The Key Steps to An Effective Presentation
General Guidelines and Visual Presentation

Introduction

The fear of public speaking ranks right up there with death and an IRS Audit for most of the population. What I will attempt to do here is give you tips, techniques and support when it comes time to make a presentation.

What do I define as a presentation? Well, in the broadest sense, it's every encounter you have with every person you ever meet. It's when you sit squirming in an interviewer's chair trying to be eloquent when you are asked why you left your last job. More specifically, however, I'm going to talk about the business presentation. Whenever you are asked to appear in front of one or more people for the purpose of explaining, educating, convincing, or otherwise conveying information to them, you have a presentation.

Compressed to it's essence, a presentation consists of three most basic elements: you, your audience, and your tools.

In this series, we'll look at each one, starting off with planning for your visuals and support materials. Later, we'll look at presentation and speaking techniques, attitudes, travel disasters and other problems faced by both the professional and the occasional presenter.

General Guidelines

The central purpose of any presentation, written, oral or visual, is communication. To communicate effectively, you must state your facts in a simple, concise and interesting manner.

It has been statistically proven that the people learn more readily and retain more information, when learning is reinforced by visualization. You can entertain, inform, excite and even shock an audience by the proper integration of visual images into virtually any exchange of information.

Meetings which might normally be considered dull, or a chore to be avoided, can be transformed into exciting productions that grab the attention of the viewers.

This kind of presentation maximizes the audience retention of the subject matter. The phrase "a picture is worth a thousand words" has existed since the New York Post discovered the value of visuals in the news business. This remains true to this day.

Simple, clear, concise visual images, briskly paced and sprinkled with attention-grabbing graphics will lend support to your spoken words. This leaves your audience with a positive attitude toward you and your product, service or proposal.

Visuals in business should be used in support of the spoken or written word, and not in lieu of it. A well-developed concept and effective script are the essential elements of any presentation. Regardless of their form, they should be the first and most important phase of its development. When the concept begins to take final form, the visuals are developed around it.

This is not to imply that A-V design should be placed near the end of the project. You must begin mentally planning your visuals at the beginning of the design process. Hastily designed and produced visuals can doom a presentation (and a presenter,) where well planned and executed images add tremendous strength. Concepts that are

difficult to grasp can be communicated quickly and easily through the intelligent use of professionally produced visuals. This allows you the freedom to communicate more complex subject matter in a more efficient manner, adding support and impact to your script.

Finally, your presentation should be entertaining. Leave the audience feeling better and more relaxed when they leave and that impression will carry over to both your subject matter and yourself. There is no logical reason that the presentation of routine sales figures and financial reports should not be as exciting as the unveiling of a new product or a first rate service proposal.

The Key Steps

1. KNOW YOUR SUBJECT MATTER

While this first point may seem obvious, it is very important that you research every nuance of your subject. Read reports and look up information about the subject with the specific purpose of writing a presentation script. When examined in this light, new ideas and alternative ways of thinking often develop. The ability to present a subject with confidence directly affects your audience's impressions and will help keep their attention.

This is especially important when giving a design presentation or proposal since you are in effect selling" your ideas to the audience. This applies whether the audience is a potential client or your own board of directors.

2. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

A small amount of research into the makeup of your audience will reap large benefits on presentation day. An engineering presentation in which the audience expects or requires highly detailed technical illustrations and data might be inappropriate when presented to a non-technical group. This would be true even though the basic subject matter is nearly identical.

If a small amount of research will help you,
imagine what a moderate amount will do!

3. DEVELOP A THEME

All presentations, regardless of their complexity, are designed with a single purpose. Whether that purpose is to sell, educate, or for pure entertainment, state that purpose to yourself at the beginning of the development process. Keep this purpose in mind always.

4. PREPARE YOUR SCRIPT

The script does not necessarily have to be a work of literary excellence. For some, simple notes on 3 x 5 file cards are sufficient. Other presenters and presentations require a carefully composed, professionally developed script. The exact form of the script depends on the formality of the presentation, the make up of the audience and who will be presenting it.Any presentation script, regardless of complexity is like any other business correspondence. It should consist of the same four basic parts, an opening, body, summary and closing.

