outrageously expensive to join; membership provides access to lots of great information.)

The website www.allbusiness.com gathers articles from many sources, including publications that otherwise require subscriptions. It's hard to search, but we found a terrific piece from *Communication World*, the journal for the International Association of Business Communicators, on what bad writing costs businesses and what you can do about it. ▶