Many businesses have adopted a presentation culture. By some estimates, Microsoft’s PowerPoint has been installed on roughly 1 billion computers and, on average, 350 presentations are created every second.

A compelling presentation that emotionally and visually engages its audience can be one of the most powerful and persuasive communications tools in the world. It can build trust, inspire connections, and motivate action.

However, some presentations are so dense that they should never be presented. Each one of us has endured a “presentation” that felt more like a group read-along. This isn’t just the result of poorly designed slides, but a poor use of the presentation medium as a whole. It’s clear that some information would be better off read by the audience than presented to them.
On some level, we know this. The phrase, “Send me your slides,” has become so ubiquitous that, in many organizations, presentations are passed around as reading material more often than they’re projected. Some people see this as a misuse of presentations, but it’s actually a smart use of what has traditionally been called “presentation software.” So smart, in fact, that we have given these documents disguised as slides their own medium—we call them slidedocs.

Slidedocs allow people to quickly understand and easily share our ideas by uniting visuals and words to illustrate one clear point per page. We’ve recently refined our best practices around this medium and released a free, online book called Slidedocs: Spread Ideas with Effective Visual Documents.

The following is a brief description of the basic ideas behind slidedocs, as well as some tips on when to use them.

Slidedocs are visual documents developed in presentation software that are intended to be read and referenced instead of projected and presented.
A Case for Visual Documents

Allowing people to consume visualized information on their own instead of presenting it to them is one of the smartest ways to communicate complicated ideas.

Our affinity for presentation software may very well come from our desire to express ideas in a visual form.

Clinical psychologist and author Haig Kouyoumdjian points out, “Our brain is mainly an image processor (much of our sensory cortex is devoted to vision), not a word processor. In fact, the part of the brain used to process words is quite small in comparison to the part that processes visual images.”

Dr. Lynell Burmark, Ph.D. Associate at the Thornburg Center for Professional Development and writer of several books and papers, had this to say about visual literacy: “Unless our words, concepts, ideas are hooked onto an image, they will go in one ear, sail through the brain, and go out the other ear. Words are processed by our short-term memory where we can only retain about seven bits of information (plus or minus two). This is why, by the way, we have seven-digit phone numbers. Images, on the other hand, go directly into long-term memory where they are indelibly etched.”

Our eagerness to combine visuals with explanatory text is a primary driver of our tendency to fire up presentation software any time we have something to communicate to a group of people. Presentation software is the most accessible software that lay people (meaning those of us who aren’t designers) have for pairing text with visuals.

Creating visual explanations in presentation software isn’t the problem, though. The problem arises when we try to project dense slides worthy of reading-on-your-own. But that’s what we should allow people to do with many of the slides we create—consume our messages on their own time and at their own pace.

To be clear, slidedocs don’t replace presentations. Well-designed presentations are still one of the most effective ways to move audiences. By using presentation software as an accessible replacement for professional page layout software, we can make our information more consumable, easier to understand, and more likely to spread throughout our organizations.
Presentation vs. Conversation

**Presentation**
- Need to communicate an already-formed idea
- Already have information about the audience’s wants and needs
- Need to inform, persuade, or entertain an audience
- Does not require real-time feedback from the audience
- Need a single event to move an audience toward your objective

**Conversation**
- Need to build upon, get consensus on, or more fully develop an idea
- Need more information about the group’s wants and needs
- Need to build a personal relationship with the audience
- Need the group’s input in order to move forward
- Need continuous engagement to accomplish your objective
In today’s time-strapped world, getting a group of people together in a room is a huge opportunity to do two things: influence them with a particularly compelling message and build consensus.

Unfortunately, the business world often chooses to deliver a presentation when their ideas would be best served by disseminating the information before the meeting and using the meeting time to discuss it.

Many prominent business leaders have already recognized this trend and have responded to it by calling for an end to presentations. Presentations aren’t to blame here. They’re one of the most powerful tools we have for moving an audience. The real culprit is giving a presentation when having a conversation would be more appropriate. So, how do we know which medium to use when we want to share information with a group? In order to make that decision, we need to ask ourselves a different question, “What do we want to get out of the time we have as a group?”

Do we need to simultaneously inform and persuade our audiences or would it be better to connect with them personally? Do we already have all the information we need about the audience’s wants and needs or do we require more information about them? Will a single event move our audience toward our goals or do we need continuous engagement to accomplish our objectives? Generally, if our ideas would be best served by more interaction and engagement from our audiences, we should probably have a conversation.

The best conversations happen when everyone is up to date on the information that’s going to be discussed. A great way to do that is by pairing visuals with concise copy for people to review before the meeting. Slidedocs do just that.
Uses for Slidedocs

As a Pre-Read
The most effective conversations happen when everybody is fully informed. By distributing a slidedoc before a meeting, we can reserve a majority of the meeting for building consensus. This is particularly helpful when the topic is highly complex or technical.

As an Emissary
People in positions of influence will sometimes say, “Send me your slides” before they’ll book a meeting with you. In any situation where we can’t be there to present our slides, slidedocs can help us fill in the details about our ideas without us being there.

As Reference Material
Information should enhance a conversation, not distract from it. Combining words and visuals around a single idea makes it easier for people to refer to the information in the heat of a discussion.

As Follow-Up Material to a Presentation
Presentations often answer the question, “Why should I embrace your idea?” After a formal presentation, people need answers to the question, “How do I embrace your idea?” Follow up with details so they can help you push forward. This is why slidedocs make great modular sales collateral.

Use Slidedocs Today
Duarte didn’t create the slidedoc medium; it emerged from the way people currently use presentation software. But slidedocs also create a gigantic opportunity for communicating with our audiences in a more efficient and spreadable way. Read Slidedocs: Spread ideas with Effective Visual Documents to learn more about slidedocs and how to create them. This free book comes with two templates. Duarte can also help you expand beyond those templates and customize your slidedoc to your specific brand and use case. Either way, you’ll quickly see how using slidedocs can help you effectively spread ideas beyond your immediate reach.

Key Insights

Use the Right Medium
Dense information should be read by the audience, not presented to them

Visualize Information
Make information more consumable, easier to understand, and easier to spread throughout an organization.

Augment Your Presentations
As a pre-read or follow-up to a presentation, slidedocs can shorten the time to understanding and consensus.
Create clear and powerful content every time. Contact us to learn more.

Call us. +1 650.625.8200