By Katherine Murray

Imagine this: You've just returned to your seat for this afternoon's training seminar. The morning session was pretty interesting, providing information about the design and development of your company's newest product. Lunch was great—a big catered affair—and now you're settling in for this afternoon's topic: *Technical specifications.* The presenter begins in a tired, flat voice. You watch as slide after slide of monochrome bullet points appear on the screen. You lean back in your chair. Your eyes glaze... you stifle a yawn and begin to imagine yourself in your backyard hammock.

Wait! Come back. It's only an example.

Your presentations always influence others to take some kind of action. The action might be to listen carefully and learn new information or it might be to drift off toward Dreamworld. The way in which your presentation delivers information has everything to do with how well it will be received. Here are some quick ideas for livening up your presentations to keep the after-lunch crowd awake in their seats.

1 Make your diagrams move

PowerPoint XP, 2003, and 2007 all have diagramming capability (in PowerPoint 2007, the diagram tool is called SmartArt)—and diagrams are great because they break up slides full of bullet points and convey information quickly and clearly.

You can go a step beyond your run-of-the-mill diagram by adding animation effects to it. Because the different shapes and text boxes in a diagram are all counted as separate objects in PowerPoint, you can assign animation and timing features to each of those elements so they slide in at just the right moment in your presentation. A little movement goes a long way, however, so be careful not to overdo it. You might do a simple slide-in-from-the-left for all the elements in a pyramid chart, for example.

2 Make it easy for your audience

A truly great presentation offers smart, memorable content in a design that helps reinforce the message and keeps people interested. You can write, edit, and organize the content in your presentation in a way that makes it easy for your audience members to follow your main points.

To make sure your ideas are crystal clear, write the content of your presentation in Outline view (**Figure A**) before you focus on the design elements (which can be distracting because they're so much fun). Make your main points your slide titles, include summary slides at key points (wherever it's appropriate), and end the presentation with a quick review of what's been discussed.

Figure A

3   Get great new backgrounds

The templates provided with PowerPoint XP and 2003 may be contributing to the low-oxygen lag in your afternoon sessions. PowerPoint 2007 introduces some new templates (and you can always browse the offerings on Microsoft Office Online to see what users like yourself have created and added). But if you have a special presentation that you want to really wow your audience, consider checking out a cool third-party site, like Powerpointed.com for some really stunning backgrounds. With just a little searching, you're sure to find a fresh look that matches the message you want to convey.

4   Let the Master do the work

If you don't use PowerPoint often, you may not be comfortable working with the whole Master idea, but Masters can save you a lot of time and help keep your presentation consistent. Suppose, for example, that there are three main sections in your presentation. By creating three Masters, one at the start of each section, you could add a colored bar as a tab along the right side of every side, with red for the first section, blue for the second, and green for the third. Tie the color scheme in with the slide title for each section (as well as the summary slide), and you've got a color-coded presentation that continually lets audience members know which section is being discussed and how many sections are left before the break.

5   Create custom bullets

We can get bored to death with bullet points, but even the biggest bullet-detractors have to admit that they serve their purpose. Ideally, bullet points provide information in a succinct, easy-to-understand format. PowerPoint makes it easy for you to substitute other characters for the regular round (or square) bullets that are part of the presentation template. But did you know you can add your own artwork easily to create customized bullets?

Just display the Bullets And Numbering dialog box and click Picture. If you want to choose one of the snazzy bullets shown in **Figure B** (by default, PowerPoint 2007 includes bullets from Office Online), simply click the bullet you want to use and choose OK. If you want to add your own art, click Import. Then, navigate to the image you want to use (a stylized version of your company logo? The staff mascot? A thumbnail picture of your product?), select it, and click Open.
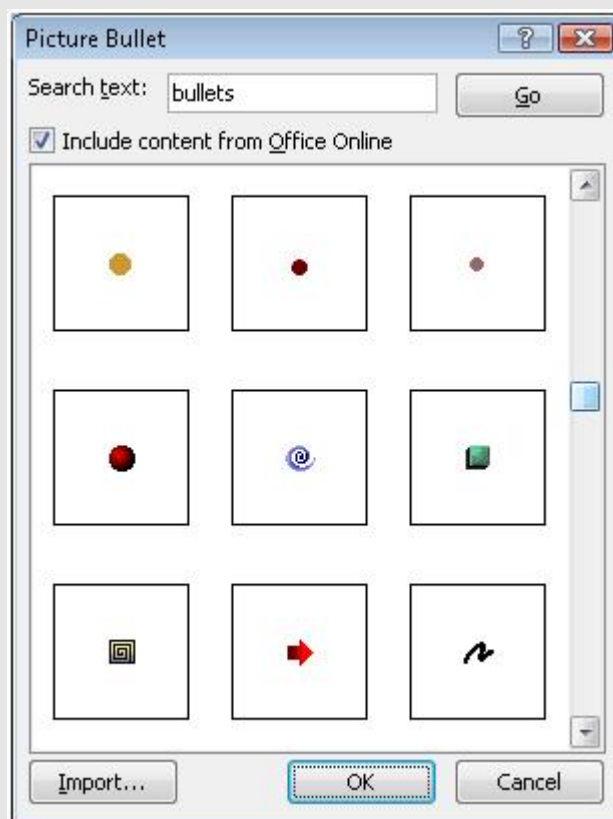
Figure B

6   It's all in the timing

Getting the timing of your presentation right is really more of an art than a science. If you set up the presentation to advance automatically, you run the risk of going too fast (so not everyone in the audience gets a chance to read everything on the slide) or going too slow (in which case they start heading for their respective mental hammocks). If you decide to advance the slides manually, you run the risk of wandering off topic or over-explaining something that no one else is particularly interested in.

