

The case for using truly visual visual-support

Many business presentations today engage in an audience-unfriendly practice of using slides that are overloaded with text. It's tempting to think that this could be helpful to an international audience. But for the majority of internationally *mixed* audiences whose language skills are usually sufficient enough to follow along, it will be a distraction.

More precisely, we know from own experience that reading bullet sentences while simultaneously trying to follow the speaker talk to us is a difficult exercise. That's because text projected onto a screen is not really "visual support" per se, even though we've come to think of it as such. Indeed, there's nothing visual about it at all.

Text, at its most basic level, is a symbol (letters, sentences) of another symbol (spoken words) which represents something in our environment. In essence, reading requires the mind to decode symbols at two layers of abstraction with each subsequent layer moving at a slower processing speed. Objects we see (i.e. a tree) travel to our eyes at the speed of light. Spoken language arrives at our ears at the speed of sound, but decoding the sound of the words we hear is a slower process still. And reading is extremely slow in comparison to seeing and hearing. That's why during a presentation, looking at image-based visuals is effortless, because it moves the audience upward into its fastest cognitive processing mode. Showing text does the opposite. It moves the audience down into its slowest processing mode, which makes it nearly impossible to keep up with the speaker.

It is helpful if the words we read create a fluid mental picture in our head, which is what a story in a novel does. But most business presentations are a collection of fragmented ideas, written as bullet sentences, that the audience has to read while following the presenter at whatever tempo he speaks. Having to read, listen and sometimes look at unrelated pictures (known as decorative distractions to graphic artists) can easily overload our cognitive processes. Most of us can't do it. We either listen or read but not both.

In addition, text slides can be just awful to look at. If we're honest, we would probably have to admit that our own slides are not designed for the listening audience in mind. In most cases we use them as a script for ourselves, reducing the presentation to an absurd exercise in PowerPoint karaoke.

So what can we do to really help our audience? To begin with, we need to tightly structure our presentations in a way that flows nicely and possess a coherent storyline. This alone will eliminate the need for using text on slides. This also means that we need to learn the key points of our own story, and not rely on text slides for our talking notes. This is not to say that good speakers do not use visual support. When they do, however, they are genuinely visual (i.e. diagrams, charts, relevant pictures) and helpful in understanding some idea.

We can also follow two very simple guidelines for designing slides offered by graphic designers. First, we begin by asking ourselves where we will really need them. Where will it be absolutely necessary to help the audience understand a point? Usually it is needed to make some complex or complicated idea easier for the audience to understand. In other cases, slides can be used to show the audience a compelling example of what you're referring to (i.e. a cut rainforest, a blanket of smog over a city, or a before-and-after comparison). Whatever the content, it will be easier for the audience to process and remember your idea if they can see it – and not just read about it.

Next, you will need to ask if will be able to illustrate the idea effectively or whether you'll need to get help. Visuals should not be too complicated themselves – leaving the audience to scratch their heads and wonder what they're looking at. When looking at a visual, typically a

PowerPoint slide, it should quickly provoke an “aha” effect, a “*now I understand*” response. If it doesn’t fulfill this simple criterion then there’s a good chance the slide(s) needs to be re-designed or even discarded.

Again, text slides are fine as handouts and should be given to an international audience for later reference. But text is a distraction and usually confusing for most audiences if projected on a screen. It will sabotage an otherwise good presentation. In the end, it is best to stick with an old Chinese saying when it comes to using visual support: *a picture is worth a thousand words*. Inverting that formula only leads to confusion and irritation – in everyone’s culture.