

A Few Good Words—Presenting Clearly

By Sally F. Cutler

Your chief audit executive has taken a long look at the slide presentations your internal auditing staff gives to senior management and executives, and she doesn't like what she sees. These presentations are used at audit opening meetings, audit closing meetings, and at the start of consulting projects. The substance of the presentations is excellent. But your chief audit executive thinks the slides look old-fashioned—even unprofessional—and you agree. She's given you the task of revising them so that their "look" matches the quality of their content. But you're not a graphic designer, so where do you start? What makes slide presentations clear and professional?

Not Just Cut-and-Paste

The best presentation slides are supporting materials. They serve as information "anchors" not only for your audience but also for you and others who are presenting. To build clear and functional slides, think of them in this way: they should not duplicate your hardcopy materials nor should they be a repository for all the information inside your head.

Content

Controlling the amount and style of the content contributes to clear, readable slides.

Amount of content

"Six-by-six" is a good rule for slide content: put no more than six bullets on a slide, and include no more than six words per bullet. Your slides will be readable, and they will support—not distract from—your presentation.

Style of content

Following the six-by-six rule requires editorial restraint and skill. For example, say you want to convey these three ideas: (1) Our risk-based audit process enables us to focus on the highest-level risks within the organization, (2) The planning of our audit coverage for the year uses a risk-based process, and (3) During each engagement, we apply the risk-based

process as well. You have fewer than six bullets, but each one is longer than six words. Here's how you might compress these three statements into readable bullets on a slide titled "Risk-Based Audit Process": (1) Focuses on highest-level risks, (2) Annual audit planning approach, (3) During audits, application of risk-based process.

You're partway there, but you now need to edit so that the bulleted items are parallel. When bullet items are "parallel," each uses the same grammatical form. Parallelism enhances clarity, making it easier for your audience to scan the list and to absorb the ideas. You might revise your example slide "Risk-Based Audit Process" like this: (1) Focused on highest-level risks, (2) Used in annual audit planning, and (3) Applied during audit engagement.

What if you have more than six bullet items on a topic? You have two choices: combine some of the items to stay within the six-by-six rule, or make more than one slide. Combining will challenge you to edit well. On the other hand, making more than one slide will challenge you to break the content rationally. Further, making more than one slide may mean you have to backtrack during the presentation. Despite these challenges, repeatedly violating the six-by-six rule leads to audience overload.

Graphic Quality

Slide programs provide tempting options for fonts, graphics, and animation. But just because you can do something graphically doesn't mean that you should do it. Poor decisions about graphic quality distract from rather than enhance a presentation.

Four graphic-quality considerations will support the content quality of your slides:

- Readable colors
- Readable fonts
- Appropriate graphics
- Appropriate animation

Readable colors

An infinite variety of background and font colors is available, so how do you choose?

- Consider the environment in which the slides will be projected. If they will be used in medium to large space (for example, during a conference presentation or a seminar), light letters on a dark background are easier to read because a bright, white background with dark letters is visually fatiguing on a large screen. In a smaller setting, however, dark letters on a light background work well.
- Avoid color combinations that make for hard reading. The presenter who chose an emerald green background with bright yellow letters left his audience with a headache rather than with memorable content.

As you develop your color pallet, limit the number of colors to three or four, and use them consistently. That is, ensure that headings are always the same color and that bulleted text and sub-bulleted text follows a consistent color pattern. Often, using only one color for all of the text—regardless of its position as heading, bullet, or sub-bullet—is the least distracting choice.

Keep in mind that you can alter the colors in any standard template your slide program offers, and you can re-color clip-art graphics as well. Doing so makes such clip art an integral and pleasing component of your presentation.

Readable fonts

As with colors, fonts are available in almost infinite variety. For clarity's sake, don't be tempted: use one font throughout the presentation, altering font size or font characteristics (bolding or italics) to make distinctions where needed.

