Making PowerPoint Presentations Powerful

PowerPoint can make your point—if you use it effectively.

By John Hutchison, CPA, MBA, SFO

Like it or not, the moment you choose to use PowerPoint, you become a designer.

"Everything I learned about design I learned in kindergarten."

Of the hundreds of presentations I've made in my career, the majority of them used Power-Point and were packed full of information. In fact, I can't remember how I ever survived presentations without using PowerPoint. Oh yeah, now I remember. I actually had a conversation with my audience and explained the topic to them.

Before we get into the details of how to design effective PowerPoint presentations, let me propose three undeniable truths:

1. When designing a PowerPoint (or Keynote) presentation, you must first decide whether you need Power-Point at all.

2. Like it or not, the moment you choose to use Pow-erPoint, you become a designer. You have chosen a visual tool to communicate, so you owe it to

your audience to learn a thing or two about visual communications.

3. Your audience will subconsciously form opinions about you on the basis of the visual appeal of your presentation.

If you can accept those truths, read on. If not, do your audience a favor and stop using PowerPoint for your presentations.

PowerPoint by the Letter (or Letterman)

In honor of David Letterman's upcoming retirement, I have come up with my own Top 10—the Top 10 Design Tips for PowerPoint.

10. Start at the beginning. The cover slide is the most underused slide in PowerPoint. The presenter often completely skips or brushes over it, but a well-designed cover slide is the key to setting the tone for the entire presentation. A beautiful cover on display as you introduce yourself and your presentation sets the stage for the quality that will follow.

The cover slide should start the visual theme you will carry throughout the presentation, giving it cohesiveness and professionalism. Remember, your audience is going to form opinions about you with regard to the visual appeal of your presentation, so first impressions are important.

9. Be original. Using the built-in PowerPoint templates to design your presentation is suicidal and signals to your audience that you didn't really care about developing your presentation. If you don't care enough about your message, why should your audience? Something custom tailored makes a strong statement.

8. Keep it super simple (KISS). KISS is the Holy Grail of design—where the rubber meets the road. You are in the driver's seat. You want to keep the road as clear as possible and direct how the audience travels through your presentation.

The words that you are going to speak are the reason you are there.

The first step is to clear the clutter. That can be a real challenge for nondesigners, especially those of us who work with detailed information every day. The challenge stems from a lack of understanding about the purpose of the slide. The slides should not include all the information. If your slides have everything your audience needs to know, why do *you* need to be there? Why didn't you just write a memo?

The words that you are going to speak are the reason you are there. Your PowerPoint slides should serve as a simplified visual aid, a rough outline. However, they

need to grab your audience's attention, to keep them listening and wanting more.

The average PowerPoint slide contains 40 words. That's too many. Steve Jobs of Apple used 19 words across 12 slides when introducing the iPhone. Jeff Bezos of Amazon used no words, only images and video when launching the Kindle Fire. When it comes to presentations, text is overrated. **Rule of Thumb:** Select one idea and no more than six lines of text per slide.

Generally, the information we present as business officials isn't very sexy. Reading your slides makes a bad situation worse. An added benefit of keeping your slides simple is that it will keep you from reading to the audience.

Typography, color, photographs, illustrations, and other design techniques are proven ways to create strong focal points in your presentation. Without clear focal points, your viewer will lose interest quickly! The following five basic design principles will help:

- **Flow**—the way the eye travels across the page. People should be able to move their eyes back and forth across your slide only once in order to process your information.
- **Contrast**—the way our eyes are drawn to things that stand out. Contrast is created through an object's size, shape, color, and proximity.
- **White space**—the open space that surrounds items of interest. White space can highlight an item and sharpen the viewer's focus.
- **Hierarchy**—the arrangement of items that allows a viewer to quickly identify a slide's most important elements.
- **Unity**—a cohesive look.

Each of those principles has a variety of techniques associated with them. Take flow, for example. Countless studies support our attraction to the human face. Not only do faces help grab the attention of your audience, they also play a role in how the viewer reads the page and interprets the message. We tend to read and process from left to right and top to bottom. The human face trumps that tendency. Most people will look first at any faces present, followed closely by the item with the greatest volume of space. The direction the face is looking is also significant because the mind naturally seeks out the information that the face is looking at. Figure 1 helps illustrate this point.

