GovTalk

Get to the Point.

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2.1 Style-Guide: "It's a PowerPoint World"

The use of PowerPoint presentations in government is pervasive. What follows is a series of guides about how to use PowerPoint effectively in the government context. As will be seen, many misuses of PowerPoint can create problems for the presenter. However, when used properly, they are very useful in conveying information, summarizing key messages and guiding the discussion towards decision. They also serve as a form of summary briefing on issues, something that a busy decision-maker can use to get the gist of an argument. In government, they are also a form of record subject to all the rules of records retention, access and preservation. As such, they need to be written with this in mind. In the government context, within government decision making, PowerPoints have to used professionally, avoiding excesses of graphics, cuteness or humour.

In the case where PowerPoints are used for public presentations, the same rule of professionalism applies. An important point here is that individuals doing public presentations are seldom doing them as individual but as representatives of their organization. Therefore, the PowerPoint should reflect the organization, use it symbols, including if it exists, its own PowerPoint formats and be presented professionally.

Using PowerPoints has some great advantages:
- Information is summarized.
- Graphics can support understanding, providing they are relevant, useful and not distracting.
- The right information is presented.

They are not, however, in spite of this happening too often in government, the base document itself, especially when there is a decision track. Some of the fault lines in the use of PowerPoint are:

- The presentation tries to be the base document, with too much text, hard to read and poorly organized.
- Key risks and points of decision are not emphasized creating potentially serious gaps in the decision chain.

Above all, the PowerPoint is an aid to a presentation. How it is designed and how it is used will affect its usefulness. In the public sector context, it is also another accessible record in the public domain.

PowerPoint does not fit all occasions, although many government departments require them as a matter of course for internal decision-making. In thinking about what is best in terms of the use of PowerPoint, this chart is a useful guide:
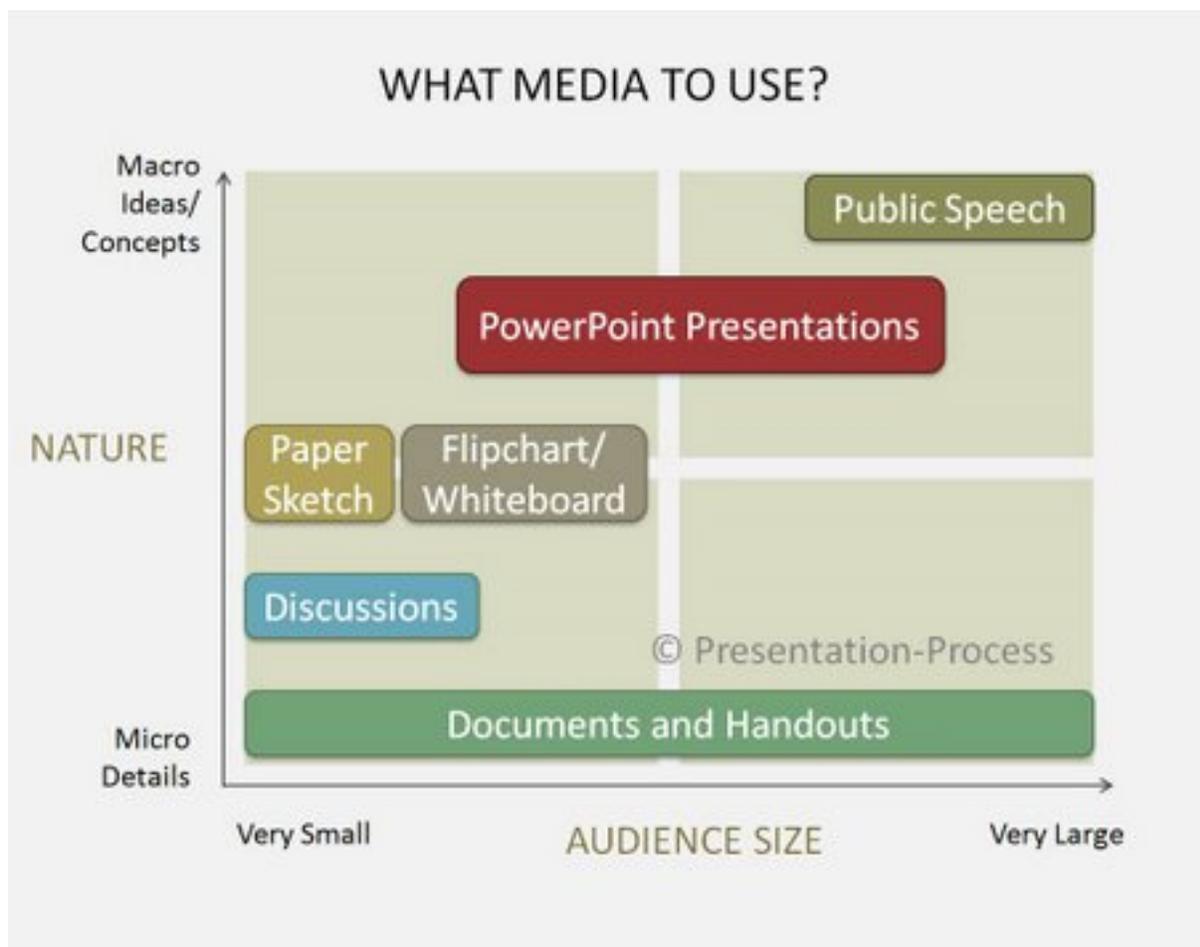
Source: Presentation Process at https://www.presentation-process.com/use-powerpoint.html

Times to use a PowerPoint productively are:
- When you have not choice as it is required for a meeting, conference, etc.
- To organize your presentation and structure your messages.
- To create a professional and consistent format.
- To provide an illustrative backdrop for the content of your presentation.
- To summarize complex information with high-level bullet headlines and useful grpahics.
- When the audience size or occasion makes sense. In other words, the larger the audience, the better use you can make of a PowerPoint. However, for formal presentations to senior officials, even though there are not a lot in the room, the PowerPoint, either in overhead or printed form, serves as a discussion guide.
- To present higher level ideas, processes or recommendations. Excessively detailed PowerPoints are hard to read and do not add value when the process you are involved in requires a step-by-step review of detailed information. In this instance, the PowerPoint might provide a discussion guide or outline the steps to be taken.

Aside from the uses above that suggest when not to use PowerPoint, here are some other ones:
- When it's personal: As a leader, you may want to bring staff on board to a change process, a new project or to face bad news. PowerPoints here divide the audience's attention and you job is to focus them on your leadership direction.
- When it's open ended: PowerPoints, for the most part, are complete stories. When the objective is to consult, actively engage or find new solutions, PowerPoints are not that useful as they structure the flow of information and ideas.
- When you are the fifth PowerPoint in a row: Aside from occasions which require it, a steady flow of PowerPoints induce PowerPoint fatigue, lagging interest and just plain boredom. Similarly, and linked, when the time is limited, the technical aspects of just setting up a PowerPoint, may lose the audience. That's when talking and interacting really work better.