

Gene Zelazny interview

With **Michael McLaughlin** posted at <http://managementconsultingnews.com/interview-gene-zelazny/>

Gene Zelazny: Make Your Presentations Compelling

Gene Zelazny is the Director of Visual Communications for McKinsey & Company and the author of [Say It with Charts](#) and [Say It with Presentations](#). Since joining McKinsey in 1961, Zelazny has provided creative advice and assistance to professionals in the design of visual presentations and written reports.

I asked Zelazny his opinions about today's presentations and how consultants can prepare winning ones.

McLaughlin: Do you think the quality of consulting presentations today is better, worse, or about the same as ten years ago?

Zelazny: As far as I can tell, the presentation material is every bit as great as it was years ago. Here we're speaking about the content of presentations, the ideas consultants share. And, yes, I'd say that they are every bit as insightful, as sophisticated, as they were or audiences wouldn't sit through them.

On the other hand, if you're referring to the form of presentations, then, yes, that's changed in the forty-five years I've been in the field. I recall doing visuals with free-hand lettering, ruling pens, T-squares, India ink, and Zip-A-Tone shadings. Then came the Xerox 914 machine and we switched from easel presentations to overheads transparencies.

After that, we transitioned to 35mm slides, and now we have PowerPoint, videos, multimedia, and video conferencing. We also have today's virtual presentations where the audience is no longer in the same room as the speaker.

None of these changes have affected the content of presentations, except that the technology has made it easy for anyone and everyone to create their own visuals.

If there is any change, it's that now we see more visuals, more slides, than we used to because we've made it so easy to produce them. The evolution of presentation technology has led to a subtle shift in emphasis from the speaker to the visuals.

I make a point of this in my presentations about presentations: unfortunately, today the visuals have become more important than the speaker.

I maintain that it's the presenter who's the presentation, not the visuals. The visuals should continue to be "visual aids" in the true sense of the word, "aids." As such, my single most appreciated recommendation is to have speakers learn to use the period button on their laptops

during “slide show.” That leaves a blank screen and forces the audience to concentrate on the speaker.

McLaughlin: What are the key changes, if any, you’ve noticed in client expectations for a presentation? And how have these changes affected how consultants create their presentations?

Zelazny: Here too, I haven’t seen major change, except perhaps that client expectations are for shorter presentations with more interaction and fewer visuals. Once more, I maintain that we shouldn’t think of “presenting at...” we should think of “communicating with...”

McLaughlin: What essential design principles should govern the contents of a chart?

Zelazny: KISS, KISS, KISS. I take pride in making this my primary responsibility—to simplify. It’s easy to leave things complicated. The challenge is to simplify. My mantra is that it takes the same amount of time to present five ideas on one slide as it does to present one idea on each of five slides.

My way allows the audience to focus on each point one at a time, *and* allows us to use larger type so the visuals are legible to all in the audience. It’s not the number of slides that count, but the number of ideas.

McLaughlin: It’s common to see animation in slide presentations. When is animation appropriate to include in a presentation, and when should it be avoided?

Zelazny: What Edward Tufte is to PowerPoint, I am to animation and clip art. You should use animation *only when it helps to make a point*. Otherwise, keep it to an absolute minimum. It’s OK if you want to reinforce that “profits are rising,” Show it with a corresponding wipe up, but that’s it.

I feel the same way about clip art. It has a tendency to speak below the level of audience intelligence, which suggests that they represent a waste of what audience members are paying for.

Be careful, though, because PowerPoint is not the enemy. After all, it’s very sophisticated software. What we need to be concerned with is the misuse, the abuse, of the technology.

McLaughlin: When you review a presentation, what is the most common piece of advice you provide to improve its quality?

Zelazny: I ask this question: what would you say and show if you had only two minutes of your audience’s time?

Don’t make this into a mystery story that recreates the problem-solving approach you went through to come up with your recommendations. Give me the conclusions and recommendations upfront, and spend the rest of the time showing me how you got them—if I need to hear it at all.

Stop thinking about yourself; put yourself in the seats of the audience members.

McLaughlin: What are the first few steps you take to get started on a presentation?

Zelazny: Start by answering these basic questions: What's your specific objective? What do you want the audience members *to do* as a result of the presentation?

Tell me: Who am I supposed to be as a member of the audience? How familiar am I with the material? How interested am I? What are three good reasons why I should agree with your recommendations? And, why should I say "No!" to your recommendations?

How big is the audience? How much time do you have for the presentation?

Once you have answers to the above questions, you will have a solid foundation on which to build your presentation.

McLaughlin: If you could give consultants one piece of advice to improve their presentation skills, what would it be?

Zelazny: Practice, practice, practice. That's the way to find the weak spots and make your presentation as compelling as possible.

"Happy 55th Anniversary, Zelazny!"

Remarks by Gene Zelazny on Oct 1 2015

OK. So where were YOU, October 1, 1961?

Chances are that you weren't even born, but for me, it was my very first day as a member of the Firm and here it is, today, 55 years later, still doing what I love and loving what I do.

Going back 55 years, I recall the interview I had with Larry Munson, then the Manager of Firm Administration reporting to Marvin Bower, Roger Power, the Manager of Administration of the New York Office, and Anthony Pascocello, the Report Production Supervisor. To this day I recall the interview when Larry asked what I thought about my experience that would qualify me for the position McKinsey was looking to fill ... make that: to create, since it never existed before.

Larry's request was the result of a report he had received from Clement Hayes Watson about the quality of McKinsey reports and presentations and charts. Clement had been in the Navy and was now a VP for the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency, AND had published a document about charts, and designed a portable drafting board with scales, and self-adhesive patterns (pre zipatones). His report led Larry to interviewing seven of us who had responded to the advertisement in the Sunday NY Times.

To this day, I recall what I said about who I was that I was that qualified me for the position: "I started the first map drawing course (that included charts) at my university by recruiting 6 students and calling upon a Geography Professor (a WWII officer) to lead the course. Then, I was in the Air Force for 3th years producing maps and charts and reports. I then went to work for the Hammond Map Company for two weeks before becoming a full time member of the Marketing Research Corporation of America draftingcharts free-hand with Speedball pens, India Ink, Dr. Martin's wash ... and leading a course in Art Appreciation for the evening classes of NYC Adult Education System."

BINGO, two weeks later, Larry asked me to join the Firm to fill the position that had never existed before with the following charter: "Gene, we do a lot of charts, and we do a lot of presentations, and we've never had anyone here to take responsibility for their quality. Please create your own position./I He then went on to say: "You're going to find that there are those who don't want to work with you. Don't worry about them. But for those who do, you can't ever do enough, and let the quality of your work speak for itself."

I also recall that a couple of years later, I had the privilege of taking a course sponsored by the American Management of America that led me to establish a magnificent mentor relationship with the leader of the program, Ken Haemer of AT&T. A few years later, I recall shaking hands with Bob Schmdt, a partner who was leaving the Firm to head a small publishing firm, when he asked me when was I going to write him a book. Six weeks later, one day a week, with the support of our Editor, Sarah Roche, and my talented visual

designer, Vera Deutsch, I created Say It with Charts, which today is in 12 languages and has sold 250,000 copies world wide. I introduced video workshops. I lead courses in the Firm's training programs of ITP, and BCR. I gave presentations to as many as 12 business schools on behalf of the Firm.