To keep everyone tuned in, vary the timing in your presentations so the shorter slides have less time and the more text-heavy slides have more time. Audience members will realize that they have a limited time to review the points on the slide and should take notice. (If you do things manually, however, keep in mind that off-topic wanderings may cause people to lose your train of thought and mentally leave the room.)

7   Play show and tell

In today's YouTube era, you don't have to go far to be entertained by a video clip on one of your favorite topics. Video clips are fun, fast-moving, and often funny. You can use video to your advantage in your PowerPoint presentation by including key segments at important points. For example, in the Customer Survey portion of your presentation, you might show questions and comments from live customers. Or you might show outtakes of moments that didn't quite make the cut. Maybe this is the right place for the cell phone video you captured of your manager balancing his coffee cup on his head when he thought no one was looking (or…maybe not).

Add video easily by clicking the Insert Media Clip button on a blank PowerPoint slide. PowerPoint will ask you to choose whether you want the clip to play automatically or when clicked. Make your choice and the clip is added to the slide. In PowerPoint 2007, you can then use the Movie Options tab (**Figure C**) to add other settings, like looping continuously, playing full screen, and rewinding automatically.
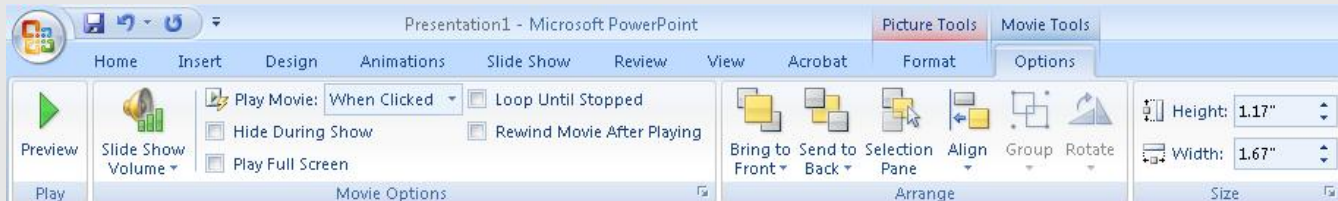

Figure C

8   A little music, please

PowerPoint makes it reasonably simple for you to add sound effects and songs to your presentations. But one caveat: Sound effects can be really annoying if they are overused (especially the dinging sound of the cash register), so go easy on the bells and whistles (literally). You could add a little sound to mark the start of the new section of your presentation, to give audience members a break while you're passing out materials, or to play in the background while a montage of images displays on your slides.

To add sound, choose Insert and select Sound. You can then specify whether you want to add sound from a file or from the Clip Organizer. You can also opt to play music from an audio track on a CD (remember to take the CD when you present!) or record a new sound.

9 Mix it up, visually

Once you have a lock on your content, you need to think about the way all the design elements in your presentation will work together. (Some people prefer to choose the design first and add content second --and that's okay, too.) Templates (and Themes, in PowerPoint 2007) help you make all the elements in your presentation consistent. This ensures that the background, the slides, the heads and text, and the bullets all look reasonably good together.

To really add some visual interest, throw in some stunning, high-quality photos—preferably of people or places. We all respond to images of happy, smiling people and beautiful landscapes. Even if your presentation is about the new electrode style of the capacitors you produce, you can include a few pleasing visuals somewhere in there (perhaps when you're talking about how happy your customers will be when their capacitors last longer, or when you mention that your top sales reps this year can earn a trip to Hong Kong).

10 Give a pop quiz

Remember how your geography teacher used to wake everybody up? He'd suddenly say, "Okay, everyone get out a piece of paper and a pencil. It's time for a pop quiz!" (Can't you still hear the collective groans?) If you really want to jar your audience members into paying attention, let them know they will be answering a pencil-and-paper questionnaire when the presentation is done. Then, include the quiz with the handouts you pass out at the close of the presentation. If you want to remove some of the pressure, you can make it a little more fun by offering some kind of incentive for answering correctly—maybe free donuts next Monday?

Now you're awake. I knew that would do it.

Katherine Murray is the author of many computer books (including the in-the-box documentation for Microsoft Office 2007 Professional and Small Business Editions). Her most recent book, **Microsoft Office Word 2007 Inside Out**, with coauthors Mary Milhollon and Beth Melton (Microsoft Press, 2007), has just hit the stands. She also writes digital lifestyle articles for various Microsoft sites and publishes a blog called BlogOffice that shares Microsoft Office ideas, how-tos, and tips.

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