PechaKucha Presentations

Idea In Short

As a consultant presenting to executives and senior client stakeholders, you will find the PechaKucha style of presentation and storytelling invaluable in getting their buy-in for your recommendations, findings, and subsequently, generating action.

I have been using PechaKucha presentation format in my Management & Strategy seminars for a few years now. I have found the constraints imposed by this presentation format extremely useful when presenting to executives, who are extremely busy people with limited availability.

Origins of PechaKucha

According to pechakucha.com, PechaKucha began because, well, because people talk too much! In 2003, yearning for "More show. Less tell," architects Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Tokyo's Klein Dytham architecture invented PechaKucha. The initial purpose was to streamline long design presentations. These sessions soon evolved into happenings through the PechaKucha Nights - first in Tokyo, then around the world. Today, more than 50,000 people present at 1,100+ global PechaKucha Nights every year and this number grows each passing year. Today, business use PechaKucha to creatively and effectively engage employees on a range of topics. Similarly, innovators use the PechaKucha presentations to create compelling stories that move audiences in less than 7 minutes. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meGaYiImC74&ucbcb=1

Shortcomings of the PowerPoint format

Edward Tufte is a recognized critique of the PowerPoint style of information delivery. His article, The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint1 is a valuable read for all consultants. Consultants are in the business of creating and communicating knowledge. Consequently, they are expected to cogently articulate the insights from their rigorous analysis on messy data,

client scenarios, customer views, etc. According to Tufte, the traditional PowerPoint presentations that consultants use to convey such material insights are woefully inadequate. In corporate settings, PowerPoint-style presentations encourage the audience to lean back and veg out.

Mental exertion

Traditionally, such presentations were text-heavy. During such presentations, the audience is mentally scanning for insights as it is constantly drifting in and out of your presentation. Your audience is trying to simultaneously read the text in your presentation and listen to you. This requires significant mental effort from your audience to both, stay focused and grasp the messages you are attempting to convey.

PechaKucha and constraints

The PechaKucha presentation format intentionally sets constraints on speakers using slideware (i.e., PowerPoint or Keynote). PechaKucha is the Japanese term for the sound of conversation or chit chat. I love this metaphor because it suggests that the purpose of certain types of presentations is to spur conversations and response, rather than a monotone delivery of information in bullet-points through pre-designed slide templates.

Cogency

As a result, PechaKucha presentations are pithy and more interactive. 20 seconds is not enough time to have text-heavy slides. You can't speak a lot in 20 seconds. 20 seconds is 1/3rd of a minute - an adequate amount of time to make a solid point, but not enough to drone on. It forces concision, cogency and coherence in speaking. This need to be concise has a corollary effect on your audience - it forces them to be more active and attentive.

Informality

Therefore, the value of this mode of presentation becomes getting the audience interested in what you have to say. When the speaker is chit-chatting, the ideas can be more informal and engaging, just like informal communication in everyday life. You recognize when someone is bombarding you with their ideas or when someone is seeking a real dialogue based on good ideas. As one MIT study suggests that informal conversation yield strong benefits. PechaKucha is about sharing one's thoughts and trying spark the listener on a

topic to drive action.

Follow the sound

For consultants, notice how your clients sound during your presentation? Deafening silence marks such presentations that reveal insights determining the course of a company; the hum of the video projector is usually the dominant sound in the room. If you're a consultant that reads (not presents) the bullet points from text-laden presentation during such sessions, you should immediately stop! Executives also tend to suffer from PowerPoint fatigue as the entire experience of reading and listening to PowerPoint presentations throughout the day requires extraordinary mental alertness and concentration to avoid FOMO. As a consultant, you should enliven these sessions by putting together a compelling presentation to engage the distracted executives and nudge them to follow your thoughts2. PechaKucha is an attempt to break through this fatigue and make the entire presentation experience more revealing, bi-directional, engaging, and conversational.

Getting started

As a consultant, getting started on the PechaKucha format is relatively easy. Leverage the fact that your client is not coming into this process as tabula rasa. Your clients probably are conditioned to a certain style of PowerPoint, since this is the experience they have had in the past. This is not to say that PowerPoint presentations are bad, merely that they have become disconcertingly familiar in discernable ways. Consultants need to be aware that this isn't a typical PowerPoint presentation. The 20 slides x 20 seconds format is particular to PechaKucha style of presentation. This will impose unique constraints on what you construct; in this case, constraints are good. In fact, constraints frequently help liberate content and stimulate creativity in client engagements. It forces consultants to make thoughtful choices, not random choices.

