

Visual Aid Madness: How to Effectively Interact with a Visual and Stay on Track

Several weeks ago I found myself sitting in the audience observing a presentation delivered by an individual whom I perceived as confident and credible. This perception quickly reverted backwards when he began to interact with PowerPoint and his notes. As he turned to have a conversation/relationship with his slides and notes, his energy deflated, he disconnected with his audience, his vocal projection was inaudible, and his rate of speech took off with record speed.

You have been there before, sitting in the audience watching a speaker talk to their visual as if you were not there. Your mind wanders and you begin to think, “Gee, should I leave the two of them alone?” It is what we call visual aid madness. We have lost the meaning and purpose behind visual aids. Have we forgotten who is more important, the visual aid or ourselves? Are we using the visual aid to hide from our listeners? When used appropriately, a visual aid provides impact, control, and emphasis for you, the listener, and your message.

Are you thinking to yourself, “I do not present. I do not use PowerPoint, nor do I have future plans for doing so.” When I speak of visual aids, I am referring too much more than PowerPoint.

- The notes you read to during a meeting.
- The computer or papers on your desk you speak to when a peer is sitting across from you trying to convey their message.
- A face-to-face conversation when you repeatedly look away from your listener in mid sentence. They begin to get a complex wondering, “What are you looking at?”

Whether we are using PowerPoint, flipchart, notes, or marketing and sales aids, we have allowed these elements to become our message rather than support our message.

Do not get me wrong, it is essential we incorporate visual aids to support and enhance our message. In fact, we are kidding ourselves if we believe our words alone will persuade listeners to take action.

The key is how we interact with visuals. Have you ever considered not only are marketing aids, props, or PowerPoint visual aids, but that you are a visual? Your non-verbal behavior will positively or negatively impact the amount of information your listener remembers. When you lose eye contact with your listener or fidget with your paper, pen, etc. you’re creating distractions that will minimize the amount of information they will receive. As a result, the chance they will take action is slim to none.

According to a study by the University of Minnesota, visual aids increase your chance of persuading your listener to accept your position by 43 percent. In addition, studies by Harvard and Columbia show that visuals improve retention by up to 38 percent. This is why it is critical that your visuals don't become a victim of a meeting planner's most common mistake – losing sight of the message objective and becoming enamored with the visual.

Here is another example for you; how many times have you been in a face-to-face conversation with a peer while they were trying to multi-task? They are responding to email, answering their phone or fidgeting when they quickly glance at you and say, “Go ahead, I'm listening.” You are smiling right now because the person who is multi-tasking may be you.

Imagine the perception your listener creates when you are not giving your full-undivided attention? The perception may be uninterested, insincere, and unprofessional with little respect and the list goes on. I am talking about eye connection. No, this is not a spelling error, eye connection allows you to connect and engage your listener. Looking away when you are talking to one or more individuals will immediately force you to lose your train of thought.

When we communicate, we need to remember who is more important, you or the visual. Avoid the visual aid madness - talking frequently to the visual, using a visual too often as your “security blanket,” or using the visual aid as part of your gestures. (Sometimes a pen in your hand will become a gesture and distraction, while you are unaware that you're holding a pen.) The trick is remembering the visual aid supports your message and not to distract your message.

Interact, not to distract:

The following skills apply to all visual aids during a presentation, face-to-face conversation, sales call, or meeting. (For example; PowerPoint, marketing brochures, handouts, notes, props, flipcharts or dry erasable boards.)

- Provide an introduction statement prior to displaying the visual. This will engage your listener's attention and heighten their anticipation.
- Create balance between you and the visual aid. Pause immediately after displaying the visual aid to give yourself time to think and to give the listener time to see, absorb, and understand the visual aid.
- Pause and think every time you look at the visual aid to gather your thoughts.
- Talk to the listener, not the visual aid! Turn from the visual aid to your listener in silence, connect with their eyes and then speak.

- Disregard the visual aid if it no longer supports your message. For example: if you are explaining an idea while referring to a marketing piece and you have now transitioned to a new subject, place this piece off to the side. This will bring the listeners focus back to you.
- Become familiar with your visual aids and how to work with them smoothly and effectively. Your knowledge of these resources is just as important as the knowledge you convey in relaying your message.

If you do not see a pair of eyes, do not talk. The floor, ceiling, computer, or any other object you are looking at while you are talking will not talk back to you. Trust and credibility will be created when you connect with the audience not the visual aid.

The next time you are having a face-to-face conversation, participating in a meeting, or delivering a presentation, pay attention to your non-verbal behavior when you interact with a visual aid. You will be pleasantly surprised when you follow these steps how you will enhance your relationships, stay on track and increase listeners to take action. And isn't that what communication is all about?

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