The Minto Pyramid Principle

Idea In Short

Lead with your recommendation, then support it with grouped arguments and detailed evidence. This top-down structure matches how executives think and lets them focus where they care most.

Consultants Must Structure Their Thinking

Structuring thought is the only way to present ideas clearly to clients. One excellent tool is the pyramid principle, developed by Barbara Minto, a former McKinsey consultant. She authored The Minto Pyramid Principle, which essentially defined the way consultants structure most of their presentations. Most consultants know the pyramid principle even if they do not know the author. Consultants often use groupings to clarify and simplify problems, because they believe many business problems are similar. Clients are often too entrenched in their industry, corporate culture and personal experience to see root causes. The common client critique is that they could have told you that. The consulting rebuttal is that the client lacked the clarity of thought and persuasion to get the point across. 1

It Looks Like a Pyramid

The presentation logic looks like a pyramid, as the name implies. The main recommendation sits on top. It is built on mid-level recommendations, each supported by smaller facts, data, analysis and benchmarks. The top of the pyramid, the executive summary, holds three recommendations. Each recommendation has supporting pages. Page one is the executive summary, pages two through four support recommendation one, and pages five through seven support recommendation two. This structure lets the reader descend from the answer to the evidence at whatever depth they choose.

Start With the Conclusion

This is a top-down type of thinking, structured and aligned with how executives think. Big idea followed by smaller ideas. This format helps you cut to the chase quickly, which matters for several reasons. Executives have a short attention span, so say what you want before they start asking questions. The logic is easy to follow: I recommend A, B and C, and recommendation A is supported by facts one, two and three. Giving the recommendation and logic up front lets the audience focus on the areas of greatest interest. It also forces the consultant to hone the storyline to the most essential parts, avoiding long-winded prose and rambling slides. Most high-school term papers used bottom-up reasoning where the punchline sat at the end of a 50-page paper. That is not how to present in the boardroom. Do not start with boring data points and save the good stuff for the end. 2

Structured Thinking Sets Consultants Apart

Consultants may not be smarter than clients, but they are more structured in their thinking. They lay out the broad boundaries of the problem, then methodically drive toward a recommendation showing the steps in the logic. They solve the math problem, but take deliberate steps to show the work. All the assumptions, sample sizes, calculations, considerations, risks and details are there, but organized with the conclusion first. This discipline turns scattered analysis into a story an executive can act on.

Two Situations to Skip the Rigid Format

There are two situations where you would not use the pyramid principle rigidly. The first is an interim presentation of facts, where the consultant walks the client counterpart through information and insights. Nothing too heavy, just information sharing rather than a recommendation. The second is a leave-behind deck, meant to stand on its own. Here the font is smaller and the writing is more long-form prose. It functions as a guide or playbook rather than a hard-hitting recommendation. Even when you do not follow the rigid format precisely, create an executive summary of one page that the executive can tear off and carry around. Make it easy for the client executive to sell your wares. Compressing a six-to-eight-week project into an executive summary is intellectually rigorous, because you must know what the key points are. As Blaise Pascal noted, if he had more time, he would have written a shorter letter. As Albert Einstein noted, if you cannot explain it simply, you do not understand it well enough. 3

Should You Buy the Book

It is up to you. The book is a bit of a boring read, but a useful consulting trick is to read the 45 reviews posted online, which get you 80 percent of the way there. The real value comes from practice. Find the best presentation you ever delivered, one you are proud of, and see how well you used the pyramid structure. Recommendations should sit up front, supported by analysis, insights and implications. Take 15 minutes and try it on your last client presentation. Build a list of bullet points in the pyramid structure: page one is the executive summary with all recommendations, page two details recommendation A, page three details recommendation B and page four details recommendation C. As extra credit, write the titles of each slide so they tell the story. You should be able to read only the titles and know what the presentation is about. There is an art and craft to writing PowerPoint titles, and mastering it separates competent consultants from memorable ones.

Make the Titles Do the Work

The discipline that separates a competent deck from a memorable one is the writing of slide titles. Each title should state a complete insight, not just label a topic, so that reading the titles alone tells the full story. A weak title says "Market Analysis," while a strong title says "The market is growing but our share is shrinking fastest in the premium segment." When titles carry the argument, executives can grasp the recommendation in 30 seconds and dig into supporting pages only where they need depth. This forces the consultant to know the so what of every slide before building it. Titles that tell the story also protect the deck when an executive flips to a single page out of order, because each page still communicates a defensible point.

- 1Barbara Minto, The First Female MBA Hired By McKinsey, Created The Pyramid Principle And The MECE Grouping Concept That Became The Firm's Communication Standard
- 2The Pyramid Principle Advocates That Ideas In Writing Form A Pyramid Under A Single Thought, With Each Level Summarizing The Ideas Grouped Below It
- 3McKinsey Credits Minto With Creating The Pyramid Principle And The MECE Rule, A Framework Still Taught To New Hires As Essential To Structured Communication

Summary

The Minto Pyramid Principle remains the scaffolding of consulting communication. Put the recommendation first, group supporting arguments beneath it and back each with evidence. Even when you skip the rigid format, always include a one-page executive summary the client can carry away.