Presentation Pointers
A Publication of Dag Knudsen, Inc.
Presentation & Sales Training for Technical Professionals

Using Computer Generated "Dazzle" to Generate Attention Usually Backfires on the Presenter.

by Dag I. Knudsen, P.E. FACEC

Part I of III

Hear! Hear! Hear!

The message: The pitfalls of "dazzle," and what it means to have an audience-focused presentation.

A manager/civil engineer at a wastewater treatment plant in Scotland said this: "I had to sit in on a health and safety meeting. The presentation was boring. We were so fed up with PowerPoint that we were placing bets on where the next bullet would come from. I don't remember a thing of the message."

Participants in my presentation seminars often ask at the onset: "How can we gain the audience attention?" Exploring the reason for the question, I invariable hear that people think they need gimmicks in order to gain attention. Moving bullets, swerving diagrams, etc.

It is time to talk about some facts. Forget about the PowerPoint* dazzle! Recent observations** have established

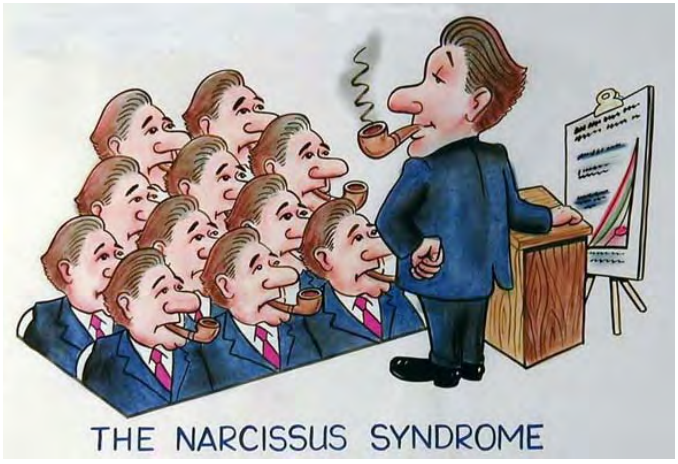

Fig 1: Some people presume an audience. Creating presentations on the assumption that the audience' interests mirror our own interest leads to classical self-centered, boring presentations. No amount of graphic treatment and electronic wizardry can overcome the poor choice of focus. Gain and keep attention by focusing on the audience' interests.

that vendor hype and a plethora of software and hardware designed to produce dazzling presentations lead to presentations that back-fire on presenters. Why? Because despite

Continued

all the hype about software and hardware capabilities, more often than not, audiences are lost, bored or confused during and after typical computer generated presentations. As Doc Searls (www.searls.com.) wrote, "Don't let presentation software keep you from getting your story across."

It's not easy to skip the "dazzle." An advertisement promotes, "...products to make jazzy presentations, 3-D effects." With all the new capabilities it is very tempting, indeed, to start using the gimmicks to jazz up a presentation. Animation is one form of adding dazzle. But it usually distracts more than helps! It can be effective as a tool to enhance comprehension of certain messages. However, before using it, always ask, "Will the use of animation here help the audience better understand the message?" If the answer is no, then the animation is a form of dazzle that will probably only hinder the message.

What do we really want a presentation to do? Dazzle an audience with movement and colors and zoom-ins and zoom-outs, or have them remember our message? Can we get our message across using "dazzle?" Only the most skilled designer of presentations might get away with it. For the rest of us, it's the message and how it is designed which needs our focus. If you want to "dazzle" your audience, do it with content, not gimmicks.

The Solution: What does it take to design and deliver an attention-getting, memorable presentation without relying on "dazzle?" It's simple: Focus on the audience and present your materials in contexts of importance to them! An audience-centered message forms the foundation for gaining and keeping attention.

Ask not what you will present. Ask WHY the audience will want to hear you. Then present your material in the context of their interest.
A landscape architect member of a selection committee asked the presenter, "How will you address the landscaping needs on this project?" The answer was, "Oh, that is such a minor part of this project, we will hire someone when we get to that point." The presenter did not recognize what was important to this decision-maker, and it cost him dearly.

