Unclutter presentation and give audience a reason to look at visuals

How many times have you sat through a business presentation where somebody used a lot of visuals during the presentation, and you couldn’t see them well or understand what they meant?

Often there is more than one presenter, which makes the situation even worse.

When you are giving a presentation, here’s a good rule to follow: If your audience can’t see or understand your visuals, don’t use them. That’s pretty simple and straightforward.

Most speakers elect to use visuals because they attract attention and can carry information, but those two reasons can also cause problems for both the speaker and the audience. Because visuals attract attention, they compete with the speaker. And because visuals can carry information, they often carry too much information.

Whether you use low-tech slides and overheads or high-tech computers, here are a few suggestions for making and using visuals so they help both you and your audience:

- Don’t put too much “stuff” on the screen. Your audience won’t understand it. While you were working on your presentation, you had plenty of time to think about and design your visuals, but your audience gets a quick look without time to study.
- Make it easy for them to follow what you mean. You’re the “show” and the visuals are your props, so present information clearly and sparingly. If everything you intend to say is on your visuals, the audience doesn’t need you. So cancel the meeting and mail them the visuals.
- Assuming that’s not an option, think about these guidelines for three types of visuals: words, graphs and pictures.

**Words:** Keep the word count down by using bullets rather than complete sentences. Limit yourself to about four words per bullet and four or five bullets to a single visual. Use plain, bold letters that stand out clearly in contrast to the background.

**Graphs:** Keep these simple and uncomplicated. They usually show trends and comparisons related to numbers, and numbers can do only three things: They get bigger, they get smaller or they stay the same.

- Instead of using hard numbers and spreadsheets during your presentation to show trends and comparisons, use graphs and charts. They’re much easier for the audience to read and understand. Have the hard numbers ready for the discussion that follows the presentation.

**Pictures:** These are worth the proverbial “thousand words.” Even if you are artistically challenged, you can find good artwork to reproduce or use your computer for appropriate graphics. Other speakers may use the same computer graphics package you use, so be careful your presentation doesn’t look like all the others. If it does, you lose impact.

One additional thought: Many speakers use handouts, and they make the handouts and the presentation visuals look the same. Usually this is a bad idea. What makes a good presentation visual doesn’t necessarily make a good handout, and vice versa.

Think of handouts and presentation visuals as cousins not twins. There should be a family resemblance, but they aren’t identical.

Finally, during your presentation don’t talk to the screen. Talk to your audience. They are the ones who deserve your attention and focus, and they are the ones who will respond to your presentation. The screen won’t, so don’t waste your words there.

Use these suggestions, and your audiences will appreciate your work and understand your ideas.

Bob Parkinson is a communications consultant, working in private industry, government, and higher education. He has written five books and hosted numerous radio and television programs. He can be reached at jrp@jparkinson.com or at www.jparkinson.com.