Swiss party makes dislike of PowerPoint a political issue

Switzerland's Anti-PowerPoint Party wants a referendum on banning the use of presentation software

Peter Sayer (IDG News Service)
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Many people dislike PowerPoint, Microsoft's ubiquitous application for creating business presentations, but few would take a political stand over it. However, that's exactly what Switzerland's Anti-PowerPoint Party (APPP) seeks to do -- along with making a bit of money.

According to the APPP, the use of presentation software costs the Swiss economy 2.1 billion Swiss francs (US$2.5 billion) annually, while across the whole of Europe, presentation software causes an economic loss of €110 billion (US$160 billion). APPP bases its calculations on unverified assumptions about the number of employees attending presentations each week, and supposes that 85 percent of those employees see no purpose in the presentations.

Switzerland's democratic system is famously participative, with citizens able to call for a nationwide referendum on almost any subject if they can obtain the signatures of 100,000 voters. The APPP is seeking support for a national referendum to ban the use of PowerPoint and other presentation software in presentations throughout Switzerland. It also plans to present candidates for national elections in October.

Image: http://www.anti-powerpoint-party.com

The party's ambitions don't stop there: Its website is published in three of Switzerland's official languages, German, French and Italian, with parts of it also available in Croatian, English, Russian, Slovak and Spanish.

"We want the world to take note of this cause. And the whole world can talk and can be involved if it is opened for the people from all over the world. We are open for all the other world languages, we just need the volunteers to translate the website to those languages," said party founder and president Matthias Poehm, a public speaking trainer from Bonstetten, just outside Zurich. "We have members, volunteers who were so happy to participate and they have translated the entire website to Croatian. The same is with the website in Slovakian."

Poehm is not the first to express a distaste for PowerPoint. In 2003, Edward Tufte, a specialist in the visual representation of numerical data, published an essay "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint" accusing the software of hurting our ability to think. And last year, The New York Times warned: "We Have Met the Enemy and He Is PowerPoint," an essay on the U.S. military's use of incomprehensible slide presentations to convey its strategy.

International backing for the APPP's goals may be there, but the party is still some way off the 100,000 Swiss supporters it needs to force a referendum: Since its creation on May 5, APPP has signed up 245 members -- not a huge number for a party that's free to join. One thing party members do have to pay for is the full party manifesto, set out in the book "The PowerPoint Fallacy" authored by Poehm. Party members pay €17, a reduction of €10 on the regular price.

So is this just a promotional gimmick? "Yes, it is a tool to promote my book. But it doesn't end there," Poehm said via e-mail.

"This issue will be raised in the awareness of the all people who still don't know that there is an alternative to PowerPoint and with this alternative you, provably, achieve three to five times more effect and excitement with the audience than with the PowerPoint," he said. "We want ... that pupils in schools are not punished by a mark reduction if they don't use PowerPoint," he said.

The alternative, for Poehm, is the humble flipchart, which he values for the creativity it encourages, and the appeal of seeing the presentation created live.

Poehm's goal with the APPP is not really to prohibit the use of presentation software, he said. "We just want the people to become aware of this issue and the alternative to it. The solutions are available, but nobody is using them."

Microsoft did not respond to a request for comment on Monday about the APPP's position and plans.