Why should the architect be interested in the presentation if it did not center on his concerns as well? Clients/audiences are tuned to the radio station, WII-FM—What's In It For Me. Transmit on that frequency and you will gain their attention and interest. We pay attention to that which is of interest to us on a personal, emotional and professional level. (See my web site for the article: *Becoming Audience Focused*.) When the presentation is not truly audience focused, all the dazzle in the world will not make it an attention-getting, winning presentation.

Determine the context in which you present your message by answering the following questions: Who is in the audience? Then for each person in the audience, ask, "What is important to him or her? WHY would that person want to recommend or select you and your firm for that particular project? Hint: It isn't because of "outstanding" dazzling slides, and it isn't because you are qualified.

For example, in certain circumstances it may be more appropriate to prove to a building owner how your design can increase her profit margin or competitive position than telling her that you can design an HVAC system that will reduce energy cost. The context that gains interest is profit.

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Your proof is reduced cost. The landscape architect wants to hear how serious issues of landscaping are taken. The safety officer wants to hear how serious you are about safety. The school administrator wants to hear how serious you are about giving the students an educational experience, and the finance officer may want to hear how sensitive you are to his cash-flow challenges. When these people are all in the same audience and your win rate depends on their score, then address their individual interests and concerns. So, ask not what you will present but ask WHY each person in the audience would want to listen to you and WHY they would want to vote for you.

Conclusion: Dazzle the audience with computer gimmicks and you may delight them at the moment. Present them with a meaningful message and they will give you a higher score and remember you in the future.

* PowerPoint is a trademark of Microsoft Corporation.

** See Presentation Pointers Vol. 14, No 1 and frequent comments on the internet, including: Economic Times, 9 July, 2001; <www.searls. com>; The Gettysburg Address in PowerPoint at <www.norvig.com/Gettysburg/making.html>; The article, "Ban it now. Friends don't let friends use PowerPoint," by Tom Stewart at <www.fortune.com>.

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Stay tuned. the next issues will cover the following:

Part II: Look! Look! Look!

The visual aids: A way to create visual aids that overcome the need for distracting "dazzle."

Part III: Talk! Talk! Talk!

The delivery: A method of using visual aids that create strong attention without the need for "dazzle."

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Part II of III

Look! Look! Look!

The Visual Aids: Presenting a way to create visual aids that overcome the need for distracting "dazzle."

Uncritical use of modern presentation software leads to uninterested audiences and loss of business. This happens because inappropriate gimmickry and animation confuses the message, irritates the audience, and detracts from the presenter. Case in point: My wife attended a session where the audience applauded the speaker's opening statement: "I will not use PowerPoint." Or take the case of the Tallahassee City Council. They passed an ordinance forbidding the use of PowerPoint presentations in the council chambers.

Seth Godin, a marketing consultant, author and speaker, states in his "e-booklet" *Really Bad PowerPoint (and how to avoid it)*:

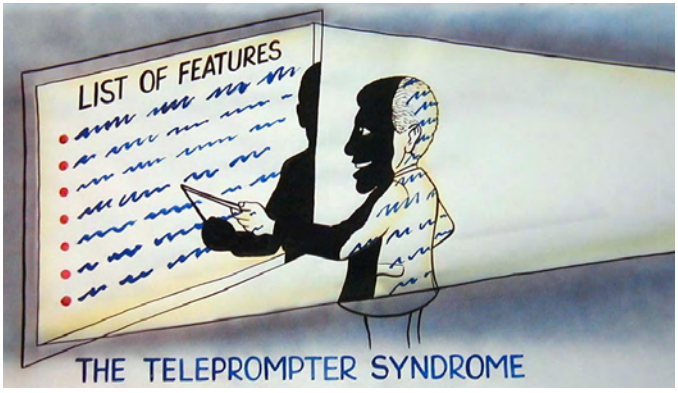

Fig 1: The audience cringes when one more presenter starts with this classical statement, heard too often:

"I know you cannot read my visuals so I will read them for you."

"PowerPoint could be the most powerful tool on your computer. But it's not.

