Achieve

Impact

through
Persuasive Presentation Design

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All the best efforts of competitive intelligence professionals come to nothing if they are not presented effectively. A vital—yet much misunderstood—component of a presentation is the *layout* of each slide: how should each page or slide be designed to communicate its message most effectively?

Yes, there are other important questions, such as:

- What is the predominant personality type among the people you are presenting to?
- What does this imply for how they like to receive information?
- What attitudinal and behavioral changes are you trying to achieve in your audience?
- What information should you include in the actual presentation, and what should you put in an appendix or leave out entirely?

But where the rubber hits the road—or more precisely, where the message hits the eye—is in the actual design of each page, or slide, in your presentation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PAGE LAYOUT

No matter how carefully you plan your presentation, 50 slides with seven bullet points of seven words each are almost guaranteed to numb your audience to the point of incomprehension. We've all sat through this kind of "Death by PowerPoint"—it's no fun, so why do we continue to inflict it on others?

The central question is:

How do you lay out each slide so that it grabs the audience's interest and persuasively conveys the intended message?

The answer is:

Design each page so that the page layout itself reinforces the main message of the page.

For example, if a slide deals with a proposed process, then draw the process across the page. If you're discussing two alternatives, draw the alternatives on either side of the page. If you're explaining how several factors are converging to create the current conditions, then draw the factors around the side of the page, with arrows pointing to the current conditions in the middle. Always prefer diagrams and images to text, because diagrams reinforce a spoken presentation while text competes with it.

TABLE 1: CHOOSING THE CORRECT PRESENTATION IDIOM

	"Ballroom Style"	*"Conference Room Style"*
TYPICAL CONDITIONS		
Audience Size	Larger (50+)	Any, but particularly suited to smaller audiences
Information Flow	Primarily one-way (speaker to audience)	Two-way
Objective	Inform, entertain	Engage, persuade, facilitate decision-making, and drive action
Constraints	Minimize downside ("Don't look bad")	Maximize upside ("Let's make a difference")
PRESENTATION IMPLICATIONS		
Visual metaphor	TV network news	Blueprint or architectural drawing
Animation	Extensive	Little or none
Color	Extensive	Some, for emphasis, or none
Delivery	Projection	Printed paper
Length and delivery speed	More slides – 1/minute	Less pages – 1-10/hour
Type size	Larger (visible from back of room - typically 24 point minimum)	Smaller (9 point acceptable)
Duration	20-45 minutes	Any

THE SQUINT TEST

A good way to test whether your page is laid out properly is to apply what designers call the "squint test." Squint at the page, so that all the text is blurred and illegible. Do you get anything about the page without having to read the text? If you can see that the page is showing a process or two or three alternatives or a bunch of things converging, then your page passes the squint test.

The squint test simulates what the brain registers in the first fraction of a second after your slide hits the viewer's retina. If this introduces the main point of your page, the rest of your message from that page can be received more easily than if the brain has to spend the next few seconds trying to decipher your point.

Does your typical bullet point page pass the squint test? At best, this kind of page layout suggests a list. If the message of the page is a list, then this page layout may be appropriate. But help the viewer understand what kind of a list it is. If it's a checklist, use checkboxes instead of bullets. If it's a series of steps, a more effective layout would be a process diagram across the page. At worst, when the brain registers a series of bullets—perhaps for the fiftieth time that hour—it wanders off to some other more pleasing image, such as next summer's vacation.

Once you have a rough sketch of the layout of each page, place the pages side by side across your desk to create a storyboard for your presentation. Scan this storyboard to make sure that there is enough variety in page layout, from slide to slide. If your presentation is repetitive, consider combining some of the pages.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT PRESENTATION IDIOM

Once you have the layout of each page, the next step is to fill in the details by choosing a presentation idiom. A presentation idiom is a form of expression and an associated set of design principles. Two types of presentation idiom are what I call ballroom style and conference room style.

Ballroom style presentations, like most typical PowerPoint presentations, are colorful, vibrant, attention-grabbing, and (sometimes) noisy. They typically take place in a large, dark room—such as a hotel ballroom. Conference room presentations are more understated: they have less color and more details on each page. They are more likely to be on printed handouts than projected slides, and they are more suited to your average corporate conference room.

The single biggest mistake that presenters make is to confuse the two idioms, and particularly to use ballroom style where conference room style is more appropriate. I would estimate that upwards of 90 percent of all PowerPoint presentations use ballroom style, yet most of the time our presentation conditions call for conference room style.

Ballroom style is appropriate for presentations in which:

- the objective is to inform, impress, and/or entertain a large audience.
- the information flow is largely expected to be one-way (presenter to audience).
- the main constraint is to minimize the downside ("don't look bad").

Conference room style presentations are more suited to meetings where the objective is to:

- engage
- persuade
- come to some conclusion
- drive action

Information flow in this idiom is expected to be two-way, and the main constraint is to maximize the upside: "Let's make a difference." (See table 1.)

GOOD BALLROOM STYLE PRESENTATIONS

The look that you are trying to achieve with ballroom style is that of the evening news: visually rich and thoroughly professional. To do this, you will want to project your presentation rather than hand it out, so that you can make extensive, but always appropriate, use of color, animation, and sound.

How do you know what is appropriate? Color, animation, and sound are appropriate when they are used to convey or emphasize information; they are inappropriate and should be ruthlessly eliminated when they serve only to embellish or distract. Use of relevant video segments, photographs, and diagrams is appropriate. And don't forget that each page has to pass the squint test.

Plan on 1 to 5 minutes per slide for the a ballroom presentation but no more than 45 minutes in all, else you risk having an audience that is dozing in the dark. Therefore the maximum length of a Ballroom style presentation is 45 slides (45 minutes x 1 slide/minute).

GOOD CONFERENCE ROOM STYLE PRESENTATIONS

A conference room style presentation should look more like an architectural drawing than something you'd see on television, and it is best delivered on paper. Paper allows much greater resolution and therefore more information on each page. Here you can use font sizes as small as 9 point without difficulty, whereas in ballroom style 24-point is usually the minimum safe size. More information on each

page also facilitates more productive conversations, because all the information for the discussion of the moment is right in front of everyone on a single page A single printed page can fit the contents of 3, 4, or even 10 projected slides.

Paper delivery also allows people to write on the presentation, so that they can better engage with your content and communicate back to you any suggested changes. Also, as Edward Tufte says, it sends a message that you are confident in your content, because you are allowing your audience to walk away with it. Because conference room style presentations contain so much more detail on each page, they tend to have significantly fewer pages. You could spend anywhere between 10 minutes to over an hour on each conference room style page.

GOOD AND BAD HYBRIDS

Sometimes it is appropriate to alternate styles within a presentation. For example, you might provide a handout at the end of a ballroom-style presentation, particularly if you want your audience to walk away with some important details. Or, in the middle of a conference room style presentation, you might pause to project a brief video segment or some images and then return to the handout to continue the discussion. This works as long as you are alternating between styles. Don't ever try to mix the two styles—never project a conference-room style page or hand out a ballroom style slide.

If you want the intelligence that you have worked so hard on to have the impact that it deserves, you need to design a persuasive presentation. To design a persuasive presentation, choose the right presentation idiom and make sure that the layout of each page or slide reinforces the main message of the page.

[Editor's note: this article is based in Dr. Abela's SCIP06 presentation.]

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