

anything from revolving company logos to detailed, full-colour diagrams that gradually build over time, many audiences still report that boredom thresholds are regularly breached.

Often referred to as death by PowerPoint, the tendency of some presenters to cram too much information into their visual aids can cause even the most enthusiastic recipient to consider sliding off their chair and under the table.

Queensland University of Technology senior communications lecturer Patsy McCarthy says PowerPoint software is a wonderful aid but can become a crutch for people who are not great at presenting.

"Sometimes, people who are fearful of speaking rely on overly text-heavy or complex slides to get their message across," she says. "They run the risk of the slides taking over, or of losing their audience because they are bombarded with too much information."

McCarthy says a common presentation sin is the use of large amounts of text in slides.

"Some people tend to use long sentences or even paragraphs of text to support their points," she says.

"The audience simply doesn't have enough time to read them, or they find themselves overwhelmed."

Rather than loading up slides with multiple bullet points and cramming in detailed descriptions, McCarthy says, it is far better to limit text to a few brief words.

"You should be using the slides to illustrate or emphasise your point, not to give all the information," she says.

During the past few years, an industry has emerged,

built around helping executives master the basics of delivering an interesting and effective business presentation.

Training courses and one-on-one classes offer those who want to improve their skills the opportunity to do so.

California venture capitalist and business author Guy Kawasaki has sat through more than his fair share of presentations.

As managing director of Garage Technology Ventures, he has endured hundreds of pitches from small startups keen to attract investment.

To encourage better use of PowerPoint as a business tool, Kawasaki promotes what he calls the "10-20-30" rule of presenting.

"It's quite simple, a PowerPoint presentation should have 10 slides, last no more than 20 minutes, and contain no font smaller than 30 point," he says.

Kawasaki's theory is that most people are incapable of comprehending more than 10 concepts in the course of a business meeting. If presenters use slides to cover more than 10 concepts, they will probably lose their audience, he says.

Once distilled into 10 slides, most presentations should be delivered in no longer than 20 minutes. Even if a longer period has been allocated, this allows time for a late start and plenty of discussion.

Kawasaki says many people fall into the trap of having text-heavy slides and then reading them to the audience.

This doesn't work because the audience can read much more quickly than anyone can speak, leading to

frustration and boredom as they wait for the presenter to catch up.

Mandating a minimum text size of 30 points ensures that even those at the back of a large meeting room can easily see each slide without having to squint.

Kawasaki points to Apple chief executive Steve Jobs as an example of someone who has mastered the art of minimalist slides.

At the recent MacWorld event in San Francisco, Jobs delivered his annual keynote speech using slides often comprising just a few words in a massive font.

Jobs also used video and audio clips (compiled and presented using Keynote, Apple's alternative to PowerPoint) in a presentation well received by the Apple faithful.

For executives prepared to take the time to uncover all the hidden capabilities in PowerPoint (or Keynote), the potential to put together an eye-catching and attention holding presentation is huge.

Seasoned presenters can move seamlessly between text slides and illustrations with embedded moving graphics to full-screen video clips. A series of templates and wizard devices within PowerPoint makes the creation of such slides straightforward.

Add the flexibility of a portable, high-quality video projector and perhaps the extra flourish of a laser pointer, and the modern executive has no excuse for delivering a boring presentation.

With a little forethought, avoidance of too much text, and some innovative visual elements, even the driest subjects can be delivered with flair.