"It's actually a dismal failure. Almost every PowerPoint presentation sucks rotten eggs. And much of the fault lies with Microsoft.

Continued

"Microsoft has built wizards and templates right into PowerPoint. And those "helpful tools" are the main reason that we've got to live with page after page of bullets, with big headlines and awful backgrounds. Let's not even get started on the built-in clip art."

See for yourself at <http://www.sethgodin.com> where Godin presents some good solutions.

Properly designed visual aids, on the other hand, can help presenters deliver attention-getting, productive presentations. This is because productive visual aids support the presenter's spoken words with compelling graphics. This leads to enhanced understanding, greatly improved recall, enhanced motivation to pay attention and improved persuasiveness.

The Need: The reason presenters use visuals is (we hope) to enhance communication.

The Problem: Technical communication based on words alone, whether by using no visuals or words-only visuals, are ineffective. The audience' comprehension and recall is poor.

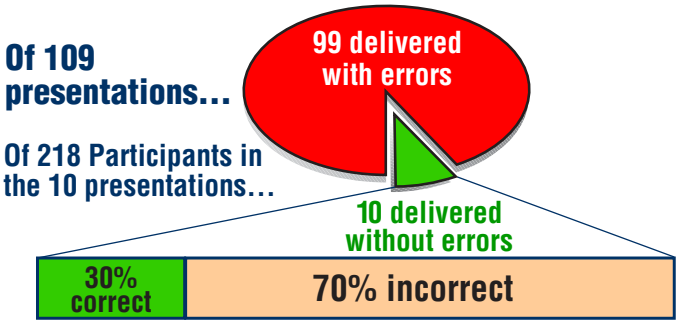

Fig 2: Presenter accuracy in word-only presentations is very low, and so is the audience comprehension. The combination leads to overall low communication accuracy in the presentation mode.

Figure 2 shows the results of 109 presentations where the speaker described a graphic and the audience was tested on understanding.

In the demonstration, the presenter, a member of the audience—most often a technical professional—described a set of connecting rectangles drawn at various angles to each other. The audience, without seeing the drawing, was to draw on paper what they understood the presenter to describe. Of the 109 demonstrations, given over a period of four years, only ten of the presenters (9.3%) described the diagram correctly.

Only 30% of the 218 participants who listened to the ten perfectly described presentations drew the correct diagram. The degree of accuracy varied all over the map, from fairly close to completely wrong. The very few who described and drew correctly demonstrated that accuracy in description and comprehension was possible. Most who failed, however, represented what occurs in the vast majority of word-only presentations, i.e. the presenters lack in accurate communication and the listeners' lack in accurate understanding, an all too often everyday occurrence.

"There are two premises we must operate on whenever we try to communicate. First, we must expect to be misunderstood. Second, we must expect to misunderstand."
Dr. Russell Meyers

Continued

Furthermore, Figure 3 shows research data which indicates that our ability to recall starts at less than 50% immediately after an oral words-only presentation and drops dramatically with time. After one work week, most people recall ~5% of the original message.

To "improve presentations," voilà! features of modern presentation software: cue-note type bullet charts (Figure 4), "enhanced" with "attention-getting" clip-art (a.k.a. click-art) (Figure 5).

However, there is a problem. Presentations supported by cue-note type bullet-charts have the same low effectiveness as an oral presentation (Fig. 3) since the presentation is based on words only.

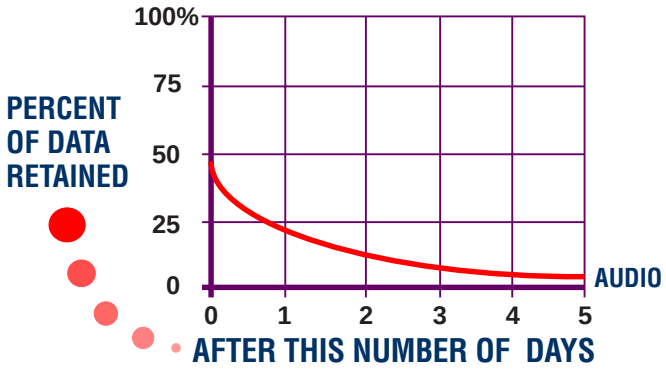

Fig 3: Audio-Only presentations suffer from miserably low recall. Slightly more than 5% of the oral message can be recalled after 5 days.

