Storyboard

Idea In Short

When it comes to good slide presentations, we can all learn from great consultants. After all, consultants charge net six- or seven-digit figures in billings per month & deliver their recommendations as presentations. Even if their recommendations are spot on, if they do a bad job at compiling their presentations, their clients wouldn't take them seriously & implement their recommendations or worse, hire them again. Hence, the presentations should resonate with the audience at:

- the macro level - the story you wish to tell, and
- the micro level - the slide design

There are no shortcuts to delivering great presentations. You need ample time to plan your goals & prepare the message you want to deliver.

Whether you're building 10 or 100 slides, you need to craft a compelling storyboard. This requires you to clearly understand your objective, the material that will lead your audience to take a course of action & finally, arrange your material in the right order. In other words, you need to organize your ideas into a logical narrative by making a presentation storyboard.

Historical origins

Story boarding is a great technique for developing the structure & content of presentations. But, you should start this process only after you have identified your audience, intent, and message. The idea of story boarding was developed at the Walt Disney Studio during the early 1930s. Disney credited animator Webb Smith with creating the idea of drawing scenes on separate sheets of paper & pinning them up on a bulletin board to tell a story in sequence, thus creating the first storyboard. The first complete storyboards were created for the 1933 Disney short Three Little Pigs. The first storyboards at Disney evolved from comic-book like sketch stories created in the 1920s to illustrate concepts for animated

cartoon short subjects such as Plane Crazy & Steamboat Willie. In other words, story boarding is an essential & proven process used in film-making. This process has been around for quite some time. Essentially, story boarding involves creating rough sketches that plot how a certain story will progress. Similarly, creating a presentation storyboard will allow you to visualize the flow of your presentation. Think of it as a visual outline, giving you a chance to step back & see your entire presentation. It's the blueprint that you'll refer to when building your presentation deck. I build a lot of presentations in my consulting job. Here are some of the best practices I use when building my presentations.

Core message

Before you begin story boarding, think of your core message first. Ask yourself:

> what do I want to say?

Think of your core message as your elevator pitch. In other words, what is the one thing you want your audience to take away from your presentation? To distill the core message, consultants rely on Barbara Minto's Pyramid Principle1 to organize their thoughts. The Pyramid Principle approach starts with an introduction that includes a situation, a complication & a key question. The body of the communication is then organized in pyramids, with ideas relating to others in a logical way.

Narratives

With your ideas on paper, you can now visualize and arrange them into a logical sequence as self-sufficient taglines. These force you to clearly think about clarity & conciseness of your thoughts. Furthermore, the taglines will help the presenter establish emotional relationships with the audience, answer their questions & further drill down in further details when required. To start with the narratives, take a clean sheet of paper and start doodling. The general idea is to sketch your ideas into a series of panels. Each panel will serve as a single slide for your presentation deck. You can divide a clean page into several sections to create as many panels as you need. For collaborations, this is a great time to sketch out each other's ideas. If you're sketching a narrative, I recommend using a paper & paper approach. I personally feel that this approach forces you to think through & clean any logical flaws in the narratives. Furthermore, you don't want to make anything permanent at this

stage. The whole point of a storyboard is to help see how your ideas flow.

Mechanisms

This means, you should be flexible to adjust if something doesn't feel right. For this reason, paper notes are quite more convenient. Use one sheet as a single panel and stick it on a flat surface. When you've finished sketching and writing, you can easily rearrange the notes in any order you'd like. Recently, I found that sticky notes quite convenient for this exercise. However, if you prefer to directly work on the slides, make sure that each slide independently works well based on the constraints mentioned above. Each slide should contribute something to the overall story. If not, have no qualms about deleting it. Saving multiple versions of your presentation electronically is an advantage. You can always retrieve the slides you deleted from an older version of the deck.

Taglines

To create your message, adopt a top-down approach by identifying your primary idea and then story boarding. That is, write only the taglines of your slides so that they work together to tell that compelling story of yours. Think of the story line as the road map for a journey & your presentation as the vehicle for taking your audience to your desired destination. Each element of the deck should take your audience one step closer to your desired end-state. These form the sentence headers of your story line that connects the various slides in your presentation. Once you have identified your core message, list all the key points surrounding this message. Let your ideas flow organically and don't try to edit yourself at this stage. Simply jot down everything that comes to mind. It's better to do this away from your computer. Some believe that writing by hand helps the creative process. You should also consider the level of detail you want to talk about in your presentation. This usually depends on the length of the presentation and factors, such as the type of audience you're addressing (are they detail oriented?), the type of argument you are making (is it going against their preconceptions?), and the stakes.

Dot-dash story line

Dot-dash refers to the bullet-point, outline format, where:

- main, top-level ideas that drive the story line are designated with round, dot-shaped bullets, and

- 2nd level, supporting ideas, facts, and exhibits are indented and designated with dashes

The dots & dashes provide the structure around which the presentation deck should be built. The dot-dash approach allows you to lay out the entire story line without investing the time to create PPT pages and exhibits. If changes need to be made to the story line, you can find out before you waste a lot of time and effort. Think about putting together a ghost deck to review & receive feedback from your key stakeholders. If your story line is wrong or you missing critical content, you won't have much to rework. Ghost decks help align on what the end product will look like & minimize wasted work. Ideally, you should develop your story line early on in your project2. Developing the story line is iterative, as it also requires guessing what your analysis will tell you. Once you've conducted the analysis, it is rather common to discover that you guessed wrong and that you need to modify your story line. Nevertheless, having a story line in place is essential as this forms the baseline of your overall presentation.

Elements of Design

Regarding design, many people nowadays prefer the minimalist approach3. In this approach, the slides contain very little text & lots of photos that are explained by the presenter. While this is visually compelling as a final product, it should not drive your narratives. Instead, you should let the intended use of your presentation determine the overall narrative.

Take a step back and look at the big picture

After compiling your ideas, you should now step back & review your presentation storyboard. Scrutinize how each panel is connected. Figure out if this sequence helps in building a logical narrative for your core message:

- Does every panel contribute to the point you want to drive home?
- Are your points supporting the argument you're trying to make?
- Is your story direct & straight to the point?

You are more persuasive when you are direct. By answering your stakeholders' questions first, you will sound more assertive & confident. You're not searching for reasons or words.

You are plainly and directly answering the question that was posed to you. The Pyramid Principle advocates that:

> Ideas in writing should always form a pyramid under a single thought. Ideas at any level in the pyramid must always be summaries of the ideas grouped below them.

Arranging your ideas

You want to ensure that the ideas you bring together under each group actually belong together, are at the same level of importance, and follow some logical structure. There are a few different ways of logically ordering ideas that belong in the same group:

- **Time order:** if there is a sequence of events that form a cause-effect relationship, you should present the ideas in time order
- **Structural order:** break a singular thought into its parts, ensuring that you have covered all the major supporting ideas
- **Degree order:** present supporting ideas in rank order of importance, most to least important

Be discerning & remove details that you don't need. From this stage, you'll come out with a blueprint to guide you with your presentation deck. Last, but not the least, when creating a storyboard, keep an open mind.

Summary

In summary, a presentation storyboard will help:

- Turn your ideas into a logical and discernible narrative
- Visualize how your key points can translate into a PowerPoint presentation
- Let your thoughts flow out organically. Storyboarding allows you to swim through ideas and concepts until you find the ones that suit your message the most.