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Effectively communicating with visual aids made simple.

By Gates Matthew Stoner ©2001

The use of presentation software, such as Microsoft's PowerPoint™, can enhance a presentation, but a common fallacy is you *must* use lots of clip art, fancy transitions, and multimedia movies to have a good presentation. However, often the most effective presentation is a simple one. Visual aids created using presentation software can (1) enhance speaker credibility, (2) focus attention, (3) increase interest, and (4) aid retention. These four benefits are very attractive, however, a presentation overloaded with too many elaborate features can serve as powerful distractions and decrease the effectiveness of a presentation. Additionally, poorly prepared visual aids which are not readable, relevant to the presentation, and overly complex not only reduce effectiveness but can have a negative impact on a speaker's credibility and the audience's interest in the presentation. The decisions you make in preparing visual aids for a presentation should always consider how to best achieve these four benefits while avoiding the temptation to overwhelm your audience by abusing the special features available in presentation software packages.

Before you start

Several important questions should be asked when preparing a presentation and considering using a software package. These questions will guide whether or not you choose to use a presentation software package and how best to create the visual aids.

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First, what is your **purpose** for using visual aids? Slides created on the computer might be overkill for a short 4-minute presentation, while they can effectively retain the interest of your audience for a longer and complex presentation. You should not choose to have slides just because everyone “else is doing it.” The effort might not be worth the trouble and possible distractions can take away from the effectiveness of your message. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Gen. Hugh Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon, issued an order to skip the bells and whistles in PowerPoint™ and just get to the point. If your audience is too absorb in reading and processing the message of your slides, they are not listening to your message. Hence, you have lost your audience and achieved the opposite effect you indeed for your presentation. Can you achieve your purpose without the visual aids created by presentation software? If so, the effort and expense might not be worth the trouble when your main purpose is to clearly and credibly inform or persuade your audience. Audience considerations are crucial to the decisions you will make when preparing your presentation.

How long is your presentation

Two common mistakes when delivering a presentation using visual aids generated by a software package are to (1) create a slide for every point and (2) rapidly deliver more than one slide per minute. Slides should serve as **signposts** for your audience and highlight your main points. Poor slides have too much information and often repeat every word spoken by the presenter. The slides should guide your audience through your presentation and reinforce the main points, thus focusing attention and aiding the retention of your message. To avoid these common mistakes, you should pace the

presentation to have no more than one slide per minute. A 5-minute presentation should have no more than 5-6 slides or overheads. This rule will help you to avoid the temptation to have a slide for every point and to read word-for-word from the slides by instead summarizing the main points for both yourself and the audience. Bullet points can aid you to deliver the presentation in a more **extemporaneous delivery style**. Too many slides serve as a distraction as your audience is reading instead of listening.

What will you be presenting?

Slides and visual aids are really useful for presenting numbers and relationships among numbers with charts. Budgets, cash flow incomes, and survey data can be difficult to convey to an audience. Effective charts and images can provide pictorial representations of abstract concepts to show trends and relationships which otherwise might not be evident if delivered orally. For example in a marketing presentation, a chart can be used to show expected sales of a new car as well as a prototype drawing of what the car will look like. This example highlights two important roles of charts and images in a presentation, (1) convey what words cannot, and (2) reinforce abstract concepts while aiding retention.

The role of the audience will also influence how you will choose the present material in your presentation. Figures 1 and 2 represent diagrams of the same concept, an intranet office computer network. An engineering audience would quickly recognize the first diagram and understand the abstract concepts represented, while a business audience would not. The second figure is designed for a more general audience in a way attempts to make the abstract concept understandable. The use of charts and other images in your presentation must recognize the knowledge level of your audience.

Figure 1.

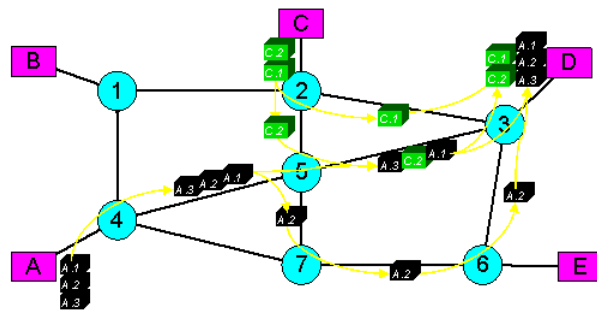
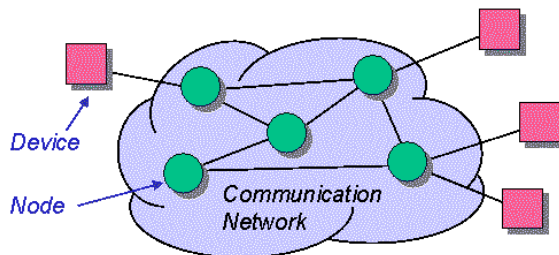


Figure 2.

A generic communication network:



Other names for "device": station, **host**, terminal
 Other names for "node": switch, **router**, gateway

Preparing the Visual Aid

- n Tailor your visual to the audience and the occasion.
- n Prepare visuals that will be easily seen by your audience.
- n Visuals should support, not overwhelm what is being said.

Good Rules to Follow

A rule can serve as effective guide, but also can be a constraint for a presentation. Several “rules” are suggested below to aid in creating an effective presentation, but like all rules there are situations in which it is best to ignore the rule. A guiding principal in preparing visuals aids for a presentation is do they serve your **purpose**. Thus, violations to these are completely appropriate if they serve your purpose.

