



POLISHING YOUR PRESENTATION



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want to
know

3M Meeting Network

Did you know that visual aids have been found to improve learning by up to 400 percent? Did you realize that we can process visuals 60,000 times faster than text? Would you guess that the average person only remembers about a fifth of what they hear?

These findings from behavioral research confirm our daily experience: we rely on all our senses to bring ideas and concepts to life. Effective presenters today realize that preparing to take the podium means more than having your index cards in order. As photos, illustrations, graphs and text make their way into presenters' toolboxes, audiences are coming to expect impressive visual aids. However, high-quality images aren't the whole story. Visuals should support you, not replace you. Use them instead to shed light on your key messages and capture the audience's interest.

The array of presentation tools available is enormous — from overhead projectors to 35mm slides to computers with LCD panels and multimedia projectors. Whichever tool you select, remember that a little forethought can thwart a speaker's nightmare. Check your room beforehand to ensure that everyone will be able to easily see your display. Also check that there are enough outlets to power all your equipment. You may also want to keep an additional projection lamp or other backup equipment handy in case of a last minute problem.

Presentation software is making the creation of eye-catching designs faster and easier. However, modern software is making it harder to resist the temptation to use every bell and whistle. You should keep in mind the critical creed of presentation design — keep it simple. Nothing ruins a visual faster than clutter and the most common mistake presenters make with visuals is trying to pack too much into them. Design each visual to make one major point or theme jumps out immediately.

Most visuals just have text on them. Experts recommend you limit visuals to about 40 words. Use large, bold letters that can easily be seen from the back of the room. Sans serif fonts such as Helvetica or Futura are more readable than serif faces such as Times New Roman. Limit yourself to one or two fonts but feel free to use italics, boldfaces and colors to embellish points. And remember, consistency counts.

Your language should be punchy and concise with “you” appeal. Try “Opening Your Home Business” instead of “How to Open A Home Business.”

Condense paragraphs into sentences, sentences into phrases and phrases into key words. Use bullets to highlight key ideas. Avoid using a period at the end of your bullets except at the end of quoted statements.

While your text visuals act as a roadmap to guide you and the audience through the presentation, conceptual visuals use a picture or design to quickly and colorfully convey an idea. The advent of clip art has made conceptual visuals commonplace. But a word of warning — conceptual visuals should be used judiciously. Don't throw in clip art just to have clip art.

Also be sure to have someone else look at the graphic. What is obvious to you may not be obvious to everyone.

Charts and graphs are useful to show relationships among variables at a glance. Whether you use a line, bar, pie, organizational, flow or table chart, remember to focus on the message, not the numbers. A descriptive title such as “Sales Reverse Downward Trend” will be much more effective than “Sales 1997.” Using action words such as “grow,” “decline” and “trend” effectively show change over time.

Once you have compiled your presentation, check it and double-check it. Little undermines your credibility faster than typos, misspellings and factual errors. When your presentation is airtight, it's time to start practicing. Pace yourself. The average time a slide should be on screen is 40 to 90 seconds. And keep in mind, the average attention time span of an audience is 18 minutes.

And one final way to ensure your messages leave the meeting room — have hard copies of your presentation available as handouts.

Make the meeting.

Related Reading

Ten Tips for Designing Effective Presentation Visuals, Presentations, September, 1997.

A Quiz for the First-Time Presenter, Presentations, December, 1996.

Successful Presentations for Dummies, Malcom Kushner, Norman Augustine, IDG Books, 1996.

Show and Tell, Donna Meilach, WINDOWS Magazine, March 1996.

Helpful Hints

Keep your visuals simple. Avoid clutter. Use large, bold fonts.

Check you presentation room beforehand.

Use clip art judiciously.

Proofread and edit with care.

Have hard copies of your visuals available as handouts.

Use a professional presentation coach to help polish your visuals and your skills.

If making an electronic presentation, have a backup of your visuals printed on transparency film to insure against unexpected equipment problems.

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