Add Visual I.M.P.A.C.T.

for successful presentations

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The old adage that "a single picture is worth 1,000 words" was never more appropriate than applied to today's environment for business presentations. Television, multimedia computing, and the World Wide Web have conditioned audiences to expect visual messages. Computer slide shows used to be a cutting-edge luxury, but now they are the expectation in business and professional presentations. But do visuals really help the message? Yes.

Visuals reinforce a message by complementing the verbal and vocal channels of communication. Visual reinforcement helps the audience remember important information. Even if they forget specific numbers, they can often recall the overall trends and proportions the visuals represented.

Visuals clarify complex information and relationships. They make abstract information more accessible to a lay audience by providing information the verbal channel can't.

Visuals appeal to diverse audiences. They facilitate cross-cultural communication because they rely on mathematical concepts. These translate more easily across cultures because they are less language dependent than verbal or vocal channels of communication.

Visuals persuade by enhancing the presenter's credibility and eliciting a positive response from the audience.

So you're sold on the idea that visuals can increase your chances of success. But how do you use them effectively? The key lies in understanding some of the differences among visuals and how to design them for maximum impact.

Choose your visual based on the type of information you want to present.

Bar/Column Graphs are useful for providing a comparison between two or more data groups Bar graphs are arranged horizontally; column graphs are arranged vertically. Limit the number of data groups so the graph is easy to read. Ideally, each data group should be a different color.

Diagrams contain information such as equations, illustrations, text or some combination of these elements.

Flow Charts illustrate processes or sequences. There must be some chronological significance to the events to use a flow chart. If too many actions or elements are included, the chart becomes too complex.

Infographs use symbols that are representative of the data groups to illustrate the amount. For example, if you were talking about the shipping revenues of a particular port, you could use a picture of a ship to represent a specific monetary unit. Infographs can reinforce otherwise static information with visual representation. They are particularly useful with lay audiences because they provide another means of reinforcement.

Line Graphs are best used to emphasize trends or changes over time. A good example is a historical look at stock prices. Again, limit the data groups and avoid using markers.

Maps are representations of relationships. Be certain to use the appropriate type of map (physical, political, etc.) to best make your point.

Organizational Charts are used to show hierarchical relationships such as an organization's chain of command, product categories or even a family tree.

Photographs are best when projected through a presentation program. Remember that the computer screen displays only 72 dpi. Therefore, a large file will look no better than a smaller one. A photo that was originally 22MB in tiff format, takes up as little as 72K as a jpeg file.. Exercise caution so your presentations aren't bloated with large image files.

Pie Graphs show the relationship of parts to a whole. Therefore, they will contain only one data group. They are best used to illustrate proportions or percentages. For added effect you can "explode" a piece of the pie, that is, make one piece stand out from the others. Limit the chart to seven pieces or categories. You can make an ordinary graph more impressive by using a 3-D graph.

Screen Captures reproduce the image from a computer screen. They are useful for training, especially in software applications. Many screen capture programs also have the ability to capture several frames and create a short animation.

> "Remember that Murphy's Law applies especially to multimedia presentations."

Tables organize numbers or text into rows and columns. Any point at which a row and column intersect should be a clearly defined cell. Limit the amount of information in a table and make certain the numbers are large enough to read.

Text slides are some of the most often used and the most dangerous visuals. Use them to highlight rather than reproduce. Guidelines--use no more than 7 lines of text per slide, make sure it is large enough to be seen easily (40 pt. is a safe bet), use a sans serif font and don't use all uppercase letters.

Remember that Murphy's law applies especially to multimedia presentations--anything that can go wrong will go wrong. Expect technical problems with your computer, software, projector, connections or power supply and prepare.

Design for I.M.P.A.C.T.

There are certain design principles that will help ensure that your visuals have a professional look, help the audience process the information and help you make your points more clearly. Design with the I.M.P.A.C.T. principle in mind.

I.dentify key information. For a visual to be effective, your audience must understand the organization and main point. One way to help organize the information is to use numbers and bullets. If the lines of text should be understood as part of a sequence, use numbers. Label each step according to its logical order. If the order doesn't matter, use ticks, arrows, boxes or circles to separate the text into bullets. Identify the most important point on the outline by using a different color for the key idea or underlining a word or phrase. Your visual will be more powerful if you communicate only one main point. Tell the audience what the visual represents before you display it.