Choosing Colors

Color choice is a very important decision when preparing a presentation since it will impact your audience’s ability to read the slides and too much color can be very distracting. The limited use of color can *focus attention* to key terms and concepts. No more than 2-3 colors should be used on the same slide and a consistent use of the same color scheme will avoid confusing the audience. Your use of color should serve your purpose, thus radically changing your color scheme occasionally can be quite effective, while the over use of various colors can be distracting. The option to change colors must be evaluated in terms of the audience as well as environmental factors, such as where you are presenting.

Color contrast is light colors on a dark background or vice-versa dark colors on a light colored background. High color contrast aids your audience in reading overheads or electronically displayed slides. While low color contrast (i.e. light colored text on a light background) can be very difficult to read and even more difficult depending on the lighting of the room. The best approach is to always use high contrast colors, such as yellow or white text on a dark blue background or dark black text on a white background (i.e. for overheads). Many presentation software packages provide very pretty templates

to use in your presentations, often these default formats have low color contrast and are not effective.

The equipment you will be using for your presentation as well as where you present will also influence your choice of color in a presentation. The most optimal environment is a dark room with an expensive computer LCD project, often though, you will present in less than optimal environments with outside light sources and a poor projection system, perhaps even a standard overhead projector. These two environmental factors can also influence how color is projected to a screen, for example you might use red to highlight a word and it will display as orange. As such, you will need to prepare your presentation for the environment in which you will be presenting. If you are unaware of the environment, your presentation should follow the general rules suggested of high color contrast and limited use of color since you will not know how they will project.

Margins

Margins are common to business reports and memos, but often in presentation margins are ignored as speakers attempt to place too much content on a slide or overhead. This results in the slides becoming unreadable since the font size is reduced in an attempt to fit all the content. Additionally a practical concern is text in the lower or side margins might display off the screen and be unreadable to the audience. One-inch margins for a slide or overhead can help avoid this problem. Television production students learn a similar rule to create “TV safe” shots, such that all the important action appears in the center of the screen. Various sized television sets cut off the side margins differently, thus to be “TV safe” is to never shot any action near the sides of the frame. This also

establishes the center of the screen as the focal point for your audience and aids the speaker to guide their attention.

A slide does not need to have every word spoken to the audience and instead should summarize 3 to 4 main points. Remember, your bullet points are to serve as signposts for the audience to let them know where you are going in the presentation. A general rule is a slide should have no more than 25-35 words and “less can be more.” Again, you also do not want your audience reading all the time and too much information on the screen will result in that outcome. Other times your audience might not be able to grasp a complex or technical definition, in which case a slide with the definition can aid in comprehension and retention. The key is to find a balance between reinforcing your main message without overwhelming your audience with too much information. A successful combination can maximize credibility, interest and retention of your message.

Readability

A business communication instructor once remarked, “It is amazing how often individuals make overheads or slides that are unreadable, which invalidates their purpose.” This often occurs when the slide is an afterthought to the presentation and created just for the purpose of having a visual aid for a better grade. An overhead of a speech outline in a 12-point font will be unreadable to the audience and serve no real purpose. In the real world, an individual could lose their job for such a poorly produced presentation. A general rule is nothing should be projected onto a screen that is unreadable from the back of the room.

Several formatting tips can increase the readability of slides for the audience and these tips can also aid retention and focus attention to the main points of the presentation.

Additionally, professionally appearing slides can also increase your credibility with the audience and acceptance of your message. First, **bolding** and at least 20-point font the text eases the strain on the eyes to read from a screen, especially at further distances. Second, a slide should have no more than three or four sub points. Larger font sizes are preferred to ease readability and reduce too much information being on the screen.

Font selection and text formatting can produce different results depending on the method of projection. *Italics* texts on overheads produced by laser printers displays well when projected, but the same is not true for computer-projected presentations. Standard fonts, such as Times and Arial, are best for any method of projection and are recommended. In the case of computer delivery, non-standard fonts might not always display as expected and should be avoided.

Final thoughts

In order to maximize the benefits of using visual aids and slides, you will want to avoid some common mistakes. First, do not obstruct audience member's view of your slides by walking in from of them or the projector such that the audience cannot see them. Repeatedly obstructing the view of the audience will result in them concentrating on your movement instead of your message. Second, speak to the audience, not the screen (it can't hear you anyway!). Turning your back to the audience is never a good idea. Also, you should display visuals only when referring to them to prevent distraction. Each transition to a new overhead or slide will get the attention of the audience and cause them to momentarily devote more attention to the screen rather than your words. Your transitions should not consume your activity and be smooth in order to not make a distraction. Overheads often stick to one another and make transitions difficult. Computer

delivered presentations avoid such difficulties but can result in a speaker too absorbed by the technology rather than the audience and their message.

Effectively using presentation software to enhance speaker credibility, focus attention, increase interest, and aid retention, does not require a very complex and fancy presentation. Often these four benefits are achieved with a simple presentation, which is not overloaded with too many elaborate features. Poorly prepared visual aids which are not readable, relevant to the presentation, and overly complex reduce effectiveness and have a negative impact on a speakers' credibility and the audience's interest in the presentation. The decisions you make in preparing visual aids for a presentation should always consider how to best achieve these four benefits while avoiding the temptation to overwhelm your audience by abusing the special features available in presentation software packages.