

THE 7 BASIC RULES OF PROPER PRESENTATION DESIGN

Abstract: This article elucidates the rules of presentation visual design that, if heeded, will almost always assure that your audiences will be able to follow your ideas every step of the way. Of course, you must keep in mind that visual design is only one-third of the package required for a successful presentation, the other two being content and delivery. Like a fine dining experience that requires equal parts food, service and atmosphere to really work, the visual design part of the presentation process is every bit as necessary as the others to achieve the desired result – in this case, true knowledge transfer.

So without further ado:

7. Maintain paragraph integrity. First, all 1st Level Paragraph text must be the same size in every slide. Likewise, all 2nd Level Paragraph text must be smaller and of a different color. Lastly, don't go beyond the 3rd Level, and this text should not be smaller than 20 points.

If all information of the same importance is of the same size throughout your presentation, your audience won't be raising question marks as to just how important this information is with each click of the slide. Take this concept one step further by ensuring that all material of the same nature is the same color. If, for instance, you use a lot of numbers in your bullet points, make them all one color, different from the text. Once your audience recognizes this pattern, they'll spend less time digging through the text to find their figures.

6. No boring fonts. Rarely is there a need to use more than two different fonts in any presentation. However, there is a HUGE need to use any two fonts other than the PowerPoint defaults Times New Roman and Arial!

The problem is that because everybody else uses these two fonts 99% of the time, if yours is the fifth presentation your audience is seeing that day, pretty soon all the text starts to look the same, and you lose much of your meaning and impact. We often hear from clients who have to sit through presentations themselves that after a while, they can't remember which vendor said what – it all becomes a big blur. Make sure you're not part of the blur.

5. Use proper builds. Without a sense of good design, which in most cases means simply showing restraint, animations can quickly overwhelm an otherwise well laid-out presentation. The trick then is to introduce concepts one at a time in a way that doesn't draw more attention than the concepts themselves. Builds are essential elements in turning slides that would otherwise have TMI into ones that audiences can follow; but like other elements of good design, a proper build should never announce itself. Rather, a well animated presentation should simply appear to "happen", without a clue as to why it seems so easy to follow.

4. Be colorful - Light on dark. Watch much black-and-white television these days? Although black-and-white works as an art form in many ways, humans tend to like color. Even old-guard newspapers like the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal finally concluded that to avoid losing readers to more modern media, they had to go to color. While humans can discern a dozen or so shades of gray, they can see millions of different colors. We've evolved to use our sense of color to survive – help your audiences survive your presentation by not blinding them with black on white.

3. Less is More. This rule is central to good presentation design, but absolutely essential for graphs or charts. We often see pie charts come across our review desk with over a dozen slices, many so small they need to be annotated with lines and arrows far from the graph itself. Do you really think anyone will remember all 25 competing products in your market and their percentage share? Might be good information for a handout, but in a presentation few people can absorb more than six elements in any graph.

You make your point much more effectively when you limit your displayed data to the stuff the audience is likely to remember. Less information becomes more retention of the stuff you really want them to go home with.

2. One concept per visual. Here's another really common problem we see in the majority of business presentations, and the solution flows from rule number 3.

When more than one concept appear at the same time, your audience not only tries to figure out the concepts, they also try to determine which one deserves most of their attention, how the two or more are related, whether one is the "right" one or the "good" one, and so on and so forth – all having nothing to do with your actual message itself. This extra time and effort acts as a drag on presentation flow, and explains why a 45-slide presentation, properly broken down into one concept per, takes less time to present than the same information packed into 15.

1. Favor Right-Brain information. We humans have evolved with two different ways to deal with stimuli from the outside world so that we can react to it in the way most likely to keep us alive. Our right brain reacts to input such as colors, graphics, shapes and patterns instantly, without stopping to process the information first. Our left brain kicks in when presented with speech, text or numbers; however with this kind of information we first pause to analyze it before storing or reacting to it. We have filters on the left side on the brain, and not everything gets through.

If you want your ideas to strike fast and be readily absorbed, then every time you can, figure out how to turn your left-brain type data into shapely and colorful right-brain images.