

Presenting With Visuals

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 10/17/2007

When creating a presentation, the most important thing to remember is that all written or visual material serves only one purpose—to emphasize what the presenter is saying. Many people think that it's necessary to produce an extensive visual presentation containing all the information being discussed. This is not the case, and in fact can be counterproductive. The idea is to arouse your audience's enthusiasm, not bore them to death. If you want to provide detailed information, it's best to provide handouts at the end of the presentation, to be mulled over at leisure. Otherwise, the watchwords are simplicity and clarity.

This article provides suggestions to help you create a presentation with impact, while saving you considerable time and effort.

What You Need to Know

What's the best way to emphasize my business's brand in my presentation?

Whether you're creating slides, visuals, or any other kind of presentation material, it's important to portray the same brand as your Web site, stationery, sales and marketing materials, signage, or other promotional literature. You want to make sure that your audience receives the same key messages from your presentation as they would from any other contact with your business. If your message is not consistent, it could have a negative impact on how your audience perceives your image in general, so it's worth spending the time to get it right.

Some of the factors you'll want to think about when designing the overall look of your presentation include:

- your logo and letterhead design;
- a specific typeface;
- a particular color or palette of colors;
- text that will be repeated on the slides, such as your Web site address, contact details or strapline.

As a small entrepreneur, how can I create my own recognizable look for presentations?

A professional "identity" for your business is essential whatever the size of your company. Although you're not representing a large company or organization, you still need to create a consistent,

professional “brand” for your presentation. A good place to start is by choosing or designing a particular template as the basis for each slide or overhead.

The “Slide Master” page in PowerPoint will help you to design your overall look right at the start. You can set up color schemes as well as fonts and sizes, and then add in any logo you want. These will then appear on every slide, and you won’t have to format each one individually.

What to Do

Design Effective Text Slides

Bear five key rules in mind when you’re putting together text slides—they’ll help you create a clean, clear, and effective presentation.

Make your text BIG

Make sure that the font on the slides is big enough to be read even by those sitting in the back row. As a rough rule of thumb: for text in bullet points use a font that’s at least 24 pt. in size. For any added detail, use text of at least 18 pt.

Keep it short and simple

Don’t put too many words on a slide: you want your audience’s attention to be fixed on you and your message, not on wading through reams of text. Aim to include no more than six lines of text per slide and no more than seven words per line of text. Use color to attract attention to important points—for example, by highlighting keywords in a different shade

Make it readable

Choose a simple, sans serif font (like Arial) and write in upper and lower case—text that’s all in capitals is difficult to read. Choosing the right colors will also enhance the readability of your slides. Most of PowerPoint’s default font sizes and color schemes work well. However, if you decide to experiment with your own, be sure that you don’t make your text more difficult to read in the process.

As a rule of thumb, for *printed slides*, dark colors on a light background tend to be the easiest to read; for *projected slides*, light colors on a dark background work best.

Use a logical sequence

In order to make your message as clear as possible, the stages of your presentation and the slides you use need to follow a logical sequence.

“Bookend” the presentation with an identical pair of images, using these to summarize your main points. At the beginning, this gives the audience some idea of what to expect and also helps you remember what you want to say. At the end, it serves to recap your arguments and also gives the

audience the sense that you are following through by completing the “story” you promised them at the beginning. Then create important secondary slides that remind the audience at intervals where you are in the presentation, and how each part fits into the whole. This is a good way to keep people’s attention—particularly if the presentation is a long one.

Remember that your audience must be able to get the point of a slide within *five seconds* of seeing it. When you put up a new slide, let your audience absorb the information before you start speaking. Once you have their attention, expand upon what the slide has to say.

Decide what to do about visuals

If a picture is worth a thousand words, it certainly makes sense to reinforce your verbal message with a strong visual component. Visual aids are an important part of most presentations, whether they be illustrations, graphics, graphs, diagrams, or anything else you can think of.

Be aware, though, that while a good visual gives a huge boost to a presentation, a poor one is worse than no visual at all. At best, it distracts the audience; at worst, it baffles them. So if you’re going to use visuals, it’s essential that you use them well.

Your first question when planning your presentation should be, “Do I need visuals?” Here are three benchmarks to help you decide whether a visual is necessary or not:

- *Does it back up my main point?* Any visual that doesn’t reinforce what you’re saying will simply distract the audience.
- *Does it clarify something that’s hard to express in words?* Using a picture is sometimes the only effective way to explain something complicated, for example how a machine works, or how different statistics compare with one another.
- *Does it make a big impact?* If there is one important message you want your audience to take away from your presentation, can it be summed up in a single image?

Once you’ve decided that what you have to say would be enhanced by visuals, the next question to ask yourself is, “What visuals do I need?”