Both pictures are aesthetically pleasing. But notice how the second example immediately draws your eyes to the faces and then to the message, which is aligned at eye level. I am not suggesting that you fill your presentations with faces, but understand how certain design elements can help you communicate your message more clearly. Keeping your slides simple is hard work and takes a lot of planning and design knowledge.
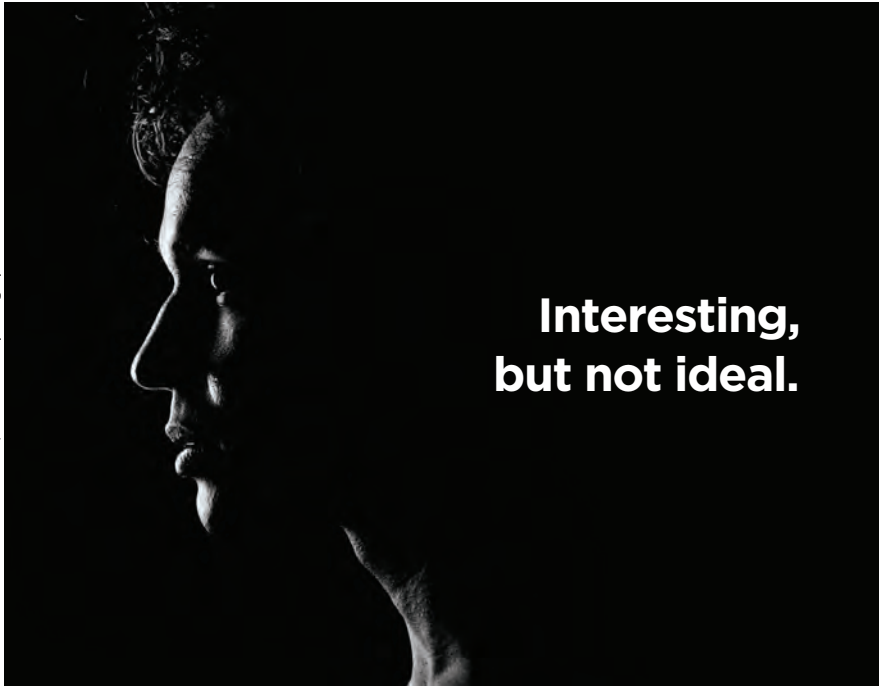
Interesting, but not ideal.
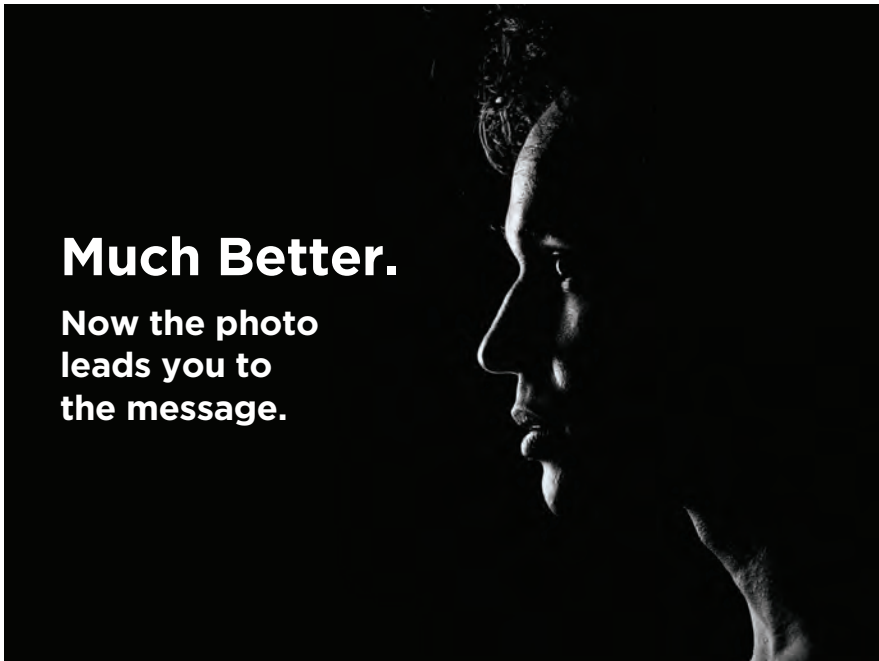
Much Better.

Now the photo leads you to the message.

Figure 1. Faces can draw attention to your text if used effectively.

Before we move on, here is one more tip to simplify your presentations: freeze the animation. Don't use animation just because you think it's a fun novelty. Animation steals the spotlight from key information. It is useful only when it helps control the flow of information and audience focus—like slowly building a math calculation.

