Presentation success: secrets

"Presentation is a contact sport. It's about making contact with each and every member of the audience." – **Damian Conway**, geek presenter extraordinaire.

Now that your perfect presentation is finished, it's time to get up before a group of strangers and give the talk. But if you freeze up in front of crowds and are sick of people telling you to imagine the audience naked, we proudly present the time-honoured *Linux Format* cheat sheet for how to make and give the perfect presentation…

1 Be prepared

Writing a good presentation is just as hard as writing a good article: you start off with a blank canvas, and have to plan which words and pictures you put in, and how. It takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of effort, but most of all it takes a lot of preparation – you need to know exactly what you plan to cover in your talk before you start writing. If you already have a list of things you want to cover, great! If not, your best bet is just to write down a long list of everything interesting relating to your topic. Then, try and group these points into four main points that you're trying to make. Note that's four, and not ten or more – a good presentation keeps the number of main points as low as possible. If one of your ideas doesn't fit under one of the four points you came up with, then it's out of the remit of this presentation: bin it!

So now you have four main points you want to make, of which each contains perhaps five or six smaller points. Your goal now is to get those smaller points down to as few words as possible, because the biggest mistake people make is to have slides full of text and expect people to read them – not only is this very dull, but it takes the focus away from you, the speaker. If you were wondering, the second biggest mistake people make when making a presentation with the assistance of a computer-based slideshow is to have text on their slides, then just read out that text as if the audience couldn't read it for themselves.

2 Be subtle

You should now have your five main points, each with five or six smaller points trimmed down to as few words as possible. But before you continue to giving the presentation, please spare a little thought to your slide design – simple and clear is better than flashy or colourful. Be reserved, and your audience will thank you for it. Colours, animations, transitions and other effects might look pretty clever when you first learn to use Impress, but you can guarantee that everyone else will be bored of them after the third slide.

And that font you found – the one that's really cute? Bin it. Cute fonts are usually hard to read at a distance, and end up being more annoying than helpful. Remember, your goal is to get information across – use your voice to be interesting and funny, and your slides to be informative and to the point.

3 Be passionate

If you're excited, people will be excited to hear you talk. But the other side to that coin is that if you really couldn't care less about what's in your presentation, your audience won't either. You need to be someone so familiar with the top of your presentation that there's no doubt about your expert status. You need to be someone who is either on the product team or closely related to it. You need to be someone who's willing to get up on stage and project your enthusiasm for whatever is in your presentation, because if you're not passionate why should your audience be?

So, don't stand still. Don't keep your hands in your pockets. Don't talk in a monotone. Don't talk like you're reading the slides yourself for the first time. Be ready for interruptions – encourage people to ask questions: it shows they are listening and that they want to learn more. In fact, you ought to encourage people to ask questions, because it helps you see where your presentation is missing information and also helps inform the audience.

Being passionate means that you want to show people the cool things about your product/service/thing. It doesn't mean you start your talk with a history lesson working up to the current day – start by telling people what they will be able to do as a result of using your product, and go from there.

What it comes down to is this: if you look at your presentation and it doesn't excite you, you're the wrong person to be giving that presentation.

