

Effective Visual Aids

A good presentation with visuals is much more effective than a good presentation without them! Visual aids are used to enhance a presentation and can include a whole range of still or moving images: video or film, whiteboards or flipcharts, Powerpoint slides or overhead transparencies, 35mm slides, models or handouts. A picture is worth a thousand words...try to be creative.

The visual aids will help the listener to retain the information better than by just hearing the words spoken. They should:

- Explain, simplify, clarify or highlight points
- Hold the attention and help concentration
- Add interest and variety

If the design and use of visual aids is not planned and relevant, it will detract from the presentation and confuse rather than help the audience.

Action Checklist

1. Prepare your presentation

For practical help on preparing your presentation, see the guide to **effective presentations**.

2. Draw out the key points

What are the key points you want to make? Are you trying to put across too much information in one go? Does each key point need to be reinforced by one or more visual aid? Are there secondary points that would benefit from the use of visual aids? Remember, too many secondary points will be likely to distract your audience from your key points.

3. Think about your audience

You should have a good picture of your likely audience. Think about their level of knowledge because this will affect the level of detail you can communicate to them successfully and perhaps give you some pointers about the sort of visual aids which might help get your message across.

4. Think about the content, format and style

Now you can consider what will be best in helping you get across your key points. Text may be suitable for most occasions, either as bullet points or short individual sentences, but remember, a word only slide isn't really a true visual aid. Graphical displays can be computer generated and include drawings, graphs, diagrams or charts, or photographs. Make sure all the visual aids you intend to use are clearly legible from the back of the room you will be using and, if they're not, change them! How often have you heard presenters say "You won't be able to read all this, but I'll put the slide up all the same"?

Whatever the presentation, remember that:

- Visual aids can be used in combination and are often much more effective because of the different formats
- Colour should be used sparingly for maximum impact and minimum confusion; the eye is drawn to the brightest spot so choose your colours for the best effect
- Dark backgrounds work best for slides; light backgrounds can be a nightmare, showing every speck of dust or fingerprint, and the glare from the screen can be unpleasant for the audience

- Excessive detail will only cause confusion
- You may need to break down complex points into several visual aids, but you should try to show how they all fit together
- The best slides should need the presenter's words to complete them; they are not supposed to be able to stand alone and they are not supposed to be your script

5. What equipment are you going to use?

Find out what equipment is available and, if you need to book it for your presentation, make sure you do so well in advance.

Make sure the equipment can be used successfully at your venue. For example, if you are using a Powerpoint presentation, overhead transparencies or slides, can you black out the room enough for them to be visible? Will you need some extra help to pull blinds or curtains or to dim lights so that you minimise any disruption to your presentation? Will the size of the room and audience mean that you need extra screens or monitors, or audio speakers?

Can you operate the equipment, to enlarge, reduce or focus images? If you don't know how, make sure you have someone who can at hand to help you.

6. Prepare your visual aids

Are there some already prepared and available in-house? Who should prepare them: you, someone in your team, or is there an in-house department to help you? Allow plenty of time for the production of your visual aids, including any corrections and amendments. Do make sure they are worded properly, that spelling and figures are accurate and that the slides are numbered in sequence.

Is there a house style to follow? Even if there isn't, make sure you use a uniform layout for all your visual aids and avoid distracting leaps from one style to another.

Visual aids should be cost-effective so bear in mind not just the costs involved in preparing them, but also hiring in any equipment.

7. Plan your use of the visual aids and rehearse your presentation using them

Carefully plan when you will introduce your visual aids during your presentation. A visual aid will focus attention away from you and that might not be what you want, especially at the beginning of your talk. You may want to vary the timing so consider the pros and cons of each approach. For example, you might decide to introduce one point before showing the accompanying visual aid, but to display another one "cold" and wait a few seconds for your audience to take it in before you start to speak. Make a note on your prompt cards so you know when to introduce each visual aid.

Handouts can be given out at the end as a summary. If you decide to hand them out at the beginning, remember there is always the danger that your audience will end up reading your handout rather than listening to you.

Keep any visual aid concealed from your audience until you are ready to use it and, after it has served its purpose, remove it so that it won't distract attention. You should allow enough time for people to take notes if they want, but generally 40 seconds should be enough.

Have at least one full rehearsal, using all your visual aids, to ensure a smooth transition between your speaking and the visual aids. Ask a colleague to sit in and give you some feedback on how well it is working. Make sure you don't end up standing with your back to the audience, talking at the screen or flipchart.

8. Make a final check

Get to the venue early enough to make sure that all your equipment has arrived and is working properly. Run through your slides and make sure they are in the correct order. Check right down to last detail. You might not have thought about the flipchart pens, but are they still usable? Any mishap of this kind when you are giving your presentation will undermine your confidence, look unprofessional to the audience and detract from the overall impact you make.

9. Have an alternative plan!

If, in spite of your best efforts, the equipment does break down, have an alternative plan prepared as back up so you can still carry on with your presentation. This may mean having a second projector available, or an alternative way of making your presentation (e.g. on OHP instead of Powerpoint).

Do's and don'ts for the effective use of visual aids

Do

- Make sure each visual aid, or combination of visual aids, is the best for the job
- Ask yourself, can I manage just as well without it? If the answer is yes, get rid of it
- Ask yourself, is it really a visual or is it just a visible verbal prompt to me?
- Try to find out as much as possible about your audience
- Make sure you know how to operate the equipment you are going to use

Don't

- Display a visual aid for too long because it will only distract your audience
- Put too much detail into any one visual aid – if every detail is essential, provide it as a handout to be taken away instead
- Forget to rehearse your complete presentation, with visual aids, at least once