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POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS THAT WOW YOUR AUDIENCE

PowerPoint presentations should be the visual candy that give your presentation polish and pizzazz. Today, it's harder to wow audiences because they see so many computer-generated presentations. Visuals should be what a stunning picture frame is to a great photo – subtle, appropriate but powerful images that still keep YOU at the center of the presentation.

How many times have you suffered through a presentation where the speaker fumbled through 40 or 50 slides, all with tiny fonts, incomprehensible charts complicated graphs? If you create great visuals you will stand out from the crowd. Audiences will be more impressed, more interactive and best of all, inclined to seek you out after the meeting.

How do you create visuals that simply frame, or enhance your presentation? Jo Robbins, author of High Impact Presentations, says visuals should be “scannable.” She says, “People can only absorb one concept at a time. The meaning should be direct and easy to understand at a glance.”

We coach our clients to plan what they are going to say BEFORE they even begin to create their slides. You want your speech to drive your visuals – not the other way around. Each slide should highlight key messages and drive home memorable points. The techniques are: one slide per idea, with the fewest possible words, in clear, readable, colorful fonts.

For more ideas, we asked Ellen Mosner, graphic designer for the Boston-based law firm, Palmer & Dodge, to give us a few pointers:

Q: What are the most common mistakes people make when putting together PowerPoint presentations?

A: Too many words. Way too many words.

Q: What makes a PowerPoint presentation work?

A: A few bulleted words intended to enhance the speaker's speech – but not mimic it. And, of course, graphics.

Q: How many words should you have on the screen? How many slides per minute or per 30 minutes?

A: I try to encourage the 6x6 rule: six bullets per screen -- max, six words per bullet -- max. I've not learned any rules about slides per minute, but I'd say if you change many screens often, they should each contain less words; more graphics with fewer words.

Q: What are some other tips for making a graphic presentation "audience friendly?"

A: I think the most important thing would be to know your audience. Some groups work well with lots of clip art. Perhaps some of it should be animated. Another presentation might do better with photos, rather than clip art. A "dry" type of audience would probably not want art and might prefer charts to visually show a trend or other message.

Q: What do you wish everybody knew about using graphic presentations?

A: I wish everybody understood that when you're speaking, if your audience is busy reading, they're not hearing you as well as you'd like them to. Nor are they grasping what they're reading because you're talking. Both listening and reading are compromised.

Q: What can executives and professionals do to prepare to work with someone like you, in terms of time and materials?

A: If the presenter would take into consideration that I do in fact need time to work, that would help! Some people look at their deadline and don't factor my work time in. How far ahead depends on the size of the project and my workload. For my work here, a week or more is appreciated. In terms of the amount of collaboration time -- that depends on the personality of the presenter. Some people know exactly what they want and tell me so. Others have no idea and rely on me for suggestions and to make them "look good." It's great if I can get a word processed file with the content already typed. And, another small but helpful tip is to mark up edits with a red pen. The red stands out and I'm less likely to miss something.

Q: If there's one thing you'd like people to remember about putting together visuals, what would it be?

A: All of the above.... Enough time, I guess. Too wordy I can do even if I don't approve! But without enough time I can't do it at all.

Mosner got her degree in textile design, but quickly fell into the world of computer graphics. She's worked as a graphic designer for the past 16 years.