M.inimize Distractions. Don't overwhelm your audience with too much information. Instead of using several charts, pictures or diagrams on one slide, make each one separate. Avoid complex backgrounds on slides that are typically included in presentation templates—they often make reading the text difficult.

P.are words to the minimum . A text visual shouldn't be a substitute for speakers' notes. Remember that you are using a *visual* aid, not a *verbal* aid. Economize in language use. Instead of writing in complete sentences, use phrases that contain action verbs.

A.dd color, contrast and consistency. Color adds variety and creates different moods, but don't go overboard. Use three or four at the most. Be sure to use contrasting colors for readability. For example, yellow lettering on a white background doesn't provide enough contrast.. Avoid using black lettering on red, blue or green backgrounds. Audience members may have a slight astigmatism that makes reading difficult. Your visuals should create a sense of consistency and continuity in the presentation. Use the same borders and margins throughout. Maintain a consistent use of colors, fonts, type sizes and layout.

C.oordinate the visual and the verbal. Make certain any graphics you use have a direct relationship to the idea you're trying to express. Too often, graphics are used because they are decorative rather than because they reinforce the message. Fonts communicate mood. For example, comic serif is a poor choice to communicate serious ideas and courier is a poor choice in a high-tech field.

T.extualize ideas appropriately. Use numbers on text lines only when there is ordinal or sequential significance. Use bullets otherwise. Do not reproduce lenthy passages of text.

Carry Backup

If you want to plan for any contingency, have a "triple backup." In addition to having the presentation on your computer, put it on a CD-ROM, a compact flash card and some color transparencies. A compact flash card is the memory card used by many digital cameras. With a ten-dollar adapter, it will fit in the PCMCIA slot of your notebook computer. Even if a notebook doesn't have its CD-ROM drive attached, the PCMCIA slot is universal. This also alows you to make last minute changes on your own computer and show the presentation on another notebook. Choose a compact flash card 64MB to 128MB in size and you'll have some spare room to backup other important documents. If the length of your presentation prohibits printing out all the slides, choose key information and summary slides. Put the transparencies in plastic sleeves to protect them from water damage and to prevent static.

Additional Resources

Books

Craig, M. (2000). *Thinking visually: Business applications of 14 core diagrams.* London: Continuum.

Harris, R.L. (1996). *Information graphics: A comprehensive illustrated reference: Visual tools for analyzing, managing and communicating.* Minneapolis, MN: Management Graphics.

Tufte, E.R. (2001). *The visual display of quantitative information.* Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.

Screen Capture Software

Mac--SnapzPro	Windows--SnagIt
www.ambrosiasw.com	www.techsmith.com

A Final Word of Warning

No amount of technology can substitute for a well planned and developed presentation. Don't let your enthusiasm for slick graphics and multimedia effects overshadow your strategic planning, audience analysis, organization and support. Visuals are an important component of crafting your message. Remember however, that they are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for success.

Make sure your visual aid doesn't become a visual distraction.

Do make certain the visual can be easily seen by everyone in the audience. That means it must be large enough and that the audience has an unobstructed view of it.

Do localize spellings, currencies, and measurements. When these are presented in a context unfamiliar to the audience, they have difficulty understanding the visual.

Do round up numbers when precision isn't your priority. Lengthy numbers on visuals divert attention from the larger picture and create difficulty for the presenter who tries to read them.

Do reveal and conceal. Display only the parts of a visual you're actually referring to. Conceal a visual, or blank your screen when you're not referring to it. An audience's attention is naturally drawn to a visual. Don't compete for audience attention.

Don't let numbers "speak for themselves." Given the same information, people can reach different conclusions about what it means. Provide the context and the interpretation for your audience.

Don't lose eye contact. Remember to focus on your audience and not your visual. Presenters sometimes turn their back on the audience and talk only to the visual.

Don't distribute handouts and copies of your presentation until after you're finished unless it's absolutely necessary.

Don't use information just because it's available. Make certain it contributes to your strategic goal in speaking to an audience.