Make the Most of Visuals

Emphasize the pictorial

When designing a visual, think in terms of, “What does this *show?*” (rather than “What does this *say?*”). Use as little text as possible, or none at all, if you can get away with it. If you can’t avoid some wording (such as titles on charts or labels on graphs), check that they’re still in a readable font size (18 pt. minimum); that they’re horizontal, for ease of reading; and even if they have to be vertical (along the bottom axis of a graph, for instance), that the letters are horizontal.

Warm up the audience

A well chosen visual early in a presentation can help to break the ice, relax the audience and calm your nerves at the same time. Presenters often begin with something humorous, which is fine, but clearly you need to take care not to offend anyone or make a reference to something that is too obscure. If you're not a natural joke teller, you may want to avoid this tactic. Cartoons can be helpful in this context, but again, make sure they're not too near the knuckle or inappropriate.

Use titles as messages

Don't waste an opportunity to reinforce your message. Instead of using a general label, such as "Market share in 2007," as your header, try to come up with a very specific label that tells people what you want them to look at. If instead you wrote "Market share in 2007 increases by 10%," your audience would know instantly why they're being shown this slide. This way you are making the title of a visual the same as its message.

Choose the most effective kind of chart for you

Charts are perfect for getting information across to an audience fast. Here's a quick guide to the most common types and what type of data they work with best:

- To show change over time (for example share prices), use *line charts*. The slope of the line instantly tells viewers the direction of the trend.
- For direct comparisons over time (for example how manufacturing costs have risen faster than wholesale prices over three years), use *vertical bar charts*. The height of the bars shows the comparative costs; and because people naturally associate left-to-right with the movement of time, vertical bars work better than horizontal ones when there's a time element involved.
- To show direct comparisons at one time (for example the mortgage company with the lowest interest rate in March), use a *horizontal bar chart*. The length of the bar gives its ranking; the label on it identifies the item.
- If you want to compare parts of a whole (for example the percentage of government budget spent on health care), try a *pie chart*. This is the simplest way to show proportions, as long as there aren't too many slices (five maximum is ideal).
- To compare information by geographic location (for example sales by region), a *map* is best. Distinct regions are identified by using different colors, shadings, or symbols.

Learn to construct an image

Using stages to communicate a complicated concept is not as difficult as you might think. It can be very effective to design your image as a series of digestible parts and then introduce them one at a time. PowerPoint is the ideal medium for this, but you can do it with transparencies and flipcharts too.

For example, imagine your company has just merged with another and you need to explain a revised, complex organizational chart. You could start with the senior management team, and then include division heads who report to them before moving on to group managers, the departmental heads, and so on. In terms of a visual, you could depict this:

- *sequentially*—using separate diagrams for each part, which you show one at a time
- with *build-ups*—adding each new layer individually, one on top of the next
- with *reveals*—starting with the whole diagram, but with most of it covered up to begin with, and then exposing sections gradually.

Remember that the most important thing is to include the information your audience will be most interested in, rather than every single detail.

Use Visuals to Enhance Your Message

Once you have decided on your visuals, the next step is to figure out how to make the best use of them during your presentation. You want them to reinforce what you're saying, not detract from it.

Unless a visual is completely obvious or self-explanatory, you'll need to discuss it—or at least refer to it. Also, make sure that everyone can see clearly from anywhere in the room. If you think someone's view might be obstructed, get them to move before you start, so as not to interrupt the program. Once a visual has made its point, take it down—otherwise it might become a distraction.

Visuals don't always have to be a design on a slide or overhead: sometimes a prop that you can pass around to the audience works best. For example, if you're introducing your company's leading edge new invention, the best way to make sure people will remember it is to let them handle it.

What to Avoid

You Do Too Much

"Keep it simple" is the implicit message throughout all the guidelines above, but it's worth reiterating here because so many people forget it. The irony is that sometimes this is due to time pressures: it can take longer to think through a message and boil it down to essentials than to throw in all the material at your disposal. It's also easy to fall for glamorous software and graphics packages that tempt you to create fancy effects and animations. Don't do it! You'll divert your audience away from your main message.

You Don't Check Carefully for Errors

This is a common mistake, and one that can be completely avoided. Let's say your presentation looks gorgeous, your arguments are cogent, your visuals are punchy and effective...BUT you misspell the chief executive's name, or the first word on the title page. Or perhaps some of your visuals are upside

down. Yes, that's your credibility flying out of the window, and you'll have to work very hard to build it back up!

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

Awesome PowerPoint Backgrounds: www.awesomebackgrounds.com

KU Medical Center, on-line tutorial series: www.kumc.edu

Copyright © 2007 CNET Networks, Inc. All Rights Reserved.