PechaKucha best-practices

The Don'ts

From my experience, these are a few things you should **not** do in a PechaKucha presentation:

1. Don't use too much text
2. Avoid bullet points
3. Do not read directly from the slides
4. Avoid visuals that don't advance your topic or contribute meaningful information
5. While a consistent slide design is good, avoid most PowerPoint templates. Neutral backgrounds and easy to read sans serif fonts are best.

The Do's

1. Consider your 20 slides as 20 panels in a graphic storyline. Think how your 20 panels flow together to create a cohesive statement or a consistent through-line
2. Consider the impact of text on your audience. If there a single word or a short phrase that can metonymically capture the essence of what you are saying in less than 20 seconds, choose that route
3. Carefully choose your visuals In a PechaKucha, images are frequently the only information on the entire slide. Visual data is just as valuable as textual data. Like metonymy, a well-chosen visual can likely replace a verbose version
4. Don't use slide transitions. Use direct cuts from slide to slide. Avoid all fancy slide transition effects as these are extremely distracting and childish
5. Avoid sounds or video clips. Again, these features are just distracting in a PechaKucha. Your voice is your sound instrument in this presentation

Pitfalls and avoiding them

Timing

As with all things in life, practise! Rehearse your spoken remarks. 20 seconds is an amazingly short amount of time. Most consultants who do not practice end up speed-talking as the slides change over. A good PechaKucha is not about talking faster or talking over the wrong slide. Timing is of the essence of a good PechaKucha. Practice really helps. Set the slide show on automatic advance, so the slide will change in 20 seconds even if you don't finish your remarks.

Storyline

Think about how your slides and your spoken remarks match up. They are two parts of a whole, and a successful PechaKucha is both well designed and well spoken. In many ways,

you should consider yourself a performer, and you are attempting to deliver a compelling performance.

Staggering presentations

Like any set of presentations, less is more. Even though each PechaKucha is only 6 minutes, 40 seconds long, try to stagger these presentations over several meetings rather than have 5 or 6 in a row. In my experience, the audience can lean forward through about 4 or 5 such presentations, but by the 6th presentation, they start to tune out. So, figure that into your planning to get the maximum attention out of your audience

Conversations & side-benefits

One of the real benefits of PechaKuchas is the attention and engagement created by the presentation. Therefore, I like to build some time for discussion and questions after a PechaKucha, into my presentations. In fact, I tend to make the final slide of a PechaKucha a bit provocative to get the audience talking. Since PechaKuchas are very structured, I find it useful to have a time limit for discussion. Depending on audience size, I try to keep the discussions with the same time length as for the presentation (6 minutes and 40 seconds). In my experience, clients really like the PechaKucha presentation style. The faster pace is quite appealing, but I think it tends to bring out the best in speakers. Even consultants who are a bit less polished as public speakers can use the 20x20 method to come across as a more organized speaker.

Know the purpose

A PechaKucha is not an in-depth analysis of an issue, but rather started as a practice by designers to help creative people get to the point when presenting new architectural designs. It forces speakers to quickly get to the point by making these presentations fast paced and more evocative than a standard PowerPoint presentation. It introduces ideas better than it analyzes them in depth.

Details & depth

The chit chat mode of PechaKuchas is actually quite hard, as it is often difficult to chit chat about something that you don't really understand. To be concise and evocative during a

PechaKucha, you should have really done your homework and understand what you are presenting. I find that consultants who give strong PechaKuchas have done their research and distilled their ideas into an essence. According to Bloom's taxonomy, these are all higher level of intellectual behaviors. Consequently, to make a good PechaKucha, a consultant should be able to analyze, evaluate, create, and communicate. In this regard, PechaKucha is an invaluable tool to reflect your point of view about a subject. This style of presentation is good at formulating points of view.

Summary

In summary, the PechaKucha style of presentation delivery forces you to plan your structure, simplify your key messages, practice your delivery, and refine your thinking. This works for both, simple and complex ideas.