"The greatest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished."
David W. Davenport

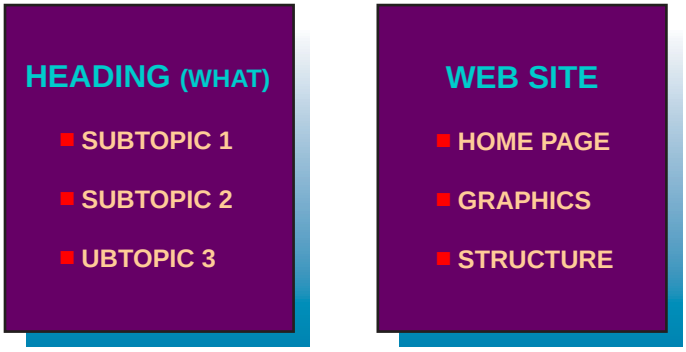

Fig 4: A classical cue-note type bullet chart.The left picture shows the format, the right picture shows an example. It represents an outline of the talk. The visual is projected and the speaker proceeds to elaborate on each bullet—verbally. This type of visual does not help the audience understand the meaning of the words.

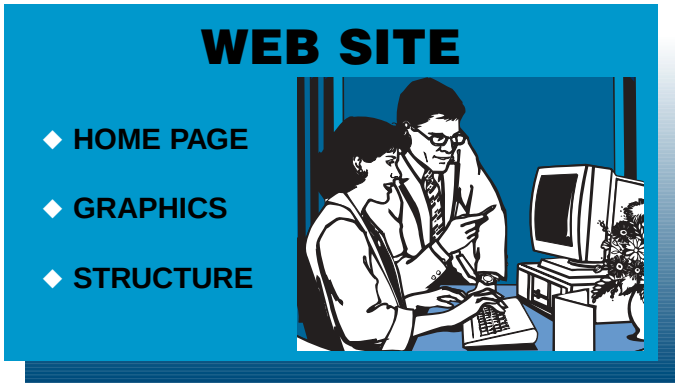

Fig 5: Equally ineffective is the same visual with the addition of click-art. The artwork does not enhance comprehension of the message. It may, in fact, distract the listeners who studies the picture.

Continued

Clip art does not improve the situation, either. Historically "clip-art" was used to decorate printed documents and advertising signs in order to gain the reader's attention. Today, clip-art is added to text-based presentation visuals in the mistaken belief that they help gain attention.

Communication is receiver oriented: "That means communication takes place when the receiver understands a message —not when the source transmits the message."
A. J. Zaremba

To be sure, clip art has a place in communication. But it belongs on the printed page, not on presentation visuals before an audience. Print-media research clearly shows that readers are drawn to images before they read the text. It is the intent of clip art or custom art-work to draw the readers in so that they will read the text. But during a presentation,

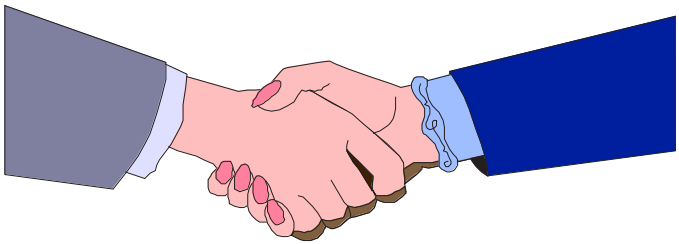

Fig 6: A rebus. This picture only stands for the word "handshake." It has no other meaning.

the audience's attention should be on the presenter and then only on the visual when the presenter addresses the visual. Let's take a brief look at how clip art and bullet charts snuck into technical presentations.

