

PRESENTATION TIP: USING VISUALS FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

Have you ever attended a presentation where the speaker read directly from her/his PowerPoint slides? Did you wonder why they didn't just give you the handout and let you go home?

PowerPoint and other visuals are tools to supplement your presentation; many presenters, however, hide behind their visuals as a way to avoid interacting with the audience.

Here are some ways your visuals can enhance your presentations, rather than putting your audience to sleep.

Stand and Face the Audience

I recently attended a presentation where the speaker sat at a table and pushed keys on her laptop to run her slides. She sat facing sideways, looking from her computer to the screen on the left (to read the many bullet points), then back to the audience on her right. It was an uncomfortable setup, and she had to contort her body to see the audience and still manipulate the keyboard.

Sitting in a chair diminishes your authority and makes eye contact difficult in a presentation or workshop setting. No, you are not the Supreme Ruler, but you are the subject matter expert for the moment, and it's important to stand tall where everyone in the room can see you. Stand facing the audience, with your computer to the side. You can still see the computer from where you are, but you can also more readily interact with the audience. You shouldn't need to look at the screen unless you want to emphasize something by indicating it on the screen. Using a laser pointer is preferred to walking over to the screen to point at something.

Use a Remote Device

Had this presenter used a remote to advance her slides, she wouldn't have had to sit in front of her computer. Remote presentation devices allow you to stand up to 100 feet away from the computer running your PowerPoint. They have many features, including next slide, previous slide, black screen, cursor control and laser pointer function. They also range in price, so you don't have to spend a fortune. Using a remote will make your presentations much more fluid and allow you free movement around the stage and interaction with your audience. Choose a radio frequency (RF) remote over infrared (IF), as radio frequency gives you much more range of motion and you don't have to worry about objects blocking the signal.

Use Notes

It's not necessary to be tied to your computer if you have your presentation notes handy. If you're using PowerPoint, print out the slides on paper so you can follow along, or just use your outline. Place the notes on a table next to you where you can keep an eye on them without using them as a crutch. Remember, the bulk of your presentation should be in your head already. Notes are just placeholders for the information in your head.

Use PowerPoint for Good, Not Evil

Bullet points have become the standard presentation mode when using PowerPoint. However, this method is not necessarily the best way to get your message across. Frequently, presenters attempt to put their entire presentation into bullet point format in order to get everything onto slides. This is not necessary or desirable, unless you want to e-mail the presentation to your attendees and tell them not to bother coming.

It's your job to engage the audience, to keep their rapt attention and to make them want more. It's your job to inform, yes, but to do it in a way that your audience remembers vividly what you told them AND retains it for more than two days. Bullet points are hardly engaging . . . and they don't tell a story the way your words and expressions can. Think back to some speakers you've really enjoyed. Do you remember their bullet points or do you remember their energy and powerful way of expressing themselves?

I highly recommend the book "Beyond Bullet Points," by Cliff Atkinson. If you're interested in delivering truly impactful presentations, take a look at this book for a completely new way to use PowerPoint.

Beyond PowerPoint

It's entirely possible to give an engaging presentation using nothing but a flip chart and markers. This "old school" presentation method is still a great way to incorporate audience input and use spontaneously generated ideas as part of your workshop. If you feel that you're leaving out something, make sure to provide handouts at the end of your session.

Visuals can enhance a presentation and help your audience to synthesize the information you're sharing. At the same time, visuals can become unwieldy, distracting or boring, dragging down the liveliness and spontaneity of a presentation. Use visuals thoughtfully and sparingly, relying more on your own personality and passion to bring a presentation to life.