

# Da Vinci vs. PowerPoint

Edward Tufte, a design guru whom *The New York Times* called, “The Leonardo da Vinci of data,” has just published “The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint,” a scathing analysis of the world’s most popular presentation software. Incensed that Microsoft’s slideware is homogenizing presentations in elementary schools, Fortune 500 companies, and just about everywhere in between, Tufte offers trenchant observations on:

## The problem with bullets

“By leaving out the narrative between the points, the bullet outline ignores and conceals the causal assumptions and analytic structure of the reasoning.”

## Presentation templates

“With their strict generic formats, these designer stylesheets serve only to reinforce the limitations of PowerPoint, compromising the presenter, the content, and ultimately, the audience.”

## Why he prefers handouts

“High-resolution handouts allow viewers to contextualize, compare, narrate, and recast evidence. In contrast, data-thin, forgetful displays tend to make audiences ignorant and passive...”

And that’s just for starters. Tufte’s report, a bargain at \$7 (plus shipping) can be ordered at [www.edwardtufte.com](http://www.edwardtufte.com). The report also includes the Gettysburg PowerPoint Presentation (a brilliant satirical piece created by Peter Norvig; the final “Summary” slide appears above). That alone is worth the modest asking price. ■



*The stirring conclusion to Lincoln’s PowerPoint presentation at Gettysburg.*



# When Good Stories GO BAD

PRIOR to April 30th, you’d have had a hard time convincing me there is anything negative to be said about storytelling. Having done a fair amount of

research on the subject, I’ve come across numerous examples of public interest groups using stories to advance their programmatic work, market themselves more effectively to donors, and strengthen their organizational cultures. On this particular date, however, I learned that these best practices—impressive as they are—are *not* the whole story.

*A compelling story can help build your organization. It can also hold it back, as the Campus Outreach Opportunity League is still learning.*

The occasion was a conference on aging sponsored by the John A. Hartford Foundation. I had just completed an hour of unqualified gushing about the power of storytelling when John Beilenson,

the conference organizer, stepped forward to say, “Yes, but...” As a student at the University of North Carolina, Beilenson had written his master’s thesis on the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL), a nonprofit that was built largely on the strength of its founding story. Over time, though, the story’s effect on COOL began to change, and in that change resides a fascinating and cautionary tale for nonprofit storytellers everywhere.

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## ► Walking the Walk

Wayne Meisel didn't consider himself exceptional. Although he had launched a community service program at Harvard to match undergraduates like him with special needs children from nearby neighborhoods, Meisel believed that a spirit of volunteerism was flickering on college campuses across America. All it needed was an organization to fan it into flame, so in 1983 he went to Washington, DC, to seek support for an "NCAA of service."

Meisel's ambitious vision was reflected in a bill, but the proposed legislation was never introduced in Congress. Frustrated but reluctant to abandon his dream, Meisel decided to take a bold step on his own. (Several million, actually.) To call attention to the untapped potential for community service on college campuses—and to begin connecting these simmering hotbeds—Meisel decided to walk from Maine to Washington, DC. The 1500-mile trek would take him through nearly seventy colleges, more than enough to build the nucleus of a national organization. On January 6, 1984, he set out on his self-proclaimed "Walk for Action."

A group of friends promised to write letters to student presidents, campus newspaper editors, and others at each school, alerting them to Meisel's impending arrival; local and national media would also be contacted. Very few letters were written, however, and no press calls were made. On campus after campus, Meisel walked in unannounced and unknown. With no fixed notion of how to spend his time on site, he met with whoever was available and slept wherever he could, mostly in common rooms and on frat house floors.

Meisel completed his epic journey in four months, but his return to the nation's capitol was anything but triumphant. As a torrential rainstorm broke, he ended his walk by unceremoniously ducking into a bar in northeast Washington. Along the way, Meisel had made several interesting contacts, but to his mind the Walk for Action was a noble failure. The notion of a national organization continued to intrigue him, but the walk had not generated the excitement he had expected. What it did give him, however, was a story.

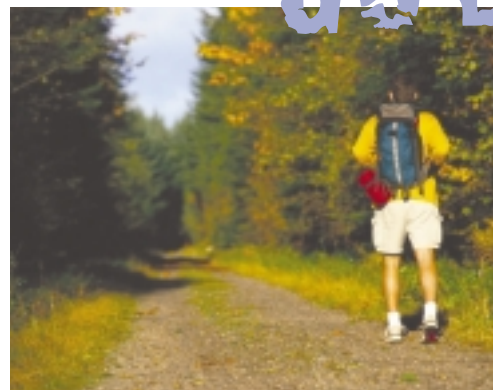
## Talking the Talk

Meisel returned to Yale University, one of the more receptive stops along the way, and met with Dick Magot, a program officer for the Hazen Foundation. Meisel told Magot the story of his walk, and Magot was sufficiently impressed to give him \$18,000 in seed funding. One year later, the Lyndhurst Foundation, even more wowed by the story, gave Meisel a \$50,000 award, and in the spring of 1985 the Campus Outreach Opportunity League, or COOL, was born.

Meisel recruited "road warriors" who, like him, would travel from campus to campus, lighting fires under volunteers and sharing lessons learned from other schools about starting community service programs. While Meisel recounted the story of his walk to raise money (rising quickly to the level of six-figure grants) the road warriors used the story to inspire students wherever they went. And in the spirit of their founder's original journey, they slept on floors and couches and worked spontaneously wherever they landed.

Without question, the founding story was instrumental in building COOL, but its inherent values began to undercut the organization's effectiveness and constrain its ability to adapt and grow. As Beilenson observed in his thesis, "Road warriors would drop deep into student life for a few days, promise to follow up on scores of matters, and simply lack the time to make good on those promises when their next site visit called." Non-stop travel also led to problems with stress, exhaustion and illness. Given the long hours expected from every employee—another

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deep organizational value connected to the founding story—annual salaries worked out to less than minimum wage. And the COOL lifestyle of hitching and crashing ignored the considerable risks posed to female road warriors.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world was changing. New organizations such as

Campus Compact were also coordinating community service programs at US colleges, and significant federal funds were now being devoted to volunteerism. COOL's irreverent, ad-lib style compared unfavorably to some of these more professional efforts. And as Beilenson observed, "COOL's reputation suffered from institutional modesty as well. Staff encouraged students to create their own organiza-

tions...rather than COOL chapters," so it was difficult to document the organization's impact.

By 1994, COOL's existence was in jeopardy. Staff was slashed from twenty-five to three, and the Minneapolis headquarters was

closed in favor of a much smaller office in Washington. In April of this year, COOL announced it was merging with Action Without Borders. Clearly, powerful external factors contributed to the organization's inability to survive on its own, but COOL was also victimized by a factor within its control—the effect of the founding story on its values and operating style.

For nonprofits that pay attention to the stories they tell, COOL's struggles raise a question worth considering. Are the values imbued in your core stories propelling your organization forward, or could they be holding it back? If the answer is the latter, it's time to develop and tell new stories—for internal as well as external audiences—or you may run the risk of traveling a long and winding road to your own not-so-happy ending. ■