

A short history of PowerPoint

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PowerPoint 1.0 was actually derived from a product called Presenter that was developed by Forethought Inc. in early 1987. Presenter was built for Macintosh II computers with special graphics cards (supporting a whopping 236 colors). It was arguably the first personal computer program directed at creating presentation slides. (Up to this point, graphical slide design was largely the domain of large service bureaus like Genigraphics, which charged \$240 an hour for time on its \$50,000 computer-design stations.) Microsoft purchased Presenter in August of the same year for \$14 million, a huge sum at the time, but probably one of smartest checks Bill Gates ever cut.

In September, PowerPoint 1.0 for Mac and DOS was released. Windows had not been invented yet. While there was some interest in the product, the average business presentation was still largely created with a typewriter and overhead transparencies. Even with conversion from PowerPoint, color graphic slides were expensive to create, and largely reserved for major presentations from big companies.

Seeing little threat in a small software company, Genigraphics began working with Microsoft to make it simple for authors to send their files directly to the firm for developing high-quality 35mm slides. Version 2.0, released in 1988, advertised this capability. Genigraphics developers actually created many of the standard presentation templates for the product, based on years of creating layouts for big corporations. Many of those initial templates are the basis of what is still being used today to juxtapose bullets and charts. The new version also supported up to 16.8 million colors, and had cutting edge features like spell-check, importing graphics from other programs and search/replace. By the late eighties, it was not unusual for presenters to create transparencies that contained graphics through laser printers.

Through the early- to mid-â€™90s, with version 3.0, 4.0 and 95, Microsoft put greater emphasis on products that supported its new Windows operating system. They also moved to the integrated â€™Officeâ€™ suite approach to their product. Kathy Harris, a former PowerPoint product manager, described the approach as a â€™buy two, get one free promotionâ€™ in a recent interview in Presentations. Word and Excel were the main draw; the value of presentation software at the time was not as clear to the typical business user, but made for a good freebie.

As PowerPoint advanced, Genigraphics began to suffer, as users took control of their own presentations and began using LCD projectors or color overheads to display their slides instead of 35mm. In 1994 the company filed for bankruptcy and, in a move akin to a car company buying a horse carriage builder, was rescued from going under by InFocus Systems, a large LCD projector manufacturer.

Sound and multimedia were also changing the nature of presentations. For better or worse, graphical transitions between slides, animation and sound effects became easy to insert into slides. Even if Genigraphics had survived, its two dimensional images couldnâ€™t support all the potential bells and whistles that presentation software could create.

With the release of PowerPoint 97 and 2000 in the late â€™90s, e-mail had become commonplace and intranets were just beginning to be taken seriously. Features like â€™save as HTMLâ€™ and integrated streaming media were included. Presentations were no longer confined to meeting rooms; they could be e-mailed and played back with voice-narration, conducted live through video conferencing, or stored on a company intranet along with video of the presenter.

Many of these advanced features were ignored when they were first included, but have taken off in the last few years, as network bandwidth has become cheap and travel budgets have been cut. Much of the hype of the late â€™90s that never lived up to its potential has become mainstream reality in 2003.

For professional communicators, the evolution of PowerPoint from a niche product for the graphics team to a core part of the office suite on every computer has created challenges. Well-crafted templates that reflect the brand and identity of a company are critical to keeping employees, customers, media and other important audiences from getting mixed signals. Cracking the whip and enforcing them inside and outside the walls of your company is important. Dealing with how presentations are converted to online webinars or even printable handouts adds even more complexity to the situation. If this sounds like a familiar headache, Iâ€™ll cover how you can develop effective templates and policies for PowerPoint presentations across a range of media in next monthâ€™s column.

