

The Medium Is the Message

Tapping the Power of Presentation Software

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The expression *the medium is the message* was coined by media expert Marshall McLuhan in his greatest work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). Although frequently quoted, McLuhan's dictum is commonly misunderstood.

Many assume that McLuhan was (1) speaking strictly of mass-media communication and (2) that "the message" referred to the information presented by these media. Both assumptions are wrong. Worse yet, casual readers may conclude from these two assumptions that McLuhan was arguing that the content presented is less important than the medium that presents it. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

According to McLuhan, a *medium* is "any extension of ourselves." For example, a tennis racquet is a medium for extending my arm to the ball, and language is a medium for extending my thoughts to others. A *message*, on the other hand, is more than simply information. Ultimately, it is a change in human attitude or behavior in response to a medium. If I watch a video about evangelism in Haiti and feel compassion for the lost and decide to support a missionary to a third world country, then the message of the video is my change in attitude toward, and decision to support, missions.

Thus, when McLuhan says, "The medium is the message," he means that the way to understand the nature of anything we create (a medium) and evaluate its effectiveness is by taking note of the changes it brings about (the message).

Bible School: Where the Medium Meets the Message

When you think about it, what you teach on Sunday morning is not a lesson; it's a group of students. The lesson is simply the medium by which you extend your thoughts and the truths of Scripture to them. The actual message

is the change in your students' attitudes and actions that result from that lesson.

To help you maximize the desired effects of your lesson, publishers have begun including media tools as well as printed curriculum. Quite often what the publisher provides is a PowerPoint® presentation to accompany the lesson. Standard Publishing provides such a presentation for every lesson in its Standard Lesson® curriculum (based on the Uniform Series). These PowerPoint presentations are provided on the *Presentation Tools* CD that is included in the quarterly *Adult Resources* packet. Slide presentations can be copied to a hard drive, CD, or USB flash drive, or they can be shown directly from the CD. Additionally, Standard Publishing packages the *Adult Resources* packet, including the *Presentation Tools* CD, in its *Adult Teacher's Convenience Kit*. You also can get the PowerPoint presentations via download at www.standardlesson.com.

Of course, you don't have to rely on the publisher's presentation tools. You can make your own as well. This gives a personal touch that will be appreciated by your class. For that reason, it's a good idea to consider customizing publisher-provided presentations rather than simply using them as-is. Rephrase the discussion questions; include photos of people from your own church or scenes from your own city.

Putting the Power into PowerPoint

PowerPoint is a very flexible presentation program that mimics a slide projector on your computer. (The reason we speak of "slides" in a PowerPoint presentation is that it mimics the old technology in which 35mm photographic "slides" were loaded into a projector so that the images on the slides were displayed on a screen or wall.) There was a time when a "slide show" usually meant a series of still pictures presented to a large crowd in a darkened auditorium. However, the use of PowerPoint in business and education has shown the versatility of the program in a variety of settings, from small group meetings to large congregations.

Unlike a slide projector, however, PowerPoint gives you the ability to change fonts and background color for each slide; to add pictures, clip art, animation, video clips, and music to slides; to rearrange slides; and much more at the click of a mouse.

In addition to your computer and the PowerPoint presentation, you will also need a means to display the presentation to your class. For a small group, a large screen monitor may be sufficient. The most flexible display solution, however, is a digital video projector and a projection screen. These are used

increasingly in church worship services. Projectors vary widely in display resolution, light output, projection technology, and, accordingly, cost. So do your homework to be sure you get a projector that will meet your needs without breaking your budget.

Tapping the Potential of PowerPoint

If any medium is an extension of your thoughts, then think of a PowerPoint presentation as an extension of what you already do as a teacher. That poster you would use in a 10 x 12 classroom is now visible in a room three times as large. When you discuss a person or an event, you can project an applicable picture while you talk. Scripture references and quotations can be displayed while they are read aloud. In other words, whatever you say can be reinforced by what your class sees. And with PowerPoint you have the additional capability of printing copies of your slide program as handouts so your students can take the lesson home for further study and reflection.

If you prefer to use a discussion approach, as I do in my adult Bible class, you will find that displaying the questions will help stimulate discussion. When I ask a question in class, I sometimes get so involved in the discussion that I forget the original question. Having it displayed on screen can help me avoid a “senior moment.” It can also be a useful tool to get the discussion back on track when a class member goes off on a tangent.

Avoiding Pitfalls

For all their power and pizzazz, slide shows often fizzle when it comes to the actual presentation. If you remember a few simple guidelines, however, you can avoid some common mistakes that may spoil your lessons.

First, keep the show brief. A common temptation is to pack too many slides into a single lesson. When that happens, the goal of the presentation can easily become to get through all the slides, rather than to drive home the life-changing message. Allow about one slide per minute of lesson time, and you won't feel rushed to finish.

Second, less is often more. One of the strengths of PowerPoint is also its greatest weakness. The program has a tempting array of tools that make it far too easy to have words and pictures fade in and out, bounce around the screen like rubber balls, and otherwise thoroughly distract the class. Unless your goal is to entertain, animation should be used to drive home an important point, not simply to amuse. Most of the slides on the *Adult Resources* CD have minimal animation or none at all so that they don't distract from the purpose of the lesson. Use the fireworks sparingly!

Third, keep it simple. Use few words and large letters or pictures on each slide so the class can easily recognize them in a large room. Too many words crammed on a slide make it difficult for the class to remember the content. Likewise, when you use bulleted points, limit the number of bullets to three or four per slide. Generally, sans serif fonts, such as Arial or Tahoma, are easier to read than serif, script, or decorative fonts.

Fourth, don't let the medium supersede the message. Marshall McLuhan argued that we should evaluate the effectiveness of any medium by its message, the change it brings about in its audience. Success is not measured by the “wow” factor of technology, but by its ability to help us achieve our goals. Even the most sophisticated slide show is still just a tool to reach your lesson objectives. As you see the lives of your students brought into conformity with the life of Jesus, then you will know that your teaching is having its desired effect.

PowerPoint Is Not the Only Option

While we have referenced PowerPoint repeatedly in this article, it's not the only such program available. Some would say it's not even the best option. But it does come with the Microsoft Office Suite that is preloaded on many new PCs, so it's extremely popular simply because it is available to so many people.

Apple makes a program called Keynote that some have found superior to PowerPoint—especially on the Macintosh platform. Google, the company behind the popular Internet search engine of the same name, also has a presentation software. Google Docs Presentation is gaining in popularity, especially with groups who design presentations collaboratively. It's also free, as are SlideRocket, 280Slides, and Prezi. Each of these has its adherents and detractors. You can research them and decide for yourself which you prefer.

Conclusion

Thanks to the influence of Christian writer G. K. Chesterton, Marshall McLuhan converted to the Christian faith in 1937. Thus, it is not surprising that after McLuhan's death in 1980 these words of Jesus were inscribed on his gravestone: “The Truth Shall Make You Free.” When you couple the truth of God's Word with the power of presentation tools, the result can set your teaching—and your students—free, indeed.