Inside a McKinsey Presentation

Idea In Short

Study great decks the way writers study great prose. A public 39-page McKinsey presentation for the postal service demonstrates ten habits: navigational structure, parallel titles, sourced data, a point per page, simple frameworks, honest sourcing, clean charts, an in-your-face case for change, detailed backup and genuine creativity.

Learning From the Best

McKinsey & Company does great work, from high-visibility government assignments to its carefully built practice, and respect for the firm makes its materials worth studying.1 Presentations are the visible tip of that craft. A dozen or so McKinsey decks circulate through any consultant's career via clients, and others sit openly online, from conference materials to engagement documents clients oddly leave public. One public-record example rewards a full dissection: a 39-page presentation from 2010 for the United States Postal Service, addressing a huge problem and providing a smart roadmap.2 Ten lessons emerge, each transferable to anyone who builds decks for a living.

Structure the Journey

Lesson one: stay organized. Consulting presentations commonly use table-of-contents pages reintroduced at the front of each section, telling the audience exactly where they stand in the flow. These road markers cost one slide each and repay themselves in orientation, as when a divider announces the base case section as part two of four. Lesson two: enforce parallel structure in titles. Page titles are the most valuable real estate in a deck, and they should be spent wisely. Titles are storytelling, reading cohesively with similar structure, tense, tone and format, like the points of an essay with clean transitions between arguments. A reader skimming only the titles should absorb the entire narrative.

Earn Credibility With Evidence

Lesson three: build credibility through data and documentation. Consultants trade on left-brain rigor, and this deck carries numbers on the majority of pages, with clear footnotes indicating sources even when they coyly say McKinsey research. When data does not exist, the firm creates it through surveys. Lesson four: make sure each page has a point. Senior managers train teams to answer so what for every page, and any page that says nothing clearly gets cut. Kicker boxes do the enforcement work, as on the page announcing that 55 percent of a cost reduction came from overtime and non-career cuts. Lesson six extends the evidence ethic in a humbler direction: find the right data wherever it lives. Professional services exist for client success, not firm pride, and this deck cites rival BCG research where appropriate. Acknowledging a competitor's work when it serves the client signals confidence, not weakness.

Frame Simply, Chart Clearly

Lesson five: create a simple framework for the problem. Complex problems with many moving parts need an overarching structure that is easy to grasp, and often a plain income statement or balance sheet suffices. Here, color coding across a revenue-minus-cost frame shows several unfavorable revenue and cost trends at a glance. Lesson seven: keep charts easy to understand. McKinsey slides run busier than ideal, and the charts themselves stay simple, clearly labeled, with obvious trend lines. Revenue is flat, costs are rising, profits are falling and cumulative losses are mounting. Unequivocal and direct, which is what charts are for.

Make the Case for Change Undeniable

Lesson eight: build an in-your-face case for change. Too many recommendations, including strategic ones from elite firms, end up collecting dust on executive shelves, almost a running joke in the industry. The antidote is quantified urgency. This deck shows 18 billion dollars of savings from the proposed actions, within a 123 billion dollar total opportunity. Billion with a B concentrates minds. Lesson nine: give high-level recommendations detailed backup. In true pyramid-principle fashion, backup pages break each recommendation into specific action steps, such as 10 billion dollars in savings decomposed into four initiatives.3 Honest dissection also means noting weaknesses: one backup page raises the question of feasibility, since the client already automates more than 90 percent of processing, leaving a careful reader unsure whether the promised improvement is achievable. Even excellent decks deserve skeptical reading.

Applying the Teardown to Your Own Deck

The ten lessons compress into a pre-flight checklist any team can run in twenty minutes. Read only the titles aloud and confirm they tell the story unaided. Check each page for a stated so-what, and cut or fix any page that lacks one. Verify every number carries a source, and mark the ones resting on internal estimates. Confirm the case for change is quantified in units the audience cannot ignore. Test whether a skeptical reader could trace each headline recommendation to its backup detail. Finally, count the pages containing something the client does not already know, because that count, not the total page count, measures the deck's value. Teams that run this checklist before every major review internalize the craft faster than any training course delivers it.

Go Beyond the Obvious

Lesson ten separates good from great. Consultants do a fine job capturing internal know-how, structuring it into a smart story and marrying it with best practices, and that performance earns a B-minus or B. Clients are smart too, and they do not pay premium fees for regurgitation of what everyone already knows. The real juice comes from thoughtful inquiry, rigorous intellectual curiosity, creativity and something genuinely new. This deck delivers exactly that, proposing thirty new revenue streams for the client to consider along with a methodology for filtering out options that are unprofitable or uncontrollable. That final section converts a competent diagnostic into an idea-generating engagement, and it is the part most worth imitating. Study the structure, copy the discipline, and then push past both into the creative territory where fees are truly earned.

- 1McKinsey & Company
- 2United States Postal Service
- 3Barbara Minto

Summary

The dissected deck shows craft compounding: road-marker organization, cohesive titles, documented data, a so-what on every page and clear charts building an 18-billion-dollar case for change. Internal know-how plus best practices earns a B. Creativity and new revenue ideas earn the fee.