7. Boot the bullets. Bullet points are a familiar format and can be a great tool for conveying the most important components of your message. So what's the problem? Presenters often get carried away. When you use too many bullets, you create a death spiral and lose your audience's attention. Remember, bullet points convey key

information. They are not meant to tell the whole story.

You must make thoughtful decisions about what to include on your slides versus what you verbalize. Not only do you need to think like a designer, you need to think like a lawyer. Build your case incrementally, one slide at a time.

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6. Keep in mind that pictures are worth a thousand words.
In addition to supporting your message, visuals evoke emotional responses that promote retention and increase effect. Photos are a great way to convey your message concisely, but don't get carried away. You're making a presentation, not a photo album. Try to limit your slides to a single image with simple or no text and then go old school: speak to your audience, build your story.

When you use photographs, be sure to use quality photography. Don't go for those cheesy stock images or unisex animated stick figures. If you don't know where to find amazing photos, try Stock Xchng (www.stockxchng.org) or Flickr (www.flickr.com/search). **Rule of Thumb:** No photo is better than a bad photo.

5. Color like a kindergartner.
Remember when you drew pictures in kindergarten? You always used the boldest, most contrasting colors and drew with real emotion and meaning. Find that inner child and draw attention through the use of contrasting colors. Colors are emotional—they elicit feelings. Studies show that color can increase interest and improve learning comprehension and retention.

You don't need to be an expert in color theory, but you need to know a little about the subject. Colors can
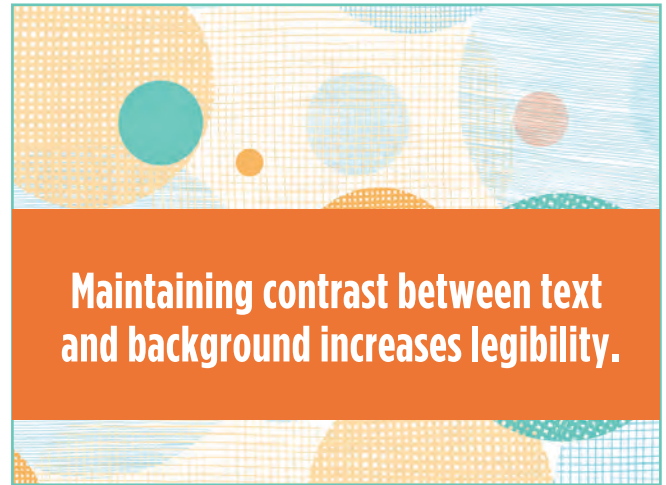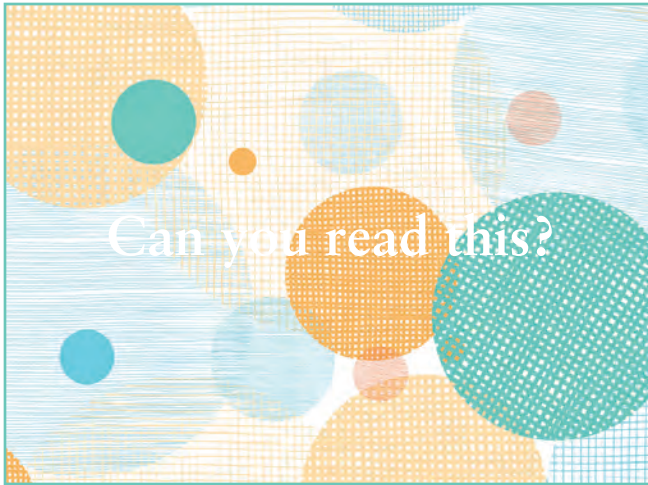
Figure 2. Be aware of how colors and backgrounds affect readability of the text.

be divided into two general categories: cool colors like blue and green and warm colors like red and orange. Cool colors work best for backgrounds, as they appear to recede from us. Warm colors generally work best for objects in the foreground, such as text, because they appear to be coming at us.

One of the complications of using photography in your slides is that you introduce a lot of color variation in your background that makes your text hard to read. Using a stylish bar of color behind the image can maintain legibility while adding visual interest (Figure 2).

Rule of Thumb: Use no more than five colors. The key to effectiveness is a harmonious palette. Say what? For help in selecting colors, check out Adobe's Kuler (https://color.adobe.com/create/color-wheel/) or COLOURlovers (www.colourlovers.com).

The color of your text is important. Make sure to use contrasting text colors to draw attention to your message. It's bold and italics on steroids. **Rule of Thumb:** Use a

single color in your selected palette to emphasize important points in your text, but don't overdo it (Figure 3).

