

To get your audience to really see what you mean, pick the right strategy.

Do use fever charts (also called line charts) to track the progress of a quantity, like price or inventory, *over a period of time*. They are especially good for showing trends—what happened in the past and what might happen in the future. As a general rule, dates appear along the bottom and quantities go up the side. A thick line represents the movement of the quantity from left to right over time and up or down according to the scale, such as dollars or units.

Do use bar charts to show the relationships among different items *at one time*. Unlike fever charts, bars work best when the time element is static, as in a comparison of the current prices of eight computers from different manufacturers.

In pie charts, **do** try to use numbers that add up to 100%. If that is not possible, make sure to insert a note about it on the chart, because some readers delight in pointing out “mistakes.”

A table isn't a visualization of numbers—it is the numbers. **Do** consider using a table when numbers differ by orders of magnitude so that no scale suffices in plotting them. Take this set of numbers: 20, 400, 160,000, and 5,600,000,000. A chart will lose the detail of low figures if it tries to reach the high ones without breaking the scale. If you must break the scale, then just use a table, because a chart with a broken scale is no longer a true picture of the numbers.

If numbers are so big that any graphic representation fails to capture them, **do** use word pictures to put them in a human context. Think of a trillion dollars

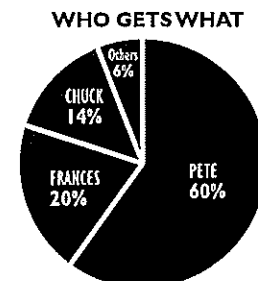
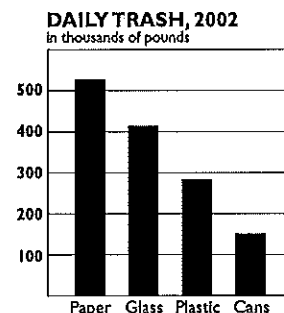
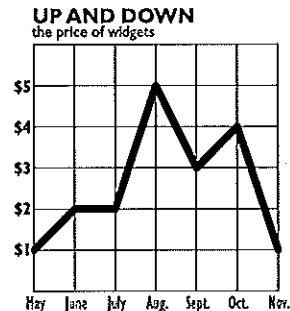
of national debt. How much bigger is a trillion than a billion? Three zeros, or one thousand times. Or consider this option: it's the year 0 A.D., and you have a trillion dollars to spend at the rate of a million dollars a day. By the year 3 A.D., you've spent a billion. By the year 2002, you'd still have 736 years to go, spending a million every day, before you reached the end of your trillion-dollar pile. We can picture that in our minds because we know the lengths of a day, a year, and a millennium, and we can imagine spending a million dollars.

Once you've settled on your approach, be careful not to undercut your efforts with gimmicks.

Don't use the third dimension or animation for animation's sake. A chart shouldn't move around or jump off the page or screen—it should stay there and let the audience read it. Work in two dimensions.

Don't use a busy background to signify the subject of the chart. No cloud formations to suggest “sky.” Most photographic or brightly colored backdrops interfere with visibility. Plain backgrounds allow the reader to read the information easily. Use white, black, or a pale color.

Don't use lots of color to tie-dye a chart. Too many hues confuse the meaning. Think of color as information itself, never as decoration to a finished chart. Start with black and white. Add color only when you need it to clarify something, like distinguishing two thick lines in a fever chart. If someone else has created PowerPoint slides for you, then use the computer to remove all unnecessary colors.



Don't use ornate, flowery fonts. Use one simple sans serif font in a variety of weights and sizes. Keep the final size of the chart in mind when choosing type size. You might enlarge it to go into a store window, on a banner, or on an auditorium wall. You might reduce it to appear in a printed report, where space is at a premium. The final size matters, not what you see on your desktop.

Images courtesy of Nigel Holmes

Presentations 101

Don't make these common mistakes

by John Clayton

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Inexperienced presenters make two kinds of mistakes: the intelligent kind that all of us must work through, and the kind that is so obvious you just shake your head in disbelief.

Let's deal with the obvious ones first:

- **Reading from a script.** There's no faster way to lose your audience's attention. Instead, look up and establish a personal connection with the audience.
- **Hiding at the back of the room or behind a podium.** Let the audience see you and your body language.
- **Ignoring time constraints.** Don't try to give a 30-minute speech in a five-minute slot.
- **Going off on tangents.** Anecdotes can be powerful tools; just be sure to keep them relevant to your point.

Then there are the mistakes that require more sophisticated responses.

1. Not knowing your audience. In any communication task, you must understand what your audience needs to know. Your first step—long before you walk into the room—is to ask who the audience is and how they will use the information you provide. Then you can structure your presentation around those needs: pluses and minuses of a proposed strategy, overview of a new software package, or potential applications of the recent research.