*   THE OPENING

The opening of the presentation sets the stage for what is to follow. Participants are introduced and the purpose of the presentation is stated. You should also present a

VERY BRIEF summary or outline of the points to be covered. This helps keep your audience oriented properly within the framework of your script.

*   THE BODY

This is the part of the script in which the bulk of the subject matter is presented. The body of a long presentation should be separated into smaller, easily assimilated modules. Each module or sub-section should make a single point or convey one idea. These sub-sections should each have their own simple opening, body and summary.

*   THE SUMMARY

This portion should be very brief and simple. Here is your chance to reinforce the central theme and purpose of your presentation. Briefly emphasize the key points and main ideas of your script in this section.

There is an old axiom that says ... "Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them." This pretty well sums it up.

Question and answer sessions often follow a final summary and are very productive if managed properly. You should encourage questions from the audience if time or format permits, but be prepared to answer them. If you do not know the correct answer to a question, don't try to fake it. You should refer the question to someone who can answer it correctly or make a note to yourself to obtain the answer later. When you do, contact the person or persons who asked it as soon as possible. This makes an excellent door opener for follow up calls.

Old Speakers Trick: If you Don't want any questions, look the audience over and ask if there are any questions. This puts pressure on the audience and makes many of them choke, and therefore, not respond.

*   THE CLOSING

In a well structured closing, points raised during the question and answer session (if any) are summarized and any handout material that was not required during the presentation is distributed. Handout material which emphasizes each key point or idea permits your audience to review the subject and assures that your words will remain fresh in their minds. Handout material should not be distributed before a presentation unless it is critical to the theme since it invariably leads to audience distraction.

5. SELECT THE PROPER VISUAL AIDS

With the script developed and the audience research completed, this decision should be simple. A five minute presentation to a three person audience is probably best made with handout material alone, or even simple flip charts. Larger audiences might be effectively reached by using a few simple overhead transparencies. A half hour training or sales presentation may clearly indicate a 35 millimeter slide show or even video. If the resources are available, dual projector dissolve presentations have a natural continuity and convey a more professional image at an economical price.

The resolution, brightness and availability of LCD Computer/Video projectors continues to improve. Home-brew, laptop based presentations are becoming very popular. Many speakers, however believe these are a direct substitute for overheads. (Well some of them DO go on an overhead projector, right?) Traditional overhead transparencies were great for lighted rooms, where people could take notes. Most LCD Projectors just are not that bright, and might be more aptly used as an alternative to 35mm Slides. Single gun, 400 or 600 lumen projectors are still very expensive.

Today, a projector that you can use in a partially lighted room starts at about $5,000, but then again, there's always tomorrow.

Major presentations at annual meetings, trade shows, sales conferences, and presentations to stockholders or client proposals can dictate an all out effort with professionally produced special effects, video and all manner of glitz and expense.

Good presentation visuals, however, do not necessarily have to be expensive. When properly planned and produced, simple, well designed graphics add professionalism and impact to virtually any show. Even presentations working within a limited budget can benefit from images created on a professional graphics system by professional audio-visual designers. The proper use of text images, charts and graphs as well as the correct type of chart or graph to use in various circumstances is the subject of another article in this series. I will, however, touch on a few of the deadly design sins of presentation visuals a bit later.

6. PREPARE A STORY BOARD

A story board does not have to be complicated or time consuming to prepare. Its main purpose is to give a general view of the presentation and communicate the important items to the technicians and artists who are creating and assembling the images.
You can make your story board using file cards and post- it notes, or opt for a comprehensive color story board, prepared by professional designers. Changes at the story board level are relatively inexpensive since no images have been produced. During the story board phase you can rehearse the script and easily rearrange, revise, delete from and add to your presentation. When your story board reaches final form it becomes the finished draft for your presentation. This is one of the most important design tools used to produce your graphics.
The final story board should consist of a sketch of each individual image, in sufficient detail to convey its approximate finished appearance. If more detailed instructions are needed to create an image than can be clearly conveyed on the story board, individual layout sheets should be prepared. These sheets should specify colors, formats, fonts and values for graphs and charts.
If specific artwork or photographs must be used in an image, they should be clearly indicated on the story board or layout sheet for that image.