A key distinction is between *serif* and *sans serif* fonts. *Serif* fonts are characterized by variations in the thickness of the lines that make up the letters and by small

ornaments (these are the *serifs*) on letters; Times New Roman is a typical *serif* font. *Sans serif* fonts are characterized by lack of variation (or only slight variation) in the thickness of lines and by lack of ornamentation (thus, *sans serif*, meaning “without serifs” in French); Arial is a typical *sans serif* font.

Although printed text is more readable in *serif* fonts, projected text is more readable in *sans serif* fonts. This is because *serif* fonts may break up when projected: the ornamentations become slightly fuzzy distractions.

Finally, you should select a font that does not contain what are called “ligatures.” Specifically, some fonts place certain letters so close together that parts of the letters touch; for example, side-by-side t’s may appear to be crossed by a single line. Avoid these fonts; they are difficult to read when projected.

Appropriate graphics

It’s true that a picture can be worth a thousand words. Graphics include the “pictures” we call charts and graphs as well as images such as logos, clip art, photographs, and video. Charts and graphs compress detailed information and highlight features within the information; images convey impressionistic messages.

In deciding which chart or graph to use, consider the message you aim to deliver. Each type of chart or graph has a best use. For example, line graphs highlight changes or trends in one or several elements over time, bar graphs highlight comparisons, pie charts show proportional distribution of data, and flowcharts represent chronological order and decision points.

A projected chart or graph must be simple enough to make the point at a glance. For example, a line graph will confuse rather than clarify when it has more than 10 hash marks on either axis, has more than three lines on the chart, or needs explanatory footnotes.

Finally, check the chart or graph for visual clarity. For example, if you are relying on dashed lines or patterned bars,

ensure that they can be distinguished one from the other.

Images are powerful, and you should consider any images from all perspectives, using these questions as a starting point:

- Does the image contribute to the message of the slide? A presentation where every slide has an image—regardless of its appropriateness—not only is challenging to create but also is distracting to audiences as they ponder what the random images mean. When in doubt, omit the image.
- Does the image appropriately represent the diversity of your organization?
- Does the image invoke the appropriate emotion? Images are inherently evocative; ensure that the emotion of the image matches the message of the slide.

Finally, when using clip art, choose images from the same “family.” For example, avoid mixing cartoons or iconic images with more literal images. Staying within image families will be less challenging if you use images sparingly and appropriately.

Appropriate animation

You can make slides, text, graphics, and images enter, disappear, flash, and otherwise dance all over the screen. Don’t do it. Use animation as you use graphics: to support the messages. Your aim is not to entertain your audience or to keep them guessing about what clever thing will happen on the next slide. In fact, audiences today are so sophisticated that almost nothing you do with animation will impress them. Rather, you will diminish the effectiveness of your message. They may even wonder how you had the time to build in all of that animation!

Use the simplest animation possible. For example, use bullet-by-bullet builds when you want to synchronize the delivery of the bullets to a fuller explanation of each. In contrast, you likely do not need a bullet-by-bullet build if you are advancing all the bullets with little to

say about each (or if you are having the slide program do so).

Animate your graphics when the animation adds something to the message. If, for example, you want to show a dramatic comparison, an animated bar chart can help drive home the comparison.

Finally, if your audience has the printed presentation in front of them, remember that what you are revealing has already been revealed to them. Use the animation sparingly to avoid unnecessarily slowing down your delivery.

Alignment with Your Audience and Your Organization

As with any communication, your reality check for slides should be to view them through your audience’s eyes. Are they readable? Are they clear? Do they support your message? Do they contain any distractions? Will the audience understand?

Finally, to use your slides for maximum effect, ensure that they take on the style and look of your organization. Using your organization’s logo and color scheme telegraphs that you are an integral part of the organization. Matching the formality or informality of your organization sends a similar message. Does your organization like charts and graphs? Use them. Does it rely on visual imagery? Include images.

By aligning with the audience and the organization—and by following the best practices for content and graphics—our auditor was able to produce polished, up-to-date presentations that made the chief audit executive proud. **NP**

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