

DON'T BE UPSTAGED BY YOUR VISUALS

While presentation technology is advancing with lightning speed, some design professionals have simply added electronically-generated bulleted lists and animated text to display their arsenal of past projects, and highlight their qualifications, rather than addressing the client's project, claims presentation specialist Ernest Burden. Although anyone with a laptop loaded with PowerPoint can now produce professional looking graphics, there is more to presentations than just good looks. The question is not whether to use slides or boards, but what's on the visuals. And remember, what's not on the visuals is the actual presentation itself – that's you, the one that clients want to see and hear from.

Some firms are so enamored with their media prowess that they feel naked when asked by clients not to use it, in statements like these showing up in RFP's. "Consultants should not include elaborate graphic representations." Or this one, "Oral presentations can only include an 8 1/2" handout, for a sit-down interview."

In an RFP for the expansion of an international airport, the airlines felt they were providing a cost-cutting service to the consultants by insisting that all the firms use boards for their presentation. One firm ended up with 50-boards, which were not only expensive to produce, but very difficult to manipulate during the interview. It became more an issue of board management than effective communication.

The main problem is not the medium itself – it's the manner that it's being used that's at fault.

We are currently experiencing a paradigm shift. In the past, when clients said don't bring slides, A/E's presumed they didn't want to sit in the dark listening to a noisy slide projector. However, the client's real gripe involved what was on those slides, typically consisting of a parade of past projects that did not relate to the project at hand, supported by a litany of the firm's qualifications.

Today, it is the electronic WOW factor (Wonder withOut Wisdom) that clients are objecting to, not the medium itself. PowerPoint is one of the most convenient and powerful electronic imaging programs today. The built-in features make it almost foolproof to use, but some can also be its drawback. One is tempted to add bells and whistles because it is so easy to do so. Crowded images, type fly-ins, sound effects, and fancy animations are some of the worst offenders. Is it any wonder that clients object to this media overload.

On the positive side, there are clients who encourage the use of PowerPoint. A project manager for a CM firm was told by two separate clients that every firm must use PowerPoint. Those that did not have an LCD projector would be required to buy or rent one. Their reason was to level the playing field, but in reality the clients raised the bar.

In another instance, an architectural firm impressed a local planning board with their site and project-related video clips within their PowerPoint presentation. The board made it a conditional part of all presentations for proposed projects in the city. That definitely raised the bar for other firms.

Here are some simple tips and suggestions for the proper use of presentation media.

Select a medium that is the most appropriate and convincing to answering the main request of the client in the most direct way.

Check the conditions of the presentation room including the arrangement of the reviewing committee. Make sure that your visuals will work smoothly in their environment and won't upstage you.

Follow the rule of 6. Six lines of type maximum on any visual, with no more than six words that are no longer than six letters. Better yet, use the rule of 3 (3 lines of no more than three words of any length).

Use bulleted lists only as prompts and do not read them verbatim. Use 28-32 point type for bulleted lists, and 42-48 point type for titles. Keep the contrast high between the type and background.

Don't leave an image on the screen after you have discussed it, as it will distract your client. Advance to the next image, or leave a black screen. Learn the 7 second rule: change visuals, or advance to the next line of text, or a blank screen in less than 7 seconds.

Don't use fly-in type, or sound effects that go with it.

Never give a "lights out" presentation. Make sure that you have a level of light that you can maintain eye contact with the review board.

Other considerations

LCD projectors are lighter and brighter than ever, but avoid the 700-800 lumens models, even if they are cheaper. You need 1,000 lumens or more to show images that will be bright enough for projection in a fully lit conference room. Some projectors offer 1500 to 1700 lumens, and are quite affordable.

DON'T use text over photographs.

INSTEAD, keep the backgrounds simple. Major titles can be used over photographs if the type is large enough and is enhanced with contrasting color or shadows.

DON'T rely on a client or host supplying any equipment.

INSTEAD, remember Murphy's second law: "The hosts equipment will not be compatible with yours". Never assume the host has a VCR or monitor to show your videotape.

DON'T rely totally on either AC power or battery power.

INSTEAD, always use the AC adapter and keep the battery in the laptop, even though it increases its weight. If the electrical power is even slightly interrupted, your laptop will not go down.

DON'T rely on your software.

INSTEAD, always have some form of backup; either copies of the visuals on slides, or overhead transparencies, or printed color hard copies at the very least (copies for the review board members too). Copy the program onto a separate ZIP disk, or CD to play in another laptop or other device. Transfer the program onto video, especially if it includes computer animations, VCR's hardly ever crash. Some presenters even bring a spare laptop.

DON'T rely on the "spare bulb" myth.

INSTEAD, always test the bulb in your equipment before you leave the office for a presentation, and again as you set up the equipment. There is seldom an opportunity to change a bulb that goes out during the presentation, as they remain hot too long. LCD projector bulbs are designed for long life, usually 1,000 hours, and you can read the "hours used" in the setup menu. However, replacing these bulbs is not something you want to attempt in the middle of a presentation.

DON'T panic or draw attention to a bulb going out.

INSTEAD, make that the end of your visual presentation (which it is), and switch to your backup plan. Pretend that it never happened; in fact, you may be the only one who knows it, so keep it that way.

DON'T ever give a "lights out" presentation.

INSTEAD, make sure that you have a level of light that you can maintain eye contact with the review board. LCD projectors are lighter and brighter than ever, but avoid the 700-800 lumens models, even if they are cheaper. You need 1,000 lumens or more to show images that will be bright enough for projection in a fully lit conference room. Some projectors offer 1500 to 1700 lumens, and are quite affordable