It's not about being new and cool; it's about helping convey your message.

If you will be presenting in a dark room, a dark background with white or light text will work fine. But if you plan to keep most of the lights on during your presentation, a white background with black or dark text works much better. In rooms with a good deal of ambient light, a screen image with a dark background and light text tends to wash out, but dark text on a light background will maintain its visual intensity a bit better. To learn more about color (and design), check out CreativePro (www.creativepro.com).

4. Learn font fundamentals. Typography is a major art form in the design world. Typefaces communicate
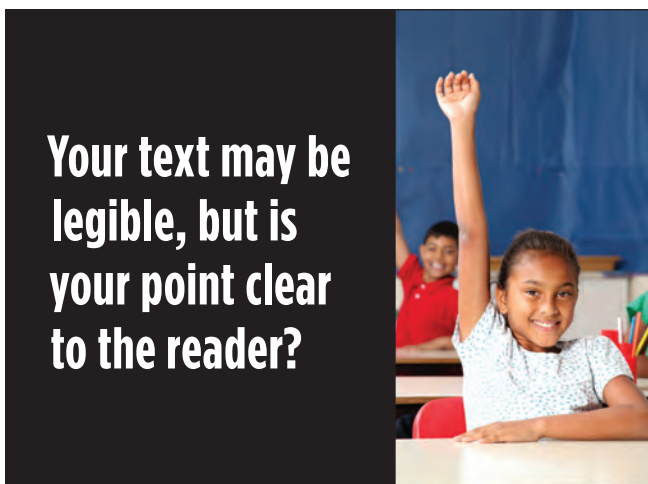

Figure 3. Contrasting colors can create balance and highlight text.

mood, so put some thought into their selection. It's not about being new and cool; it's about helping convey your message. Old style serif fonts such as Times Roman and Garamond tend to feel formal and professional, whereas sans-serif fonts like Arial or Lithograph feel modern and clean.

With typography, go for legibility over fun. Reserve creative fonts for the titles rather than the body. For the slide's body, stick to traditional typefaces like Helvetica or Arial. Against dark backgrounds, always bold the text for readability. Size your fonts appropriately. Remember, the person in the back of the room has to read your slides. Don't be afraid of traditional, standard-looking fonts. They will ensure that your design remains clean.

3. Consider using video and audio. Video clips activate cognitive processing, so consider using them to show concrete examples. Using video clips will not only illustrate your point effectively but will also serve as a change of pace, thereby increasing your audience's interest. Audio clips such as interviews are effective as well, but avoid cheesy sound effects. The excessive use of sound effects attached to animation is a sure-fire way to lose credibility with your audience.

2. Use charts. Graphics are a great way to reduce a lot of information into manageable pieces. Most of us have had quite a bit of practice using graphics, so I won't dwell on this point. Here are some quick guides to good chart design:

- Pie charts are great for showing percentages. Limit the "pie" to 4–6 slices, and contrast the most important slice with color or explosion.
- Vertical bar charts are perfect for showing changes in quantity over time. Limit the chart to 4–8 bars.
- Horizontal bar charts are used to compare quantities. Limit the chart to 4–8 bars.
- Line charts are excellent for demonstrating trends. Limit the chart to 4–6 lines.

Charts show significant changes better than tables of data. However, if you are trying to downplay the change—for example, a loss in revenue—a table will display that information in less dramatic fashion.

1. Remember, it's OK to laugh. We've talked about professionalism and serious design stuff, but don't forget to be entertaining. Whether you are horrible at delivering witty one-liners or are a natural-born comedian, it helps ease the pressure of being on stage by letting your slides handle some or all of the humor. In that way, you can be perceived as funny without worrying about botching the punch line.

Roaring laughter from the crowd is not the goal. An occasional smile from a few audience members goes a long way toward knowing they are paying attention. Don't pour it on too thick, or the audience will know that you are trying too hard. **Rule of Thumb:** Find the most boring or complicated parts of your speech, and break them up with a funny slide or two.

Always consider your audience carefully when deciding what type of humor is appropriate. Offending your audience is far worse than boring them.

Power Up Your Presentation

Literally thousands of resources are at your fingertips to help you improve the design of your presentations. With just a little bit of work, you can design PowerPoint presentations that help you convey the message you want to convey. But please remember, it is your responsibility as a presenter to inform, inspire, and, yes, entertain your audience.

If you invest the time to learn more about design, you will be rewarded a thousandfold with a well-informed audience.

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