Until the computer age, presenters gave talks using cue notes kept hidden from an audience. When needed, professionally designed graphics placed on easels were used to help explain points that needed clarification. PowerPoint changed all that. Life-size cue notes are now displayed before an audience as are barely legible pages with, in too many cases, the presenters full text. The result has been boring visuals. To draw attention to the visuals, presenters add clip-art (or click-art) to their word visuals in the mistaken belief that they help attract and keep attention. But the clip art is used in the wrong place for the wrong purpose.

"Meaning in human communication exists primarily in the minds of the communicator, not in the words themselves."
Dr. M.W. Cronin

Since non-copyrighted images have become widely available in modern presentation software, they have been added willy-nilly to text as attention getters. Karen S. Schriver, in her book *Dynamics in Document Design*, asks,

"Does better technology equal better communication?"

Her answer is, no. The problem is that amateur designers lack an understanding of even basic communication principles and the results, says Schriver, are "vibrantly colorful documents that are disjointed, hard to understand and ugly." She writes, "People have become information decorators while they should be communication architects."

Computer technology has given the world a key to presentation capabilities unheard of in the past. What it has not given the world is an education in how to use the technology correctly. This lack of understanding now results in dismally ineffective presentations. This also backfires on the presenters.

Continued

The Solution: Technical communications based on graphic-based visuals have high effectiveness when combined with the correct method of presentation. (The latter will be discussed in the next issue of Presentation Pointers). Figure 6 shows research results of presentations where the audience hears the message and at the same time sees a graphic-based visual which supports that message. With this approach an audience can achieve up to ~70%, —a thirteen fold improvement—in comprehension and recall provided the topic is of interest to the audience.

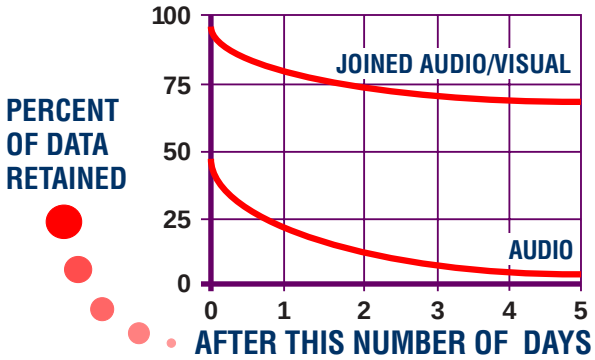

Fig 7: Two-channel reinforcement improves the receiver recall by a factor of 13, or 1,300%. Two-channel: The eyes see what the ear hears, at the same time.

Graphics can be in the form of:

- Photographs
- Business graphs
- **Simple(!!!)** engineering drawings
- Flow charts **(simple!!!)**
- Maps **(simple!!!)**
- Gantt charts **(simple!!!)**
- Matrices **(simple!!!)**

…anything that helps the audience understand the meaning of the spoken words. The figures in this article represent examples of these types of visual aids. Study the figures and discover how each supports the message below it. They help give the words contextual meaning.

A compelling graphic is any image that supports a point (argument) so clearly and strongly that it "compels" people to believe and act.

An example can be found in Edward Tufte's book *Visual Explanations*. He presents the 13 visuals of poorly organized data used by the engineers to try to convince NASA not to launch the space shuttle Challenger. Then he shows how the data can be reorganized into one graph that would have compelled NASA not to launch! You may remember that NASA, against the engineers' recommendation, decided to launch. The space shuttle exploded 73 seconds after the rockets were fired. "In the 13 charts prepared for making the decision to launch, there is a scandalous discrepancy between the intellectual tasks at hand and the images created to serve those tasks," says Tufte.

The technical presenter who wants the audience to decide in his/her favor seeks to support their message with compelling graphics.

Next time you want to use a visual ask yourself, in what way does this visual support or explain my point? If you can't answer that question, don't use the visual. Your audience may applaud you.

Continued

Attend my seminars ***Design and Delivery of Winning Interview Presentations*** or ***Design and Delivery of Effective Technical Presentations***. You will experience first-hand that this article tells the truth—and how to create those successful presentations with compelling graphics. Call to set up an in-house seminar.

