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In a scene from *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore makes his point about global warming before an audience — and how to use slides to powerful effect.

III POWERFUL POINTS

# A convenient lesson for presenters

Al Gore's film raises the bar in the fine art of persuasion, **DOUG MOLLENHAUER** writes

And now, in the award for presentation effectiveness in a documentary or feature film, the winner is ... Al Gore in *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Mr. Gore's acclaimed documentary about the threat of global warming may or may not win an Oscar when the golden statues are handed out on Sunday, but his performance is an award-worthy example of how to make a persuasive presentation.

Much of *An Inconvenient Truth*, which is nominated for an Academy Awards for best documentary feature and best original song, consists of a slide presentation Mr. Gore makes to a live audience. (This week, he brought his show to both Montreal and to a sold-out auditorium at the University of Toronto.)

Through the film, the former U.S. vice-president gives a practical case study on how to present persuasively

and — of particular importance to business and technical people — how to use slides to powerful effect.

Here are some specific suggestions for would-be persuaders:

**Warm up the audience**

"I am Al Gore. I used to be the next president of the United States of America." When the audience laughs, he says: "I don't find that particularly funny." And then he smiles.

That's how Mr. Gore, global warming crusader, introduces himself to the audience and successfully warms them to him.

Self-deprecating humour, especially in small amounts, can have a potent effect on winning an audience, or even critics, over to your point of view.

In the words of Peggy Noonan, a former White House speechwriter: "Humour is a quick victory. It's a speaker's way of saying: 'This won't be painful; humour is allowed here.'"

Humour has always been a great leveller, and Mr. Gore uses it to good effect several times in his presentation.

**Map out the argument**

Persuasive arguments generally

have a clear line of reasoning that leads to some form of action. As Aristotle pointed out centuries ago, all persuasive communication must lead to change.

Here is what the structure of Mr. Gore's argument looks like:

1. a clear description of the essential problem;
2. the evidence and implications of the problem;
3. the causes of the problem;
4. an addressing of the counter-arguments (what he calls "misperceptions");
5. the solution, with specific action steps.

Two things to note in passing:

Not all arguments need to be structured exactly this way, although this one works well here; and, about half of the presentation time was spent on showing evidence and implications. If we're committed to true persuasion and bringing about lasting change in attitudes or behaviour, we gloss over proof at our peril.

**Be clear — above all**

Mr. Gore tells us in the film that he set himself a goal — to communicate the threat of global warming as clearly as he knew how. His use of visual aids is a powerful part of the way he clarifies and supports his argument. Consider some of the techniques he employs to strengthen his messages and argument.

First, he sets context for a visual aid before he reveals the data. In other words, he makes a point and then shows the line graph that supports the point. Frequently, he shows the lines' axes alone first before revealing the data, which is often in the form of a line graph. This rivets attention and brings clarity and impact to the point he's making.

In this way, the visual aid becomes an extension of the speaker. Speaker and slide never compete for our attention. They are directly connected.

Contrast that with the clutter, confusion and eventual disconnection we've all experienced with corporate PowerPoint slides, especially in technical presentations.

**Strengthen signal, reduce noise**

The lines delineating data, instead of being static and inert, almost always move, flowing from left to right across the screen. The movement directs the eye and helps maintain one focus.

In virtually all cases, Mr. Gore uses images dynamically — not because it's cool, but because it's clearer. We see the atmosphere breathing in and out. We watch water bodies evaporate. West Nile disease spreads, in a time-lapse, from east to west.

The eye is drawn to movement, but these slides draw the eye to movement that matters, movement that persuades.

The background merely establishes the context for the movement, and functions as just that — background. The signal is strong, because the background noise is minimized.

Contrast that with the often dazzling but ultimately distracting movement we see widely used through the animation features of PowerPoint.

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# Gore film sets a benchmark for presentations

**GORE** from page C1

## Support in many guises

Mr. Gore incorporates props, such as a hydraulic lift, which raises him several metres from the stage floor, to dramatically emphasize how “off the charts” carbon dioxide levels could become in less than 50 years. He shows before-and-after photos, animations, archival material, simple formulae, folksy quotes, and several other visual aids that help lend breadth and force to the argument.

Admittedly, the budget for a presentation like this is likely a lot bigger than most of us could afford. But Mr. Gore has set the bar high for the rest of us, not just with technology (apparently, the show was done

on a Macintosh), but with effectiveness. My prediction is that presentation-software developers will be paying close attention.

## Balance logic and emotion

When it comes to persuasive arguments, logic alone is seldom enough, just as emotion alone is not enough. Put the two together in the right balance and you become a force to be reckoned with. Most of the graphs in the presentation use the force of logic to drive a point home and help audiences, as Mr. Gore says, to “connect the dots.”

But interspersed in the logical argument are emotional appeals as well. We hear the story of Mr. Gore’s sixth grade teacher dismissing a student’s innocent (and quite rea-

sonable) question about continents once fitting together: “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.” Of course, audiences love to side with the underdog, especially when the innocent underdog is proved right.

In another example, we see an animation of a polar bear trying in vain to find enough floating ice to rest on, forced back to the waters to swim on or drown trying. These appeals connect with us at a gut level, and often stay with us longer.

Mr. Gore knows that to gain a fair hearing, he needs to achieve balance on many levels: between facts and folksiness, between serious and silly, and between humility and strength.

The former next president of the

United States knows well that to win acceptance, to push an issue to a tipping point and to move policy makers and citizens to committed action, you need to appeal to the head, the heart and the sense of humour—and in the right measure.

Nearly a quarter of a million Canadians saw the documentary in theatres last year. Many more will likely see it on DVD. If a seismic shift in public opinion in this country supporting tough measures on global warming is any indication of success, Mr. Gore can rest assured that his message has been communicated clearly and persuasively.

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