7. PRODUCE THE VISUALS

If the previous steps have been carefully followed, this can be the easiest part of preparing your presentation.
With careful, timely planning, the only task remaining is mechanical process of production. The complete and accurate planning that you have done to this point assures a smooth production cycle without the need for unnecessary last minute changes. This is true whether you use Magic Markers to prepare flip charts on a newsprint pad or require a nine projector slide presentation with live video.
Today's computer graphics products permit you to make changes and alterations that could not be accomplished using any other method of production. While last minute changes are possible, avoiding them can still help cut the cost of your presentation by eliminating revision and rush fees.

8. REHEARSE--REHEARSE--REHEARSE

Your final script and outline or story board permit you to rehearse your presentation even before the visuals are completed. This assures that when your final images are prepared and ready, you will be as well.

If you'd like to really test your mettle, drag out the camcorder and tape your rehearsal. Just keep in mind, no one expects you to be Winston Churchill.

9. PRESENTATION DAY

On the day of the presentation, arrive and set up early. Have spare projector bulbs and extra copies of the handout material close at hand.

You have your visuals, you are well rehearsed, the room is set up and the participants are all prepared. Speak clearly and with authority. A little humor if tastefully added can help break the tension of the moment. There should be no surprises. Make certain that the audience questions have been addressed, and of course, thank everyone for attending.

10. FOLLOW UP

Check back with the attendants and participants to assure that your presentation goals were met. A questionnaire distributed at the end of your presentation can be a source of critical information for follow up calls or future presentations. Encourage the attendants to call or write with any questions that they did not get answered during the presentation.

SOME DEADLY SINS OF VISUAL PRESENTATION

The Illegible Image.

Images not clearly seen by the entire audience add confusion and distraction. If you have to say "I know you can't read this but.....," why include the visual at all? The more eagle-eyed viewers may take exception to this attack on their literacy while others are attempting to see what is on the screen. While straining to read the visual, they cannot be expected to be paying full attention to what is being said.

One popular rule of thumb is the "8H" rule of legibility. In a nutshell, if you can read an image from eight times its height, odds are your audience will be able to read it when projected. As an example.... You have a flip chart which is 2 feet high. If you can read the chart from 16 feet away, that chart will probably be legible when converted to a slide or overhead transparency. 35 millimeter slides are about an inch in height. If you can read a slide from 8 inches distance, that slide will be legible under most presentation conditions.

The Useless Image:

Images should be designed to please the mind as well as the eye of the viewer. If an image has no specific place or purpose in a presentation other than "it is pretty", it should probably be removed.

The Overly Complex Image:

More images with fewer ideas on each are better than a few images which are complicated or difficult to understand. A single idea or set of facts per image, timed to the speaker's pace will add punch and emphasis to each important idea assuring maximum retention.

Most people are easily bored, and one generally accepted rule of thumb states that if an image remains on the screen longer than 7 to 10 seconds, you begin to lose viewer attention.

Chartjunk:
Closely related to the previous deadly sin, "chartjunk" is a phrase coined to identify confusing elements which really have no place on the image. Many presenters insist on having a glaring colored logo in the corner of every image. While a common element can add continuity to a presentation, blazing logos and distracting objects can detract from the message. And after all, isn't the message what it's all about?

Chartoons:
A first cousin to chartjunk, "chartoons" are overly cute attempts to make a presentation appear more professional by adding lots of distracting, tacky, aggravating symbols and such. These usually appear right after a presenter has discovered a clip art library.

Ransom Note Design:
Just because you have access to 35 fonts does not mean that you are required to use them. A single font throughout an entire presentation is usually quite sufficient. Use bold, italic, underline, quotations and/or color changes to emphasize or subdue key points or words.

Calico or Crazy Quilt Graphics:
Keep the colors to a minimum. A single background color throughout a presentation lends an air of continuity. You can separate broad sections of a presentation by changing background colors, but keep the changes to a minimum. Unless your purpose is to shock or grab serious attention, try to keep all background colors within the same color family.

Mixed Visual Metaphors:
You should not mix your metaphors when you speak, so please don't mix them in your graphics without specific purpose. You would not use warm colors in an image whose subject was ice hockey unless you wanted to emphasize the warm comfortable temperature of the stadium.

By keeping these suggestions in mind throughout the design and development process, you can dramatically improve the quality of your presentation. The production process will go more smoothly, the budget will not be broken, and your nerves can take a well deserved rest.