

Pecha Kucha Nights and Beer: a Sober Guide to Better Presentations

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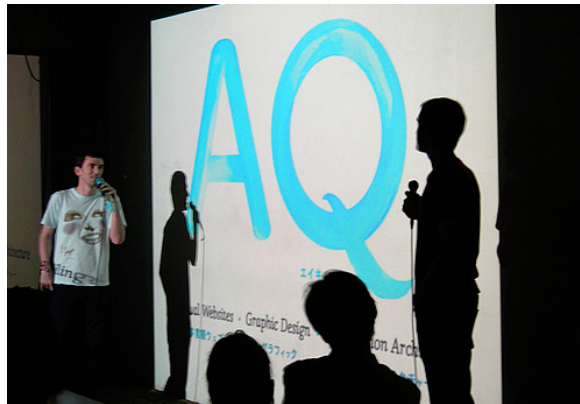
From its home in Tokyo, Pecha Kucha Night has spread to more than 70 cities worldwide, where every month, people continue to present their creations and ideas in front of hundreds of peers, within the same minimal format with which Pecha Kucha started:

- 20 slides, 20 seconds each. That's 6 minutes and 40 seconds per presentation.
- Still images or video
- Any subject

The beauty of Pecha Kucha Night lies in the tension between the chaos of a full-blown party and the politeness of an art school crit, with the snappy pace holding it all together. Like any open-mic night, this is an intense fight for attention. In the red corner, the presenter "selling" his work to the audience, in the blue corner, the bar selling beer to the same audience. The better your presentation, the less beer the bar sells, and vice-versa!

The thing is that I don't drink beer, so after attending fifteen Pecha Kucha Nights in Tokyo over the past 2 years, and presenting three times ([Tokyo Art Beat](#), [Divvy/Dual#1](#) and [AQ](#) last month), I would like to share some tips on what makes a show-stopping presentation and memorable evening, even without booze.

(Note: like any form of self-expression, rules, even mine, are there for breaking. I have witnessed some great presentations by raucous drunks and near-mute video artists.)



Preparation

Choose a theme

Portfolio pieces are standard, but by no means required. Some of the most crowd-pleasing presentations I've seen have been about what the presenter does outside the studio. Photos of clouds, deconstructions of human love, honeymoon pictures; if you can tell it in a compelling way, you can tell it at Pecha Kucha.

Tell a story

Even a strict portfolio presentation benefits from an over-arching narrative to pull the work together. Don't just describe what's on the screen, reveal your thought process, your mistakes and your epiphanies. The audience may just begin to care about you and your work.

Take your time

Crafting a presentation takes time. Dumping 20 images into Keynote won't cut it. You must decide on a theme, gather material, work out your script, and adjust rhythm and pace, and all this takes time. Count on at least 6 hours of preparation spread over a few days.

Rehearsal

Completing the slides doesn't mean you are ready to present them. Even twenty seconds can feel endless for you and the audience if you don't know the material. Rehearse until you feel a rhythm taking over and the initial stiffness melt away.

- Recruit a guinea pig audience. A friend is good, a stranger is even better. (note: your pet guinea pig is not acceptable)
- Stand up.
- Pay attention to your body language and the tone of your voice. Do you look slouchy, stiff, bored?
- Try to imagine yourself in the audience. Would you enjoy the presentation? If not, trim, tweak, project, whatever it takes to get you excited about your own work.

Showtime

The First Word

Without revealing too much, set a few expectations. Introduce yourself, where you come from, and what you will present. Quickly.

Talking

- Pechakucha means "chit-chat" in Japanese, so that means talk. Every presentation requires a different amount of narration, but don't stay silent: if people wanted to stare at a screen, they'd go to a movie. They're here for you.
- Speak up! If people were put to sleep by the previous presentation, it will wake them up. Besides, when was the last time you heard "too loud! speak softer" at a presentation?
- Speak into the mic. If you move (which you should), the mic should rotate with your head. If you turn your head to show something on the screen and the mic doesn't turn with you, people will not hear you anymore. Simple.
- Breathe. The audience needs pauses to digest your genius, so snappy bursts are better than an endless stream. Use silence as your punctuation.
- Articulate, because it's rude to talk with your mouth full.
- Time your comments so you can follow the slides in a controlled manner. If you start feeling like you are being dragged down the street by a big dog chasing a squirrel, let go of the leash, take a breath and start with the next slide.

Language

If your presentation is bilingual, that leaves only 10 seconds per language per slide, enough for a simple sentence really. The slide may flip before you finish both languages. In this case, continue with the second language over the new slide and finish up with the first language.

Even better, maintain this | A•B | B•A | rhythm throughout. This reduces language switches by half, which is easier for both you and your audience to keep up with.

Body Language

Audience. Talk to the audience, not your shoes, not the projector, not the wall, not your notes, not the front row. Smile, make eye contact, talk with everyone.

Endurance

20 seconds is short, but 6m 40s is pretty long. Aim to keep the same intensity for 20 slides or people will be gazing into the bottom of their glass by half-time.

The Last Word (some ideas)

- Give thanks.

- Offer people a next step: Where can they see more? How can they find you? Where will you be after the show?
- If you have to beg for work, be elegant or at least funny in doing so.
- Alternatively you can dive into the crowd.

Post-Apocalypse

Don't go home... yet. Scan the room to see how you've done. Someone may be trying to catch your gaze, someone may have an opportunity for you, someone may want to buy you a beer etc. You've talked to the audience, give them a chance to respond.

A Pecha Kucha Night is a rare chance to feel the creative pulse of a city in just a few hours. But more than a slideshow, it thrives on new human connections created during each event. Pecha Kucha can start discussions and relationships; so don't be shy, show your work, make an impact, and let's keep the chit-chat alive.