In presentations, unlike in other forms of communication, your audience can and will give immediate feedback. Thus, the best presentations are interactive. At its most basic, interactivity comes in the form of a question or discussion time. More sophisticated—and usually more effective—are exercises

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that focus audience activity on key issues. For example, get your audience to design solutions to real problems that they are facing.

You can also use interactivity to fine-tune some details. For example, a written report might include the caveat “We assume you are familiar with single-entry accounting.” But now you don’t have to assume. Instead, ask, “Is everyone here familiar with single-entry accounting?” Don’t forget to look around for their answers—and seek out the hesitant facial expressions of those who hate to admit their ignorance.

2. Failing to grab your listeners’ attention.

The audience arrives wondering: *Why should we care? Why is this important?* So, rather than jumping straight into the history of federal housing on Indian reservations, start by describing the current housing crisis. You get your listeners’ minds working (*How did this come about? How can we solve it?*) in ways that give them context for the historical discussion.

Usually the easiest way to hook the audience is to describe the problem you set out to solve—though if the audience is familiar with it, make the description brief. Other successful “grabbers” can be anecdotes (“When I opened a can of our company’s dog food last week, I discovered...”) or surprising facts (“Over half of our customers expect to buy a DVD player within the next six months”).

3. Neglecting to provide a road map. Once you’ve gotten the audience interested, they start wondering, “Where are we going?” If the terrain is complicated, they may need a road map. A “Table of Contents” slide will help them understand what you want to do. As you start each new section of the outline, return to that slide to help your audience understand where they are, where they’ve been, and where they’re going.

If your outline is simple, don’t waste precious time on lengthy explanations. Still, you may want to describe in one sentence what the audience will learn. “By the end of today’s presentation, I hope you will understand how online buying is shaping the industry, who the major players are, and where we should invest to compete.”

4. Presenting without visual aids. The five senses provide different pathways to people’s brains. Your presentation should transmit information to your audience through these

multiple pathways. Effects on smell, touch, and taste may be difficult to create—but visual aids are easy and powerful.

For many concepts—including relationships, flows, and spatial organization—we think visually. We have diagrams, charts, and maps in our heads. Why should you translate them into words and force your audience to translate them back to visuals?

Visual aids also trigger emotional responses (that’s why advertisers show attractive, happy people using their products). We are especially drawn to pictures of other people. So, for example, if you are proposing strategies to improve employee satisfaction, or if you are commending individuals such as this month’s sales leaders, use pictures to enhance the person-to-person aspects of communication.

By contrast, text-based visuals are barely better than no visuals at all. Because people can read faster than you can talk, they find nothing more boring than looking at a text-heavy slide as you read it aloud word-for-word. Visual aids should have objects, pictures, or diagrams combined with words; their effect should reinforce without repeating what you say aloud.

Similarly, visuals are usually best on a screen, not a handout. When you use a handout, people look at it instead of at you. You lose the audience focus and group dynamic. Handouts are good for listing procedures or providing properly spelled Web site addresses. But never hand out an article providing additional background—some people will read the handout instead of listening to you, and most will throw it away unread. Instead, let those who are interested come get it at the end of the presentation.

5. Using visuals that don’t relate to your message. Just as each paragraph you write should have a point, so should each visual aid. You express a paragraph’s point in the topic sentence; you express a visual aid’s point in its title. Why am I looking at this picture of smiling people? A title should tell me: “This initiative will increase employee satisfaction.” Your words should also integrate with the visual, perhaps including phrases such as “As you can see on the slide....”

Too often, a presenter will display a dense table of numbers, perhaps copied from another source. Which numbers should I look at? What trend do they illustrate? You should design and edit your

visual aids in much the same way you format and edit a document—continually thinking about the effect on the audience. Should key numbers in this table be boldfaced? Should it be a pie chart or stacked-bar chart instead? By asking such questions, you continually compare your visual aid to the message you want it to convey.

6. Not letting visual aids do their work.

Presenters make fascinating mistakes with visual aids:

- Blocking the screen with their bodies
- Talking to the screen rather than the audience
- Displaying a slide for ten seconds or less—not enough time for its message to sink in

Since you spend so much time developing an effective slide, make sure you let it do its work while you do yours. Practice to make the following physical actions become second nature:

- Stand where most of the audience can see both you and the screen
- Glance at each slide to make sure it's correct, then turn to address the audience

- As you speak, check your audience's faces to see that the slide has registered with them

7. Presenting without passion. Despite an ever-growing array of communication options, presentations remain essential to the business world. Why? In part, a presentation allows interaction between audience and presenter, and among audience members who can develop team spirit. But mainly, a presentation is an in-person experience. It's not just your words and visuals that make your presentation, but *you*. The audience will judge your credibility, substance, and passion—and they've come to the presentation because they can best make those judgments in person.

When you stand up in front of a crowd, you must believe that you're telling them something important. When the audience feels your trust and faith in the topic—if you have been effective in communicating it—you pass the implicit test they came to this room to give you. Your presentation succeeds.

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