

Use It or Lose It!

Creating Support Materials That Impact Your Message

After writing numerous articles, from enhancing your communication behavior to optimizing team performance, there has been one article in particular that has caught reader's attention. I continuously receive phone calls from readers requesting additional information on the article titled: *Visual Aid Madness: How to Effectively Interact with a Visual and Stay on Track*. This communicates to me that learning how to interact with visual aids continues to be a struggle for most individuals. Or we fall in the category of doing what we've seen done by others, whether or not it's effective. The selection and design of the visual aid is the key to increasing learner retention and influencing your listener to take action.

Therefore I've decided to share with you best practices for selecting and creating a visual aid that creates a positive, lasting impression on your listener.

If you're thinking right now, "I don't deliver presentations, nor do I use PowerPoint," this article still applies to you. Ask yourself:

- Have you facilitated a meeting in the past with the aid of notes?
- Have you participated in a sales call with the aid of a marketing piece such as a brochure or product demonstration?
- Have you prepared for a face-to-face conversation with a peer that requires a visual aid to explain a concept or idea?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, it's time to increase your awareness of how your visual aids may cause confusion for you and your listener. As a result, you'll struggle thinking on your feet and your listener will not hear nor understand your message.

I consistently observe individuals using visual aids without a purpose but rather as filler or as a substitute for their notes. We've lost the true meaning behind visual aids and the value they bring to our message:

- To support our message
- Increase learner retention
- Enhance listener memory

Before your next presentation, meeting, or sales call ask yourself, "Why am I using this visual aid and what objective do I want to achieve for the benefit of the listener." To assist you in deciding which visual aid will best support your message, consider:

- Purpose of the visual aid
 - To inform
 - To educate
 - To entertain
 - As a resource for later use
 - To create interaction and a hands-on experience for your listeners

- Listener expectations and needs
- Listener experience and knowledge level
- Your level of experience with each visual aid medium
- Size of the room
- Time frame
- Take-away key points, concepts and ideas

Understanding the visual medium's purpose, advantages, and disadvantages that best support your message is a critical step to all communication situations.

PowerPoint

Purpose

- To increase learner retention.
- To add impact and emphasis to your message.
- To provide you and your listeners with transitions.
- To provide colors, graphs, and pictures.

Advantages

- PowerPoint is prepared in advance so that you do not need to worry about spelling or drawing a visual on the fly. (This only applies if you've completed a spell check prior to your presentation.)
- PowerPoint can be easily saved with the option of quick edits for future use.

Disadvantages

- We heavily rely on PowerPoint as our notes and we read to them.
- We put too much information on a PowerPoint slide written in a small font that's difficult to read.
- The animation and build options are a distraction for the listener.
- Technology may not cooperate.

Flipchart

Purpose

- To create listener interaction.
- To document listeners' concerns or questions that you may need to respond to after your presentation.
- To document points of discussion to guarantee these topics are covered during your presentation.
- To post agenda items or ground rules generally for small groups.
- To create a visual on the fly, adding support to a listener's comment or to your key point.

Advantages

- Flipcharts are easy to use and can take little time to prepare.
- You can post flipcharts throughout the room and easily refer back to them.
- Since flipcharts don't rely on technology, they will never break down.
- You can easily add points, facts or ideas.

Disadvantages

- There's no spell check or grammar editing.
- It's not portable friendly.
- If you don't write legibly or large enough, listeners cannot read the information.

Whiteboards

Purpose

- Brainstorming ideas.
- To document questions, agendas, or topics of discussion.

Advantages

- Whiteboards are easy to use and can take little time to prepare.
- You can quickly erase information.
- You do not need to carry this equipment with you.

Disadvantages

- Information cannot be saved easily.
- Writing legibly can be challenging, making it difficult for listeners to read your writing.
- There's no spell check or grammar editing.

Props (product demonstrations, sharing photographs, etc.)

Purpose

- To teach listeners how to use a particular product.
- To increase learner retention through a powerful visual (i.e., picture or product).

Advantages

- Provides an immediate application of learning when listeners can use, touch, feel, or see a product, concept, or idea.

Disadvantages

- Listeners are focused on handling the prop, therefore miss your message.
- May cause distractions if the prop is noisy or difficult to maneuver.

Handouts

Purpose

- To create take-aways and future references.
- To encourage listener interaction.
- To include individual and group exercises within your presentation.
- To illustrate detailed charts, graphs, and diagrams.

Advantages

- Listeners have a resource to take with them and refer back to.
- Listeners have the option to use your handouts for note taking.
- To provide clarification when explaining a step-by-step process.

Disadvantages

- Temptation to read from our handouts and get tied to them.
- Participants read ahead.
- Risk increases for losing listener attention.

After you've carefully selected the visual medium that best supports your message and attracts your listener's attention, you're ready for the creation. There are nine strategies that you never want to miss.

1. Less is more! Create visual aids with more pictures and fewer words. Remember, a picture is worth how many words?
2. Design visual aids around key points or ideas you want your listeners to remember.
3. **Three "B's:" BIG, BOLD and BRILLIANT.** Big for everyone to see, no matter what size the room may be. Bold words to increase visibility. Brilliant with generous use of color. Create just enough color to excite the eye, between two and four colors for text.
4. Use simple typefaces that are easy to read. Tahoma, Arial, and Helvetica are always a safe choice because they're easy to read.
5. Use bullet points to highlight key points and ideas. Limit your bullet points to four per visual, with four words per bullet.
6. When sharing data, facts and statistics, illustrate the take-away points in a pie chart, a bar graph, or a line graph.
7. When illustrating your point with graphs, use only one graph per visual. Avoid trapping your message in "information overload."
8. Stay away from software overkill. If you're clicking the mouse every few seconds, you're working too hard.
9. Avoid using all capital letters, which are difficult to read. You don't want to shout at your listener.

Tip

The above visual design techniques are recommended for all media (i.e., PowerPoint, sales aids, flipcharts, props, notes, meeting agendas, and whiteboards).

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