

Making Powerpoint Presentations a Visual AID Not a Visual DISTRACTION

It's not surprising Powerpoint slideshows have become the norm for visuals in most business presentations. They are quick to produce, easy to update and effective to inject visual interest into the presentation. However, they can also spell disaster even for experienced presenters. The key to success is to make certain your slide show is a visual aid and not a visual distraction. For the best results, avoid these common pitfalls of Powerpoint presentations.

1. Too Many Slide Transitions And Sound Effects.

They become the focus of attention, which in turn distracts the audience. Worse yet, when a presentation containing several effects and transitions runs on a computer much slower than the one it was created on, the result is a sluggish, almost comical playback. Such gimmicks rarely enhance the message you're trying to communicate. Lines of text appearing each time you click the mouse can be distracting. Focus on your message, not the technology.

2. Beware of Standard Clipart.

First, make certain that you need graphics to enhance your message. If you do, use good-quality graphics sparingly.

3. Presentation Templates are Not Always a Good Idea.

Templates force you to fit your original ideas into someone else's pre-packaged mold. The templates often contain distracting backgrounds and poor color combinations. Create your own layout and consider using your logo in a corner of the screen.

4. Text-Heavy Slides = Yawn.

Projected slides are a good medium for depicting an idea graphically or providing an overview. They are a poor medium for detail and reading. Avoid paragraphs, quotations and even complete sentences. Limit your slides to five lines of text and use words and phrases to make your points. The audience will be able to digest and retain key points more easily. Don't use your slides as speaker's notes or to simply project an outline of your presentation

5. Consider Perspective.

Presenters often scan a table or graphic directly from their existing print corporate material and include it in their slide show presentations. The results are almost always sub-optimal. Print visuals are usually meant to be seen from 8-12 inches rather than viewed from several feet. Typically, they are too small, too detailed and too textual for an effective visual presentation. The same is true for font size; 12 point font is adequate when the text is in front of you. In a slideshow, aim for a minimum of 40 point font. Remember the audience and move the circle from "me" to "we." Make certain all elements of any particular slide are large enough to be easily seen. Size really does matter.

6. Reading.

An oral presentation should focus on interactive speaking and listening, not reading by the speaker or the audience. The demands of spoken and written language differ significantly. Spoken language is shorter, less formal and more direct. Reading text ruins a presentation.

A related point has to do with handouts for the audience. One of your goals as a presenter is to capture and hold the audience's attention. If you distribute materials before your presentation, your audience will be reading the handouts rather than listening to you. Often, parts of an effective presentation depend on creating suspense to engage the audience. If the audience can read everything you're going to say, that element is lost.

7. Have a Plan B.

You never know when an equipment malfunction or incompatible interfaces will force you to give your presentation on another computer. Be prepared by having a back-up of your presentation on a CD-ROM. Better yet is a compact-flash memory card with an adapter for the PCMCIA slot in your notebook. With it, you can still make last-minute changes. It's also a good idea to prepare a few color transparencies of your key slides. In the worst-case scenario, none of the technology works and you have no visuals to present. You should still be able to give an excellent presentation if you focus on the message. Always familiarize yourself with the presentation, practice it and be ready to engage the audience regardless of the technology that is available. It's almost a lost art.