

# Effective Visual Presentations

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Well designed visual presentations can greatly enhance the effectiveness of even the best teacher. Visual presentations should not be used, however, for novelty sake alone. They should support the message, not deliver it. Such presentations have in common

be simplified. A good rule of thumb, whether using overheads, charts, or electronic units, is to use no more than six lines per slide nor six words per line. The six lines per unit keeps the content well within the seven "chunks" which cognitive psychology tells us is the

plify. Simplify. Focus both headlines and elements on the essentials of the presentation with one major idea at a time. Graphics should be used wisely and for the purpose for which they are intended. They should illustrate, not decorate.

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three essential components. First, they are used purposefully. Second, they are well designed. Third, they are delivered confidently.

## Components of an effective presentation

### APPROPRIATE USE

First, effective visual presentations are those which are purposefully used. They are used to (a) clarify or emphasize a point under discussion, (b) sharpen audience interest, (c) focus the discussion very specifically, and (d) record major points of a complex discussion. Using visual supports for either of these four reasons will enhance the professional image of the presenter. Used for any other purpose, visual presentations simply detract or distract from the message.

### GOOD DESIGN

**Language.** Once the appropriate use has been determined, effective presentations rely heavily on basic principles of good design. The language of the presentation is the first thing the audience notices. That language should

upper limit for mature memory. Limiting the lines and words per line has the added advantage of producing less "cluttered" space thus enabling the audience to read the slide quickly without losing their focus on the speaker. Nothing is quite as distracting as a slide which is so wordy that it becomes a script from which both audience and presenter read. Other aspects of space use are also important.

**Space.** Headline the main idea. The arrangement of space should make the headline the part of the slide to which the audience attends first. Graphics should be chosen to support, not supplant the main idea. Arrange all graphics to face the accompanying text, drawing the audience's eye back toward the verbal message. The production and use of graphs and charts has separate constraints.

**Graphics.** The content and number of slides should also be minimized to keep the audience focused on the speaker. Headlines and elements should be labeled both precisely and concisely. Simplify. Sim-

Charts and graphs have specific uses. Choose each carefully coordinating purpose with the appropriate use. Bar charts emphasize comparative relationships between two sets of facts while flow charts clarify complex relationships. Line graphs are best used to show time/frequency distributions such as trends. Pie charts should be used to convey simpler relationships and illustrate part-to-whole relationships.

Photos and cartoons should be used sparingly as visual hooks on which the audience can hang the verbal message. A photo of the presenter on a title page (I have actually seen this done) is in poor taste. It simply invited off task mental considerations on the photogeneity of the speaker.

On the other hand, in a presentation on litigation and legislation, a color cartoon of a judge was used very effectively to help the audience keep the two factors separated. Dressed in traditional English robes and holding a gavel, the figure in the cartoon became an icon for separating practices prescribed in litigation from those prescribed in legislation. In a very com-

plex discussion, this colorful icon helped the audience maintain the differentiation between the two sources.

**Color.** The use of color is equally important to the use of space. Poor color contrasts make reading the text difficult, diffusing the audience's attention to the speaker's remarks. Color has a psychology of its own and, while it is doubtful that the wrong color can totally alienate the audience, it certainly can affect viscerally audience response.

Green, for example, usually indicates growth or movement. Blue is calming and institutional. Red, across most cultures, denotes power, danger, and energy. Purple commands our attention, perhaps because of its traditional association with royalty. Yellow is the less liked color of all and should be used minimally. Needless to say, all these generalizations have exceptions but they can increase the confidence of the beginning designer/presenter.

### **CONFIDENT DELIVERY**

Confidence in delivery is a must. That confidence is built not on oratory charisma but on sound preparation. Think your message through and organize it well. The best designed presentation is worthless if the content is not well organized. The most overlooked part of organization is practice.

Time the presentation. Analyze it. Get a colleague or family member to critique your rehearsal. Anything a naive audience cannot understand needs further refinement. Pay special heed to any comments on speaker-audience interaction.

The most common mistake in that area is lack of eye contact followed closely by voice use. Making eye contact does not mean that you stare your audience into submission. Rather, each member of the audience has multiple experiences during the presentation when they think you are talking directly to them. If you are easily visually distracted, maintaining eye contact may require some practice.

Being able to understand someone speak does not mean just hearing the sounds. Articulation and projection

also play key roles. The latter is the least understood. Projection is not just speaking louder; it is speaking directly to the person furthest from you. Just as ventriloquists project their voices, so presenters should, too. Make that distant person the target for your voice and "throw" to them.

Always check the logistics of the room in which you are presenting even if, as at a conference, it means sitting through someone else's presentation. It is time well spent. Check the lighting. Can the audience see you? Can you see them? Check the number of working electrical outlets. Sit in the rear of the room to check global acoustics. If sitting through someone else's presentation, be sensitive to the area of the room from which the most requests for the speaker to repeat what has been said. This is especially important if you heard clearly what was said. It may be an indication of an acoustical "dead space." Check the dimensions of the room. Are the people in the back row so far removed that they are observers rather than participants? If so, think about ways to involve them. Walking up and down the aisle will work if you have a lapel microphone. Organizing multiple small group activities may offer them a human contact. Questions can be used to draw them into the presentation, too. For example, asking questions of the back row or being quick to respond to questions from that area may draw these participants closer mentally.

Be careful not to compete with your visual aids. If you are using electronic aids, turn them off when you are talking. See the Six Sage Suggestions for the exceptions. Before using film or video, watch it several times. If the audio portion does not fit your audience or purpose, turn the sound off and create an audio uniquely for your audience and your purpose.

Lastly, take spare parts even if you have been given an iron clad guarantee that all your needs will be met. A good basic emergency kit can include extension cords (bright colored ones easily spotted when packing to leave), three-prong adapters, replacement cables, bulbs, at least one small lamp with a

strong bulb to augment note taking light, a bright flashlight for blackouts, chalk, masking tape, dry erase markers and pens. Never trust others to provide these even if you have a written promise. Prepare for the worst including having a clear backup plan in case the inevitable happens. Until you have had a visual presentation interrupted by a blackout, you will never quite appreciate the phrase "in case the inevitable happens."

Effective presentations have three major components in common: purposeful use, good design, and confident delivery. Add to this some sage advice from the experience of others. This advice is offered so you will not make their mistakes. Go, and discover new ones which you can then share. •

### **Six Sage Suggestions for Using Visual Presentations**

1. When in doubt, don't.
2. Coordinate all auditory and visual expressions.
3. Remove a visual immediately after discussing it unless it presents your overview, your agenda, your key point.
4. When using electronic equipment, turn it on only when you want the audience to focus on it.
5. Face your audience and maintain eye contact.
6. Deliver your message confidently.