4 Be entertaining

The goal of your presentation is not to be the ultimate documentation for your project. A presentation is a primer: you
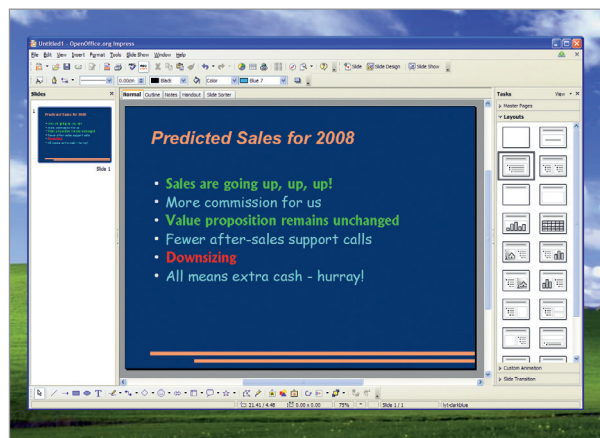
› **Several font types and clashing colours is the antithesis of subtlety: tone it down, or you'll look like a used-car salesman!**
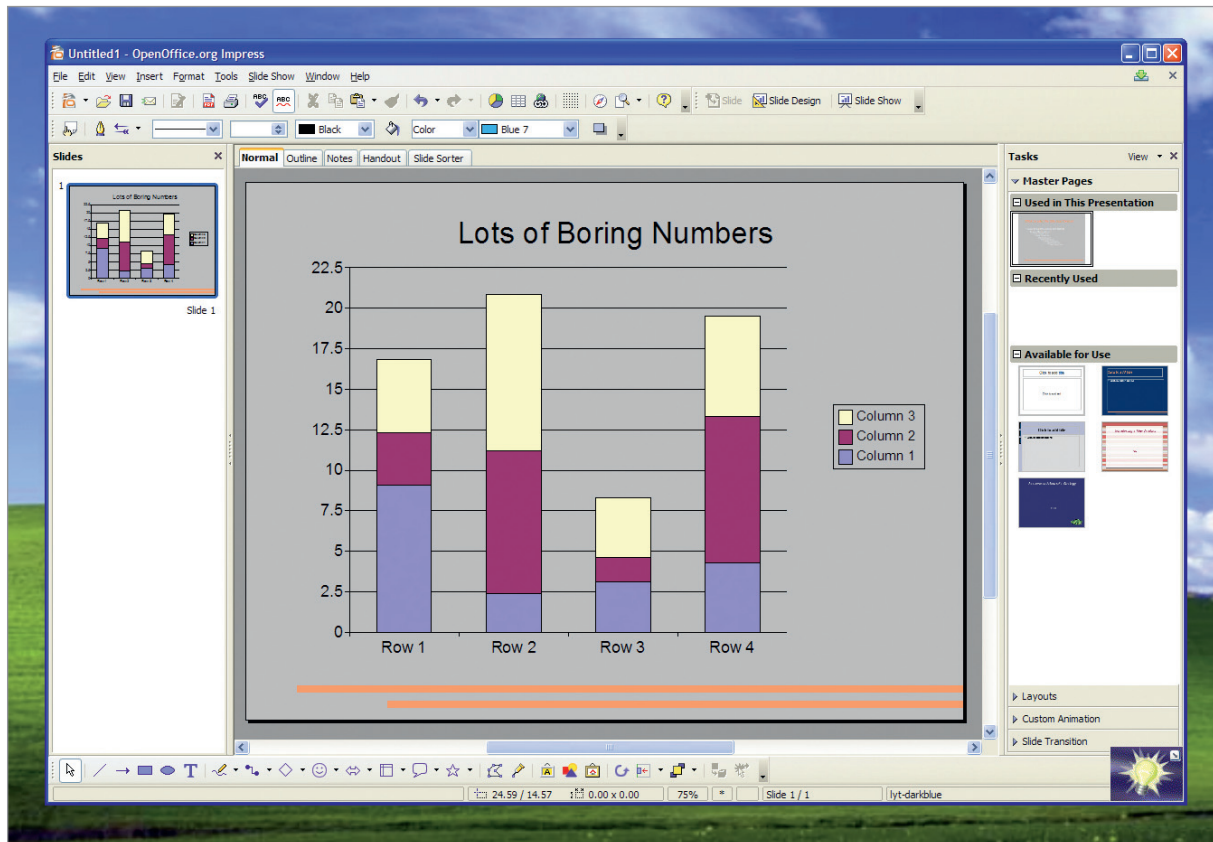
❯ **If you're not passionate, your audience won't be either – too much text, lots of numbers or dull-looking charts are the fastest way to kill the passion in your talk.**

have some time to get people excited about whatever it is that you've done, not to teach them everything there is to know about it. You should already have chosen a tight selection of points you want to raise, so your job now is to get that all across without your audience falling asleep. Ideally you'll get the talk across in an entertaining way, as that should boost how much the audience remembers afterwards.

> ## "Your goal is to get your information across – be informative and calm."

At the very least, you ought to order your presentation so that it has a logical flow from the start to the end. Having a strict hierarchy in your slides – *ie*, using headings and subheadings properly – helps people follow your flow, and should also help them remember your talk afterwards. Once you have the logical flow, the next step is to make it interesting, and that's harder. But even if your presentation is on a terminally dull topic, it's still easy to make it more interesting – make use of pictures to get your points across, bring in some anecdotes that tie in to what you're saying, do live demonstrations on a computer if you can, tell them some back story if it's interesting. In short, do whatever it takes to make your logical hierarchy come to life!

If you're really desperate, a few simple jokes can go a long way to keeping people awake and interested, but don't go overboard – you're a speaker, not a stand-up comedian.

5 Be yourself

This is the hardest part of being a presenter: you need to be cool, calm, relaxed and in control. If you get nervous in front of lots of people (and that's quite normal), being those four things might

sound almost impossible, but with some practice you can at least pretend to be cool and calm!

6 Practice makes perfect!

One sure-fire way to help you stay calm is to practice your talk beforehand. Get a clock out, note down the time, then practice the speech to yourself. Yes, that includes talking out loud to yourself – get over it! Once you've gone over the entire talk, check how long it took you, and compare that against the actual amount of time you have allocated. Going over the presentation like this ensures you smooth out any rough parts, but also gives you a chance to develop a practised patter – an easy familiarity with your words that makes you sound a lot more confident than you actually are.

If you're still nervous, the best thing to do is to try to turn those nerves into energy: stand up, walk around, make some hand gestures, and try to work off some of the stress. This is particularly important if your talk is long, because you're going to be up the for a while and too much stress will just make your muscles ache.

And finally, don't be afraid to make mistakes, because everyone makes them now and then. Just relax, laugh it off, take a deep breath and continue – as long as you pick up where you left off, you'll find your audience is quite forgiving! **LXF**

PowerPoint tragedy

On 1 February 2003, near the conclusion of its 28th mission, Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated during re-entry over Texas, killing all seven crew members aboard. For a fascinating in-depth examination of the assertion that NASA's over-reliance upon and/or misuse of *Microsoft PowerPoint* during the shuttle's maintenance might have been part of the cause of this loss, visit Edward Taft's website: **http://tinyurl.com/e4atx**.