Let's go multimedia shopping with Crabby

Crabby Office Lady

I like to shop (I am a woman, after all; I don't just play one on the Web). I also like music and sound effects. This week I got to indulge in both of these pleasures in order to bring you a column about adding multimedia to your presentations.

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Like most women, I do my fair share of shopping. But since time is at a premium, I don't want to have to go into each and every store and try each and every product to see if it works for me or my family. I'd rather have somebody else do that for me. Hence, the usefulness of product reviewers. And since the advent of this Internet thing that Al Gore invented (just kidding, Al! I love ya! I don't drive an SUV! I wash out my used plastic bags!), there are many reviewers out there.

For today, however, I am your product reviewer. I'll look at three different companies that make products to add multimedia to your PowerPoint presentations. You know, lift them up a bit, separate the bullet points, make you look cool, hip, and suave (which is, of course, reason enough to try).

authorPOINT: You ought to be in movies

Everyone wants to make a movie. That in itself is not such a bad thing. The fact that anyone *can*, well, that is a horse of a different color. (To see just how colorful that horse is, take a little trip to YouTube, then come back and tell me that it's a good idea for just anyone to make — and publish — a movie.)

You, however, have a magnificent PowerPoint presentation that you must not keep all to yourself, one that you would like to wrap up in a nice little package. Maybe you're heading to a trade show, creating an e-learning course, or perhaps you simply plan to drive your colleagues wild with envy.

The Office Marketplace has partnered with a company called Sikhya Solutions, whose authorPOINT software enables you to create multimedia presentations in Adobe Macromedia Flash, Windows Media, and Real Player formats. Not only can you turn your presentations into movies, you can be the star of the movie by turning the presentation of your presentation into a movie. Now you don't even have to BE there to show your stuff. Just let that digital facsimile of you do the work.

And this company has done a really good job of keeping it simple: When you install authorPOINT, it's added to PowerPoint as a plug-in — it shows up as a menu and a toolbar. You just open your presentation and click the **Capture** button. Add audio and video at the same time or separately. And then *voilà*: a multimedia presentation magically appears that contains your slides, your exciting audio/video, navigation tools, and even speaker notes, if you want.

I don't know about you, but my PowerPoint presentations that are a little complicated — those that have a lot of transitions, animations, and even video clips — don't always run as smoothly as I'd like. Maybe I'm on a strange computer that doesn't have the latest version of PowerPoint. Maybe the machine I'm using is so slow and ancient that it resembles my grandparents' first color TV. Maybe my music file is not embedded into the presentation; maybe I linked to it at a location on my own computer ... and I'm not presenting on my own computer (hence the dead silence when music should play). Maybe Bill was out sick and I was invited to step in give the keynote address at the year's biggest tradeshow but got that deer-in-the-headlights feeling and was unable to go on, thereby embarrassing my company and putting my job at risk.

Turning both my presentation and the image of me presenting my presentation into a movie will save me from cringing in shame. What's more, I'll be all set to post it on YouTube. Because I'm sure everyone is just *dying* to see the Crabby Office Lady giving a PowerPoint presentation about the fine points of good e-mail etiquette ...

- [authorPOINT](#)
- Cost: $299 (education discount for teachers)

PresentationSounds: Wake up your audience

A slide show with bullets, text, and a chart or two is just not good enough anymore. I've witnessed an entire roomful of people, sensing that a PowerPoint presentation is coming, turn into Pavlov's dogs, but yawning mournfully instead of salivating.

A good sound effect or piece of music can grab your audience's attention and drive home an important point. Better yet, if all the sounds in your presentation share a theme, everything just feels a little more tied together. But as much as you'd like to add some spicy sounds to your presentation, they can be hard to find and when you do, they're copyright protected (so you better not go stealing them).

