

A Presentation Skills Company

On the Big Screen

Principles for Creating Effective Presentations

Your chances for an effective presentation dramatically increase by establishing a *central theme*, by paying close attention to *layout and design* elements, and by incorporating *color*. It's a strategy MediaNet calls *Purpose, Movement, Color*:

- Holding the audience's attention on every visual (*purpose*)
- Controlling the way the audience reads each image (*eye movement*)
- Affecting the audience's emotional response (*color*)

PURPOSE

Your first step in creating a presentation is to identify a single *purpose* for the event. Without a *central theme*, your story will undoubtedly drift. Ask yourself "Why am I doing this presentation?" The *why* behind the story is the *objective*.

The objective must always be stated *actively*, as in "to do something." *To sell, to teach, and to motivate* are all examples of active objectives. By stating your objective actively, you can shape your story toward a *call to action*. When your presentation is over, what do you want the audience to think, feel, and/or behave? Determine the specific response that you want and choose information that supports the desired outcome. If the objective is *to persuade the decision-makers to buy*, then make sure that all the information you present moves your audience toward signing an order.

When the purpose or objective is clearly stated, the amount of information you need to gather is dramatically reduced. The number of visuals required to support a *single* objective is less than the number required to satisfy *multiple* themes.

The key to enforcing your objective is to *design your last visual first*. This does not mean you will present the last visual at the beginning of the presentation; instead, it means you should start creating your presentation by designing your conclusion, first. At the end of the event, what words and graphics will be on the screen and what will you say and do?

Once you've carefully crafted the last moments of the presentation, think of this conclusion as a *dartboard* and each of the visuals as a *dart*. Each visual must be *aimed at* the dartboard in order to be effective. Quite simply, each visual should support the objective or it shouldn't be part of the presentation.

How Much is Enough?

Most presenters tend to *increase* the amount of information on each visual in the hopes of clarifying major points. Nothing could be worse. A truly effective presentation should never try to answer every question *visually*. Such an attempt will lead to complex images cluttered with excess information.

To help you edit the amount of information on each visual, start by *folding your 8.5 X 11 page in half*. This will force you to think in a smaller workspace and keep you from cluttering the image with too much information. Many software programs have automated features to enhance the planning process. An *outliner* feature allows you to quickly arrange your thoughts hierarchically, while simultaneously assembling your visuals in another mode. A *slide sorter* feature displays thumbnail sketches of all the visuals so you can rearrange, add and delete images easily.

Can Everybody See?

The ability for your audience to absorb information in a short period of time rests on their ability to see the screen. There are several ways to test if your images are going to be readable when projected.

For *35mm slides*, hold the slide at arm's length; if you can read it at this distance, the audience will be able to read the information when it is projected. For *transparencies*, place the overhead on the floor and stand over it to test projected readability. Use the "*8 to 1 Rule*" when considering the layout and design of electronic visuals. Eight times the height of the image is the maximum viewing distance for the audience to read small-sized text (*small-sized text* is about 24 points). This means that if you know your projected image will be 4 feet high, you would prefer audience members to sit no greater than 32 feet from the screen.

MOVEMENT

The more you can hold the audience's attention during your presentation, the more information they will retain when it's over. Think about it. Each time you bring up a visual, where do the eyes travel first? Where do people look next? How long will they give a visual their attention?

Graphic elements assist the eye and allow the visual to be understood more quickly and easily. This control of eye movement also allows more time for the audience to pay attention to the *content* within the visual.

Geometric Shapes Guide the Eye

When processing the information on a visual, geometric shapes are easiest and text is most difficult. Use shapes to attract the audience's attention to the part of the visual that you want them to process first and keep typefaces simple so that the words can be scanned as quickly as possible.

Perhaps the simplest graphic element to use to control eye movement is the *arrow*. There are numerous times where using arrows as *part of the visual* can greatly enhance the understanding of the information as well as eliminate the need for laser pointers. The bouncing red dot of a laser pointer can become annoying to the audience, but worse yet, these devices force presenters to look at the screen and keep them from making eye contact with the audience.

Type comes in two basic styles, *serif* and *sans serif*. In reading text, the eye moves along the *contours* of each letter and becomes more distracted if multiple contours or text shapes appear within the same visual. Serif typefaces tend to *slow the eye* down, while sans serif typefaces *speed the eye* because there are less contours of the letters.

We recommend using a serif typeface for the *heading* of a visual and a sans serif typeface for the *body*. This allows the eye to slow down while reading the heading which has fewer words of greater importance, and speed up when reading the body of the chart where there tends to be more text.

You can also control eye movement through *capitalization*. By using a combination of upper case and lower case text, your visuals will be easier to scan and you can use capitalization to place emphasis at the exact spot you wish to treat with more importance.

Guiding the Eye with Headlines

Perhaps the most obvious way to direct the eye to the important area of a visual is to *write emphatic headlines*.

Imagine the difference in a visual with a bar chart and a descriptive headline such as "Fourth Quarter Sales" and the same chart with the emphatic headline, "Fourth Quarter Sales Post Record Highs!" The latter directs the eye to concentrate on the data for the fourth quarter as opposed to the rest of the chart.

Emphatic headlines not only direct eye movement, but they offer insight into the presenter's objective or feeling about the particular reference.

Establishing Depth

Most business visuals are constructed using a two-dimensional approach that directs the eye up and down or left to right. Consider using artwork in the background and overlapping pictures and words to create the dimension of depth.