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In the next issue...

Part III: Talk! Talk! Talk!

The delivery: A method of using visual aids that create strong attention without the need for "dazzle."

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Talk! Talk! Talk!

The Delivery: Regarding a method of using visual aids so that they invite full attention without the need for distracting "dazzle."

Compelling research proves that addressing visuals is a key factor in assuring audience' attention, comprehension and retention of presented material.

Out in the field there is no lack of opinions—contradictory at that—on how to deliver a presentation. "Don't read the visuals." "Address the visuals." Stand next to the visuals." "Stand away from the visuals and use a pointer." Are you confused? How do you know what is most effective? And, should you care?

The following cited research will present a dramatic picture of the impact of correctly delivered information and how it assures audience attention, comprehension and retention.

Since this is the third segment of a three-part article, it would help the reader to be familiar with the first two installments, **Part 1: Hear! Hear! Hear!(1) and Part 2, Look! Look! Look!(2) Part 1** covers the importance of listening to the needs and concerns of the client before presentation visuals are created. **Part 2** covers the design of the visuals to facilitate understanding between speaker and audience. **Part 3** will cover the actual delivery of a presentation.

The optimum delivery method places the speaker immediately next to the visual. The visuals are as small as practical yet large enough to assure legibility. As soon as a new visual is displayed, the speaker should read every word and describe in detail any graphics. Then the speaker should face the audience, establish eye contact, and amplify on what the visual covers. By following this method, the audience' curiosity about what is on the visual has been satisfied and they are now ready to pay attention to the speaker. Full attention is nearly guaranteed. A transition statement readies the audience for the next visual.

A common reaction from novices to this delivery method is, "But reading the visual is contrary to everything I have

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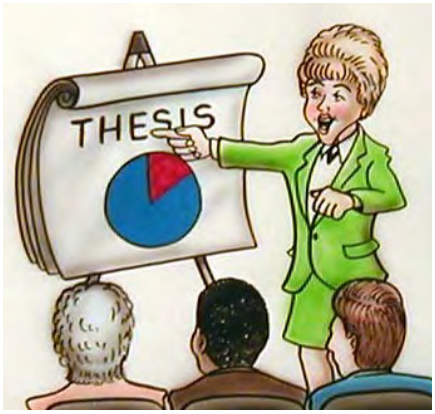
Fig 1:



1: Immediately, when a new visual is up, point and read.

2: When you have addressed the visual, look and talk while keeping eye contact.

3: Look and talk as you transition to the next visual.

been told." Rest assured. The above method works. More than 10,000 professionals in a variety of fields—engineering, science, architecture, construction, training, education—have learned it in my seminars, practiced it and concluded that it works. In addition, extensive empirical research proves that this method of delivery is supported by cognitive learning theories.

A word of warning: This method will not work for those technical presenters who use the poorest form of presentation visuals, the cue-note bullet charts (2). This method does work when compelling visuals (2) are used that assist the speaker in getting his/her message across. The rest of this article focuses on the reasoning behind the importance of addressing visuals.

The science of effective message transfer supports the claim.

Clark and Mayer (3) stress the importance of using multimedia (graphics and spoken words) to increase comprehension. They distinguish between information delivery theories and cognitive learning theories. Information delivery theories represent the "memory-dump approach" in which the speaker delivers a verbal message and expects the audience to draw their own conclusion. It's a method well known to most of us. The teacher talks. The students take notes. At the conclusion the teacher asks, "Are there any questions?" This is followed by blank stares. Everyone goes home. It's now up to the students to figure out the meaning of the lecture.

The cognitive learning theory involves learning in which "active sense-making" is part of the process. In active sense-making the presenter does not leave it up to the audience to draw conclusions but helps them in drawing the correct conclusions.

