The 'Death by Zoom' pandemic

By Tiffany Markman   20 Jun 2022

My fellow people-who-work-in-this-weird-hybrid-world, we need to inoculate our presentation game against widespread mediocrity. How do I know? Well, I sometimes make myself a coffee, respond to emails and comb my daughter's unruly hair, all while 'watching' online presentations. I'm not proud.

Source: www.unsplash.com

But I'm also not alone.

A group of us recently shared the dubious privilege of watching an industry specialist absolutely *butcher* an online talk. She was covering a niche I work in myself; one I find fascinating. But she sent most of her audience to sleep, made me grind my teeth into stumps and ensured that no one signed in for her remaining sessions.

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Hers was a less-than-mediocre presentation, but not because her content was poor. Her presentation skills let her down. So what can *you* do to avoid #Zoomurdering your innocent online audiences?

I'll tell you. In four parts.

Content

Yes, you want a narrative, but you don't want to overfill the audience's bucket. I've found that sharing one main message powerfully is preferable to sharing five, weakly. (Also no one remembers more than three.) Shave your "must-includes".

Try to use custom presentations, created especially for each audience, topic, and angle – rather than the same blather from last time. And if you cannot craft something completely fresh, at least tailor the top (intro) and the tail (close).

Be prepared to use more slides than you use in person. Attention spans dwindle faster during virtual presentations, so if you spread the same content over additional slides, there's more frequent on-screen change. If I use ±10 slides for a live 60-minute talk, the same talk online will feature ±25 slides.

Design

You won't be able to see how your slides display on your audience's screens, and your viewers' settings for contrast, brightness and colour may vary from your own (or be poor). Stick with high-contrast colours and avoid tone variations.

You can use more text on your slides than when you present in person because there's less in-room distraction, but structure your slides like mini-billboards. Think of your viewers like drivers on a highway. Use larger fonts and plenty of open space, and (oh, I wish I'd known this in 2020!) try not to place anything important near the outer edges of your slides.

If you're using bullets (which I absolutely *hate* when presenting, but which we sometimes need to share specific content), animate their appearance – one by one – and dissolve their disappearance, so as not to overwhelm your viewer.

Delivery

You, not your slides, are the star of the presentation. Most presentation software shows the slides in a big window and the speaker in a small one, so be sure to start and end with the focus on you. Don't share your slides until after your introduction, and stop slide sharing as you wrap up.

Mouth open? Eyes up. Look mostly at the camera, which is the equivalent of making eye contact with the audience. If you struggle with this (I do!), put a sticky note with a smiley face below your camera to remind you, or hide your self-view so you're not tempted to look at yourself the whole time. It also helps to make the occasional 'sweep' of the audience with your eyes.

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Unless you're the sloth who works at the DMV in Zootropolis, it's almost impossible to speak too slowly. When you get nervous, your heartbeat quickens and your words speed up. Go much more slowly than you think is suitable.

Confident speakers are secure with silence. Make friends with the pause (again, not like the sloth, but sufficiently). If you pause for two to three seconds, audiences assume you've lost your place. But if you pause for five seconds, they think the pause is intentional. After 10 seconds, even the people texting will look up.

Engagement

Data from analysing Ted Talks shows that when we see someone's hands, we more readily understand and trust them. I used to resist giving online presentations partly because I felt restricted by the absence of hand gestures. And yet, I got over myself by May 2020. You *can* use your hands on-screen. There's just a smaller space available, so keep them closer to the body and face.

Use language carefully. You'll need to infuse your talk with engaging words like "you", "us", "we", and audience member names (if possible). Start sentences with "Imagine…" or "What if…" to get your audience members thinking.

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Assume people aren't looking at their screens the entire time and draw them back in, often. Say things like, "What do you see behind the woman on this slide?", "Look at the graph on the right-hand side here," or "Drop a yes or no into the chat". These nudges draw out participation and keep the flow interactive.

Bonus tip: This one's from Andy Bounds who says, "When I prep presentations, I have a simple rule of one to two: I must ask at least *one* question every *two* slides."

That's it. Go off and be awesome. Good luck.

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

I spend 10 hours a day writing - and teaching others to write. I was South Africa's Freelance Copywriter of the Year in 2020 and one of the world's 'Top 50 Female Content Marketers' in 2021.
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