

A black and white photograph of a man with glasses, wearing a dark suit, a light-colored shirt, and a striped tie. He is standing at a podium, gesturing with his right hand as if speaking. The background is a textured wall. In the foreground, the blurred backs of several audience members' heads are visible, suggesting a conference or presentation setting.

THE IMPACT OF TED TALKS ON BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS TODAY



INTRODUCTION

The best place to start an insights article on TED Talks is to define exactly what this new phenomenon is. TED Talks are structured in such a way that much of the focus is on the art of public speaking - one person speaking to many, typically in a very formal environment, often in the form of a lecture. This 'old school' approach has proven to be wildly successful, providing both education and entertainment to millions of people in person and online every year.

Well done, TED.

However, there are TED attributes that many authors and commentators have linked directly to a successful formula for business presentations. A big mistake. Of course, there are some valuable lessons to be learned, but we cannot take all the things that make great TED Talks and then blindly apply them in a more everyday environment. However, before we start pulling the constructs of the TED methodology apart, what are the benefits and lessons that we can take from TED that can be applied to other forms of communication?

An area explored in another article in this year's Eyeful Insights journal is presentation length. TED firmly sets its stall out by stating that shorter is sweeter by limiting all presentations to 18 minutes. This represents a big shift from the norm of business presentations. Indeed, 18 minutes was typically the amount of time somebody would spend on a standard introduction - when their business was formed, how many offices they have around the world, and what their EBITDA was for the last five years - a dreadful way to start a presentation. 18 minutes has since been defined by TED as the premium time for audience engagements - shorter really is sweeter.

Aside from refining the amount of time presenting, TED has played an important part in developing better content through the promotion of storytelling. TED storytelling manifests itself in many ways, notably by taking dry data and turning it into something engaging through the use of stories. Carmine Gallo has estimated that 65% of what he terms the greatest TED Talks are made up of stories.

That's 65% of their content.

Effective storytelling can be applied across the entire presentation landscape, be it to a large formal audience or much smaller groups in more intimate settings.

There is also the growth of authenticity within presentations, which is demonstrated in the best TED Talks. Presenters now have license to truly be themselves (of course, there are plenty of examples of poor quality TED Talks where an obvious lack of authenticity really does damage the presenter's reputation, and ultimately the impact they have on their audience).

Authenticity coupled with storytelling highlights that emotion is now a vital part of presentations (and, frankly, always has been). TED has made a virtue of emotion within a presentation, and by mixing authenticity with storytelling has provided a spotlight for a new way of imparting information across a range of audiences. This approach can be successfully applied to a whole range of different presentation forms, from sales presentations, pitch presentations, through to internal presentations.

And finally, TED had built a reputation on insisting upon the use of great visuals. Over the years, countless commentators have implored presenters to recognise the power of visuals by repeating 'a picture paints a thousand words' and other well-worn clichés. Rather than lecture, TED has shown how slides and props can be used as a powerful visual punctuation to the message shared by the presenter.

In summary, there are a number of reasons to celebrate the positive impact TED has had on business presentations.



BUT HAS IT ALL BEEN GOOD NEWS?

Probably its biggest failing and the reason that we cannot blindly take what makes a great TED Talk and apply it to every other type of business presentation, is the fact that they sit firmly in the 'formal presentation' category.

As such, there is no direct feedback loop; you can stand on stage at a TED event, present a monologue for 18 minutes and not get any feedback or pushback from your audience. They cannot challenge or question you. Of course, there's the online forums after the event has gone live but in terms of testing understanding and building a connection with an audience, it's difficult to do so within the confines of a TED Talk. Equally, business presentations are increasingly conversational, built around interaction and the ability to engage, listen and then respond to an audience. TED's closed approach is at loggerheads with what makes truly powerful business presentations tick.





There's also a rising voice of dissent towards TED as people challenge what they view as style over substance. Due to the lack of direct challenge or intellectual rigour, a concern is that TED is being dragged down by hokum disguised by the glossy presentation of ill-informed facts. Again, this is something that you simply can't get away with in the 'real world' - the ability to back up your message is key to presentation success.

So, what has the impact of TED been on typical business presentations? Well, after careful consideration, we believe it has been a force for good by making public speaking a respected art form. Equally, it's demonstrated to people that a lot of hard work goes into making an engaging, powerful and successful presentation.

It's not just about the skill of the presenter - great presentations rely on structure, carefully considered messages, relevant content and embracing the lost art of storytelling. In terms of people aspiring to be better presenters, TED has set a standard. Our job as presenters is to continue to push the bar of quality ever higher - that would be a truly worthy legacy for TED.



PRESENTATIONS ARE TOO IMPORTANT TO NOT BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

Eyeful was founded in 2004 to address a problem that befalls organisations of all sizes – poor communication at key moments.

It might be a must-win pitch, a high stakes shareholder engagement or strategically important internal conference... whatever the event, presentations play an intrinsic part in their success or failure.

Optimising these engagements is where Eyeful step in.

Understanding the fragile mix of elements that ensure presentation success is why, after all these years, we're still at the forefront of making communication work for clients across the globe.

The growing collection of Eyeful Insights papers is another example of this thought leadership in action. To learn more about our work, visit:

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