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The proper use of visual-aids in corporate presentations

Following on last issue's article "Top mistakes in presentations skills", Wahyd Vannoni of Mediacodex discusses the proper use of visual-aids.

Most presentations fail, in part, because presenters have not really understood what visual aids are really for. The confusion arises mainly because the presenter thinks, consciously or not, that visual aids (such as powerpoint™ slides), notes and brochure are one and the same.

This article will show why this is a mistaken assumption and why it is fatal to your goal of communicating a memorable message that can be acted upon by the audience.

For the purposes of this article, we will use the following Powerpoint slide as a reference. Disregarding the actual text, its structure and use are common.

Industries:

There are numerous industry focuses within venture capital and private equity. The largest sector investments over the last year in the US, for instance, have been the following:

- 1) software
- 2) telecommunications
- 3) medical devices

4) biotechnology

5) network and equipment

Geography:

Funds are often organized by having a specific geographic region constraint in regards to making investments.

Size of Funds:

Funds vary in size; anywhere from €50 million to €5 billion. Nonetheless, originators of funds normally seek at a minimum €100 million.

Slides as notes.

A sleek slide appears on a wide screen. The presenter steps aside, looks at the slide for a few seconds and begins reading. "There are numerous industry focuses within venture capital and private equity...".

From the audience's standpoint this reading is superfluous. The audience knows how to read. It doesn't need someone to read for it.

Worse still, the audience and the presenter discover the slide at the same time. The presenter, as stated above, takes a few seconds to understand what the slide is about and then reads-on. In other words, the presenter uses the slide as a prompter in order to know what to say. By the time the presenter has figured-out where he is in the presentation, he has already lost control of his message. Why: because within those same few seconds people in the audience will scan the slide too. They will decide for themselves what in the slide is important for them.

The presenter will read from top left to bottom right (in countries where reading follows this pattern). The audience, not needing to

read every word will stop at whatever point, graph or picture it thinks is relevant. Using the slide above as an example, members in the audience can quickly scan the headlines such as “geography” and “industry” and choose, in their mind, to focus on the size of funds while the presenter is still stuck talking about the kinds of industries within venture capital.

(The more data in the slide, the more pronounced this effect will be. Slides which include graphs or a picture are a delight for the eyes of the audience, thus interfering with what the ear listens to.)

This creates confusion in the minds of the audience because humans cannot read one thing and listen to another at the same time. At best, they will rapidly switch their attention between reading and listening, but not doing properly either.

The best way to realise why this is confusing, is to watch a typical news channel with a scrawling text of headlines below the newscaster. Try to listen to the newscaster while reading the headlines for a couple of minutes and feel how confusing it is.

Why does the audience have to be distracted by what it sees? Can it not simply listen to the presenter? In short, it cannot, even if it wanted to. The visual will always overwhelm the auditive. As residents in the country of Croatia, we are blessed with being able to prove this uncontrovertially. Step into any bar or caffè in Croatia and you will be almost always find a plasma screen. Even if the place is full and you are trying to have a conversation, your eyes will periodically go back to the screen for that unmissable HRT 2 documentary on cow-milking. The problem is not the documentary in itself, the problem is that bar-owners, like presenters, think that a visual will always add something and that the glitzier the visual, the better it will be.

The presenter’s added value.

What about situations where the presenter minimises the amount of text, perhaps keeping only three or four words? There is still no good reason to include even a few words (or bullet-points). This is because, if the presenter can say it effectively, then showing these same words on a slide is useless. Equally useless, is having a

presenter making general comments on text on a slide. If the comment is pertinent and relevant to the message then slides are not needed.

The true test of a good presenter, is how much added- value this person brings to the presentation. If the audience feels that the slides might have been sent by email without losing anything from the message then the presenter becomes irrelevant. In some cases, the presentation becomes clearer without the presenter.

Visual aids are just that.

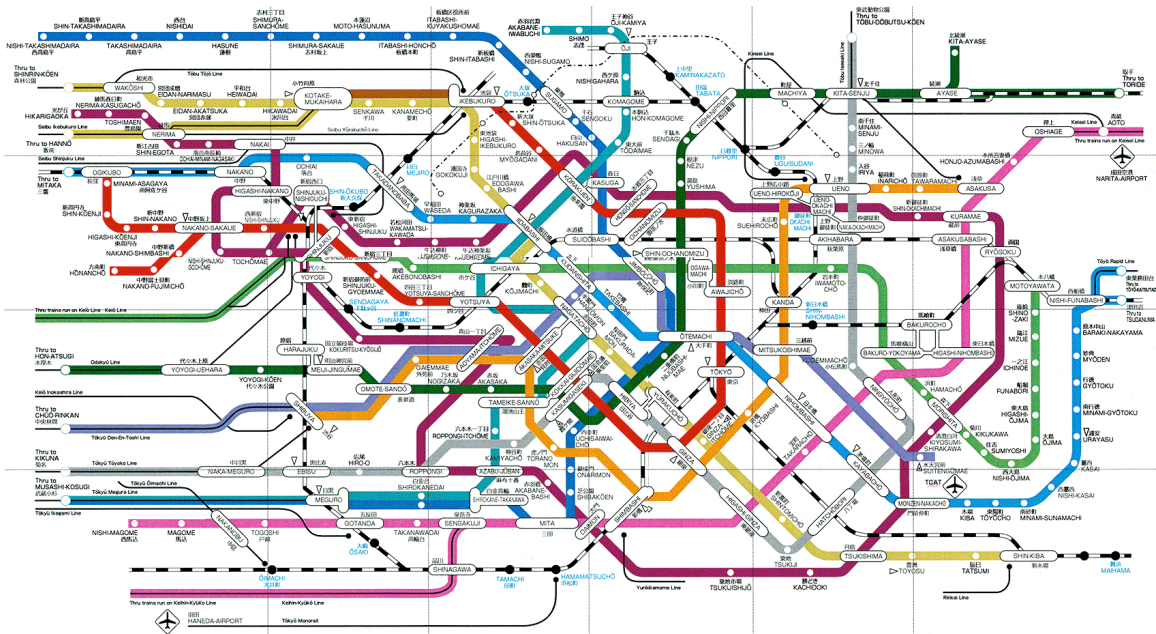
Visual aids are a potentially useful tool for the presenter. The secret lies in using them in a manner that enhances the presenter's message and personality. Their real purpose, is to help the presenter convey a message when words are not enough.

One question that should come to mind at this point however, is this: how will the presenter know what to say, if using the slides is counterproductive? The answer is simple, write a set of notes.

These notes will stay with the presenter and will not be shown to the public. Notes are a roadmap to a presentation. They are used to structure the presenter's message and make sure that the presentation is always on track.

Bringing notes is sometimes seen as a sign of weakness. After all, the presenter knows the subject inside out and could talk about it for hours. That is one reason why notes are useful. The presentation needs to stay on track and must not expand on details which, while interesting, distract from the real message that audience needs to hear. Jet-pilots always have a checklist which they methodically go through before any flight, no matter how experienced the pilot is. A presenter's notes are a pilot's checklist.

Visual aids then, come in support of your notes. Their best usage is when words cannot easily describe a concept or an idea. For instance, the idea of the complexity of the city of Tokyo, is best illustrated below with a map of the city's underground system.



There is however a right way and a wrong way to use a visual such as this. Some readers might have looked at this map before reading this article. For them, if they have understood at all that it was about Tokyo, the interpretation is independent of the text. They will have drawn independent and separate conclusions as to why this map is featured in this issue. Probably, they will have missed the intended point, which is the complexity of the city of Tokyo.

This leads us to consider the right way to use slides or visual aids in general. The presenter needs to introduce the visual. Without this context, the point the presenter wished to make will be lost. The presence of a slide or visual aid, must be justified within the context of the message of the presentation.

This context, or why the slide exists at all, must be stated before it is shown to the public.

Again, most presenter's fail in this task because they do not contextualise their visual or the data.

Where's my brochure?

We have seen that slides cannot be notes. They cannot be a brochure or a leave-behind either.

Some conference organisers find it useful to print-out the slides that will be presented and leave them in glossy folders. The audience will then find these folders on their desks.

From a communications stand-point this feature is self-defeating. It leaves the audience with the freedom to look at all that will be presented and directly skip to the slides which, for whatever reason seem relevant.

A much better solution, is to tell the audience that they will be left with a brochure. However, this brochure, to be truly effective, must be crafted for its own sake. It cannot be a print-out of the presenter's notes or of the slides.

This is because the brochure is a different medium serving different purposes. The brochure is a document that should expand upon the presentation. It should provide much more information than the presentation did. It must also expand upon and reinforce the key messages of the presenter.

Leave-behind.

The presenter should indeed use visual-aids. These must first be contextualised within the presentation. Tell the audience what they are going to see, show it to them, and then remove the slide and tell them what they saw. To do this seamlessly, every second slide should be blank, or with just a company logo. This will prevent visual distractions once the focus of attention comes back to the presenter.

Create notes before you develop your visual-aids. This will allow you help you focus on your message rather than waste time on the attractiveness or format of a slide.

Develop, if needed, a brochure or a leave-behind document. This document should complete your presentation and allows the audience to expand upon it once the presentation is over.

Remember: you the presenter, are the focus of the event, not the visuals.

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