

Talk About the Project Right Away

The opening first few minutes of a presentation are the most critical to winning. With this in mind, you should evaluate how many PowerPoint images the client must endure before you start addressing the only things they care about; that is, the project issues and their concerns. What's a reasonable number? Is it six, ten, or maybe twelve? Presentation specialist Ernest Burden has suggested a number - one.

Here's an actual presentation where the winning team addressed the client's major concerns in the first few minutes, and a look at those who didn't.

The project: renovation of a 100 year-old historic bridge in an urban setting, which required a temporary bridge during reconstruction. Since they both would have a movable span, close coordination of vehicular and marine traffic were critical.

The team that placed last was an advocate of the "look at us" syndrome, as they opened with the following statement. "We're going to talk for the next 30 minutes on why ABC should do this project. Bridge design is what ABC is all about, and that for 113 years, it's what we do all the time, and it's our job to convince you of that."

Then the images start. First the org chart, then the bulleted lists of the 113 years of experience on other projects, with 100 renovated bridges in the last five years. A series of images of previous projects follows, concluding with image number 21. Finally, a list of the key issues of the project. Seventeen of the thirty minutes have transpired.

The second-place team began by expressing their excitement for the project, but also emphasized their past reputation by placing photos of similar projects all around the room. Their approach focused on project coordination of the teams, as shown in their org chart and schedule.

They hit the project issues on image number 7, with an aerial map of the bridge, and the alignment of the temporary bridge next to it (7 minutes have lapsed). But then they described at length, the advantages and disadvantages of five options for the construction of the temporary bridge, but never focused on any specific solution for the historic renovation of the main one.

The winning team opened by pointing out what made them stand out from the others. "The thing we offer is a blend of national experience with local expertise to give you strong local community coordination and consensus building."

This theme was strengthened by offering a local project manager who had served on the bicentennial inspection on the bridge, plus other team members who worked on the project EIS documents. Their bridge design consultant taught courses nationally on analysis and preservation of historic bridges, and showed an understanding of the old master's engineering techniques.

The first images were of the bridge, described as listed on the National Register in 1982. They pointed out pertinent items from the Secretary of the Interior's criteria for renovation of historic bridges that would affect their approach. They had nailed most all the client's concerns and issues within the first four minutes of their presentation.

So where does the org chart come in following this scenario?

Ernie suggests that it can wait until the projects issues are outlined up front, then you can bring on the team that's going to make it happen. And how can you get all the project issues up front when everyone wants to talk about what they've done for other projects first?

Ernie suggests that in most cases, the site holds the clue to the client's main issues. When doing your site survey, take along a video camera and have the project manager walk through, or in this case drive across the bridge, talking about the issues of access, traffic control, bridge alignments, and the public concerns; how the project will impact the community.

Don't overlook the obvious. None of the teams had any images from the water, approaching the opening section of the bridge. Take a boat trip as well; talk about the structural issues here, and the

navigational concerns. Alternatively you can do this with a computer animation, but the impact of the boat trip would be far more effective. These segments could easily be edited into a brief video clip and can be shown either in a VCR, or as a video clip within PowerPoint on an LCD projector. The clip can have the dialog already on it, or it can be spoken live.

Discussing the main project issues first, sets the stage for a winning presentation, gives the client a comfort level, and builds anticipation to hear the rest of your approach.