For example, rather than creating a chart with bullets listing the percentage of time employees spend on different tasks and illustrating it with clip art of a stopwatch in one corner, expand the stopwatch to fill the background. Then, use the percentage data to build a pie chart. Because both the watch and the chart are similar in shape (round), you can superimpose the pie chart on top the stopwatch graphic. Finish by adding the legends and other text to the foreground.

COLOR

The most significant element regarding electronic presentations is the ability to use color easily and cost-effectively. Color has an affect on the *emotions* of the audience; therefore correct color choices can have a tremendous impact on the success of the presentation. Color is so powerful and has become so readily available, that presentations delivered in black and white are *less effective* than ever.

This does not mean that black & white overhead presentations are useless. You just need to be aware of the distraction caused by the amount of white light and consider ways to reduce the problem. Fewer words on each visual would let the audience scan the image faster and concentrate more on the presenter than on the screen. You can also reduce the overall number of black & white visuals to be presented. To compensate for using fewer visuals, more detailed handouts could be given for later reference.

Using Clip Art

Incorporating clip art increases the attention span and reduces the time it takes the audience to interpret your data. The content of your visual will provide a hint as to the appropriate clip art to use. Match the artwork as closely as possible to the meaning of the visual to help frame the reference for the audience. For example a chart explaining “Office Supply Orders” could be illustrated with artwork of pencils, paper clips, or staplers. This would make more sense than incorporating a picture of a conveyor, truck, or factory.

If you intend to use photography or *natural images* as part of a visual, remember that photos usually contain hundreds of thousands of colors. If you attempt to overlay text or other elements on top of a photo with light and dark spots, the information may be obscured by the varying contrast within the photo. You may have to darken the contrast of the photo in order for the text to be more readable.

Color Perceptions

While numerous studies have shown the benefits of using color in presentations, the human reaction to color is one of the more compelling reasons to harness its power. Societies agree on *associations* for colors based on cultural references (as in *green* being associated with *money* in the American culture). However, there's more to color than mere association or attachment. All humans live under the white light of the sun, therefore our natural, or physical reactions to color are similar. For example, where red may have the cultural attachment of *danger* or *stop*, the underlying emotional affect implies *desire*, *passion*, or *competition*.

You can tap physiological associations by incorporating color theory into your presentation design. The color of the foreground elements does not significantly affect the general *feeling* the audience gets from your visuals, but the large block of color in the background can make an affect.

However, when incorporating color into presentations, be aware that certain color combinations may pose a problem for some people. For example, those with a *red/green deficiency* tend to see purple more as blue, or may mistake brown for green. If a line chart has two or more lines using varying shades of green or red, some viewers may be unable to distinguish the lines and become confused and lose interest.

The order in which you arrange the colors of *related* foreground elements should follow the *darker-to-lighter* viewing pattern. Nature is arranged from *darker-to-lighter* (the earth is darker than the trees, which are darker than the sky, which is darker than the clouds) making this color arrangement easy to scan. When creating data-driven charts with a series of related items distinguished by color, arrange them in a *darker-to-lighter* pattern from bottom-to-top or left-to-right.

Emotions and Background Color

Large areas of color, specifically background colors, can help create an emotional response in the audience. Here are some tips on choosing colors to support the objective.

Red backgrounds are helpful in presentations that seek to heighten the *passion* of the audience, such as sales or marketing events. We recommend darker shades of red, such as maroon or burgundy, rather than bright red.

Blue backgrounds indicate a *conservative* approach, while enhancing credibility. When in doubt, choose dark blue or *indigo* backgrounds combined with yellow and white text. This combination is the easiest to read from any distance.

Black backgrounds are great for financial presentations mainly because black represents *what has already happened* or *what is in the past* that cannot be changed.

Green stimulates *interaction* from the audience. Backgrounds using a deep green or even a teal (blue/green) will help elicit opinions and are useful for training and education presentations.

For best readability, background colors must be *dark enough* to allow for the contrast of light text in the foreground. Be careful with color choices and combinations or your presentation may end up looking like a circus. The use of too many foreground colors and poorly selected backgrounds will become a distraction for the eye and result in an ineffective presentation.

CHOOSE SIMPLICITY

The goal is to keep your presentation as *simple* and *consistent* as possible, without running the risk of distracting the audience with multiple objectives, overwhelming information, too many typestyles, confusing graphics, and changing background colors. We have found that when an audience is *more aware* of colors, typefaces, layout, and clip art, they become *less aware* of the content or point of the story.

When you begin to create electronic presentations it's easy to become concerned with the technical aspects of the presentation and forget about the objective you originally intended to achieve. Keep asking yourself a number of questions about the presentation you are preparing.

- Can you say something vocally instead of displaying the words visually?
- Can you eliminate certain visuals by providing details in the handouts?
- Can you use reduce clutter and still explain details while keeping attention?

Remember: hold the audience's attention on every visual (*purpose*), control the way the audience reads each image (*eye movement*), and affect the audience's emotional response (*color*). If you can incorporate these three principles into your presentation design, you'll be on your way to becoming a more effective presenter.

NOTE: The information in this handout supports the MediaNet lecture "On the Big Screen."

Additional support for this and other topics can be found in several publications including:

--- *Special Edition Using Microsoft PowerPoint 2007* by Patrice-Ann Rutledge and Tom Mucciolo (Copyright 2006, QUE, Pearson Publishing, MediaNet, Inc.).

--- *Purpose, Movement, Color* by Tom and Rich Mucciolo (Copyright 1994, 1999, MediaNet, Inc.)

--- *Media-Design Skills* CD-ROM (Copyright 2004, MediaNet, Inc.) an interactive tutorial.

--- *Teaching Effectiveness* research study, published April, 2008, available on our website.

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