Continued

The typical interview/short-list presentation has low effectiveness when the conclusion is left up to the audience, i.e. the selection committee. This happens when the presentation is based on the "information delivery theory." Effectiveness is high when the decision-makers are actively engaged in processing the message. This happens when the presenter explains the information on the visual and thereby invites the audience to mentally participate in the meaning of the graphics on the visual. Clark and Mayer write, "An important part of active processing is to mentally construct pictorial and verbal representations of the material and to mentally connect them." (3, pg. 60) This is exactly what you want to have happen when you present to a technical selection committee. Help them, visually and mentally, connect the dots!

The cognitive model developed by Mayer and others (3,4) is shown in part in Fig. 2. Notice that the spoken words

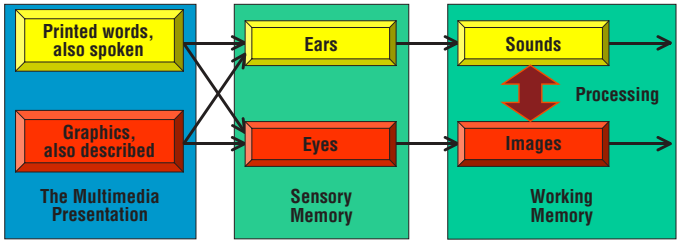


Fig 2: Cognitive learning models emphasize the need to present the graphics and the spoken description at the same time. *(Adapted from references 3 and 4).*

enter both the aural and visual input channels. When the presenter reads the words (call-outs), the audience sees and hears the same message at the same time. This strengthens their ability to comprehend and recall. When the words also relate directly to the graphic—when the presenter explains the graphic—then message reinforcement is further

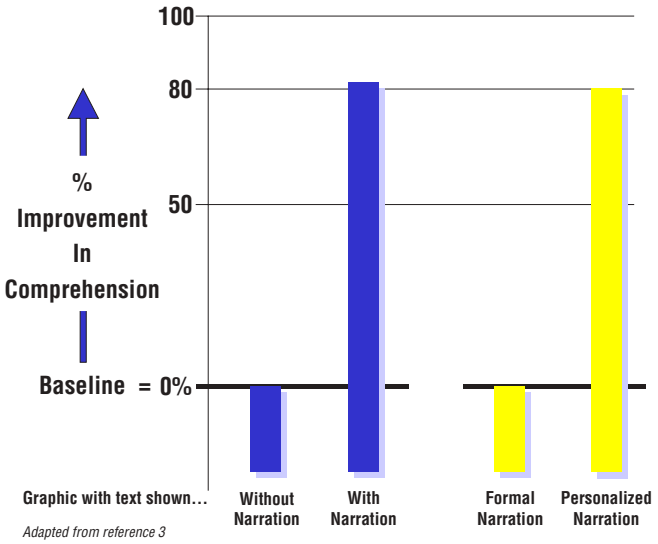


Fig 3: Research data demonstrates dramatic improvement in comprehension when auditory and visual channels process the same information *at the same time*—and the presenter does not depend on a script.

strengthened. The results are shown in Fig. 3 in which the baseline represents typical delivery method and comprehension. Improvement in comprehension is dramatic when the message enters both visual and auditory channels at the same time.

The left data-set in Figure 3 shows what happens when a visual is projected but not explained, compared to the substantial improvement in comprehension when the visual is addressed and explained. Furthermore, the right data-set shows what happens when the presenter uses a formal, rehearsed text (a script), compared to the equally significant improvement in comprehension when the presenter is armed with the facts but delivers these "in his own words," helping the audience create mental graphics or

Continued

pictures. This then supports the earlier instruction: Address the visual (read every word, describe all the graphics), then face the audience and amplify.

There is an almost universal feeling of resentment when people are asked to attend a presentation. They anticipate a gruelling, boring experience. Presenters know this. It is for this reason that visuals are jazzed up—ANYthing to keep the audience from falling asleep!—So, fancy pictures, animation, sound effects, color, speed and flashiness are used to dazzle the audience and keep them in a state of wakefulness. But is attention, comprehension and retention improved? No!

In fact, researcher discovered, to their great surprise, that children watching jazzed-up scenes of Sesame Street stopped watching (5, pg. 101). The kids became selective in what they watched. They focused on the portions of the show that had content and turned to other activities when "flashes and dashes" were presented. