

# Graphical Excellence in the Real World

By Susan de la Vergne

## Technical Presentations and PowerPoint

In every organization I've been in—both the clients I teach for today and the companies I worked for during my own 25-year career in Information Technology—the complaints about PowerPoint slides in technical presentations are the same: they're confusing, too dense, they seem disorganized, they're hard to follow, they're obscuring the message, and sometimes they're even boring.

Some complainers and consultants recommend simplifying the messages—one idea per slide, for example, or cut back on the information, reduce it to whatever will fit on the screen in a big font. But that does a disservice to the content. The solution isn't to render them “lite.” Instead, the solution is to design them in ways that best serve the information they're trying to deliver. The keyword in that sentence is “design”—and I don't mean colorful background templates. I mean design that promotes comprehension, design that augments information rather than decorates it.

## Galileo, Da Vinci and Graphical Excellence

For the last few of years, I've been using the ideas and advice of Edward Tufte in my class, “Effective Technical Presentations.” Some participants in my class are already familiar with Mr. Tufte, as he's a rather renown subject matter expert in the area of visual display. The *New York Times*, for example, referred to him as the “Leonardo da Vinci of data,” and the *Wall Street Journal* has called him the “Galileo of graphics.” One might not need more in the way of credentials than that, but we could also add that he's taught statistics, graphical design and political economy at Yale.

In the last thirty years, Mr. Tufte has gathered and analyzed examples of graphic representations of information from throughout history and from a range of fields of study—architecture, history, scientific discovery, and musical composition. He's perhaps best known as someone who is

exceptionally critical of PowerPoint, at least as it's put into practice by most users of it. He demonstrates in example after example how PowerPoint invites us to degrade and smother rich content by reducing it to nothing more than big letters on a screen decorated by occasional clip art, gratuitous colors and lines, and generally poor design work.

Mr. Tufte's recommendations are especially relevant for engineering and technical presentations because every technical presenter must convey complex ideas, facts and discoveries clearly and memorably, and just about every technical presentation depends on PowerPoint slides to do so. (Some presenters, in fact, mistakenly think their slide deck *is* their presentation.)

In *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, Mr. Tufte sets out prescriptive guidelines for preparing visuals in his "Principles of Graphical Excellence." Chief among them is that slides must be "well-designed." He offers hundreds of examples in his materials (books, website) of great design.

But even after viewing them, most people are still left wondering how to achieve design excellence. It sounds reasonable but it's a significant leap to prepare slides that live up to Mr. Tufte's standards when what most presenters have been doing up until now is simply typing up speaking notes into a stream of slides which are interleaved now and then with an occasional hastily prepared graphic.

Even if someone were lucky or talented enough to hit on the right inspiration for a great design, what are the chances they'd have enough time in a typical workday to create the kind of visuals Mr. Tufte insists are needed?

## When Reality Compromises Perfection

You can make considerable improvements in slide prep that will much better serve your high content material, even when you don't hit the design jackpot. Here are a few suggestions to improve the PowerPoint portion of your presentation.

First of all, **before creating a slide, decide whether what you're about to create should be a slide at all.** Some things to ask

yourself: Am I creating a slide that's really nothing more than a cheat-sheet for me so I remember what I'm supposed to say next? If yes, skip it. That's not a reason to create a slide.

Another question: Does the information I'm about to put on a slide do anything other than provide documentation? In other words, should it be a document instead? If yes, skip it. That's not a reason to create a slide.

Another question: Does the information I'm putting on this slide amount to nothing more than a bullet list of phrases? What you want is a cogent argument, not a thin sketch of a few unfinished ideas. A bullet list of phrases isn't doing much to promote understanding of complex, rich content material. Skip it. That doesn't belong on a slide.

Another question: Does the slide contain a complete story—cause and effect, accountability for the information, a full set of data? Or is the point of this slide to “spin” the story? If yes, reconsider.

So now you've whittled down the number of slides you were going to create. Here are some other things you can do to improve the slides you are about to create.

**Skip the doo-dads.** In other words, don't decorate your data with clip art, color, or meaningless shapes. Don't put boxes around words or phrases or don't put (or allow PowerPoint to put) bullets, dashes, or other wingdings in front of words. They're just clutter.

**Bypass the PowerPoint templates.** They're just decoration. Keep your audience's focus on your information, not the shade of green it's wrapped in. Your audience has enough to figure out without visual distraction.

**Omit anything that doesn't carry information.** That includes the branding, at least the branding on every page, the repetition of the logo and company name. I know many Marketing Departments will take me to task for suggesting such heresy, but branding is, first of all, an unnecessary visual distraction and, second of all, it sort of obscures ownership. Who created this information? Oh look, it says right here: “ABC, Inc.” Not helpful. How can anyone track the information to its source?

**Write a document** when a document is called for. I'm frequently surprised by how much text goes into slides that actually belongs in some written deliverable where it might be read and remembered rather than viewed (usually at an unreadable distance) and forgotten. So move things out of slide format that don't belong in slides and put them into documents instead. (Try sending the document out before the meeting and ask people to read it ahead of time. Include a bribe—cookies for everyone who does the pre-work! Retention of the material will improve.)

And finally, try to **create slides and visual displays of information people can really linger over**. They should be lingering because there's so much to enjoy or discover, not because it's so confusing they can't find their way out. If it takes only a second to get the visual and the audience becomes instantly impatient, then your visual isn't accomplishing enough.

You may yet hit on a fabulous, inspired design for your visual displays now and then. But when you don't, employing these guidelines will help you create leaner, clearer materials.