I found a company, an Office Marketplace partner, that offers compilation CDs with just about any sound or music type that you can think of. PresentationSounds creates and produces royalty-free music and sound effects that you can add to your presentations. You pick what you want from such themes as "Animals & Wildlife" (I now know how to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat), "Vehicles & Equipment" (not sure when I'd use the wood saw sound but I'd like to create a presentation around it), and "Energy Soup" (track 9 reminded me of how my daughter's kindergarten class acted last Halloween after ingesting 5 pounds of candy corn).

I spent WAY too much time on the PresentationSounds Web site. They let you test all the sounds — like Chinese food samples at the mall — before you order up the CD, so you're not surprised if you get something that sounds more like a howling baby than a cat. And oh yes: You can download the CD or you can have it shipped to you. If you get into this company as much as I did, you can sign up for a newsletter that gives you special discounts and even access to free sound effects.

I like this PresentationSounds — I like the fact that they're in-house, that they work with composers and musicians who add to the library every week.

NOTE The company Web site says that you can add these sounds to Outlook and Outlook Express e-mail messages. I have to add that sound effects in e-mails are not on my short list of items such as raindrops on roses and warm woolen mittens. I do realize that adding such things can be fun and may possibly be useful — although now that I think about it, that's something I've yet to experience. Give me one good reason to include music or a sound effect in an e-mail.

- [PresentationSounds](#)
- Cost: $49.95 per CD

PlaysForCertain (that's a relief)

Sometimes, I know, your music won't play while you're presenting because you didn't set up the presentation correctly, so everyone has to suffer due to your incompetence. And when it comes to video, I also know that sometimes what you see when you're working on the presentation isn't exactly what comes out when you're in the hot seat, trying to present.

PlaysForCertain (PFC) offers three different products to help you live with yourself:

- PFCExpress is free, and, in my opinion, is one very powerful little tool. I've mentioned a few times over the years the problem with trying to embed large-sized videos, images, or audio into PowerPoint. You can't do it. PowerPoint creates a link to them, opening a "path" to the place where you're keeping that large file. If you take your presentation with you on a DVD or other removable storage device, the presentation won't automatically copy that large media file and reroute the path to find the copy. Same if you e-mail the thing; your recipient will be mighty irritated with you when those big moments ... aren't.

PFCExpress examines the entire presentation, looks for all embedded or linked files, removes the existing paths, and creates "pathless links" to copies of those files. It places the copies in the same folder as the presentation. Then everything is wrapped up nice and secure into a standard ZIP file. Pretty ingenious, right? Had this product existed when I was creating a full-on walk-down-memory-lane presentation for my sister's wedding, complete with audio, video, and music, I probably would have showed up at the wedding feeling a lot less stressed about being a bridesmaid ... again.

- PFCMedia solves compatibility issues. (You know, when it works on your own computer but not on the computer you're actually presenting on?) PFCMedia processes video and audio files into a format that will play on virtually any Windows PC (sorry, Mac users). And even better, really big file types like .mpeg and .avi files will be compressed (which is a good thing, especially when you're traveling with a presentation).
- PFCPro does everything PFCMedia does and also provides you with video and audio editing capabilities — right from PowerPoint. In other words, this is a pretty powerful tool, youngsters.

One thing I like about this Office Marketplace company is that you can download a free, fully functioning trial version of the software that will not only work for two weeks, but continue to work after that trial period. And perhaps more important, the trial doesn't require you to register, give your e-mail address, or provide any other personal information (shoe size, street on which you grew up, favorite hot dog topping). That I like. If I want to put peanut butter on my kielbasa, that is my personal business.

- PFCMedia for PowerPoint
- Cost: PFCExpress: FREE; PFCMedia: $49.95; PFCPro: $129.95

Aren't they lovely? Five very attractive products from three top-notch companies. You now have no excuse for those snoozer presentations, and if I hear about any of you putting your audience to sleep or messing up your presentations, well, consider yourself warned.

"I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by." — Douglas Adams

About the author

Annik Stahl, the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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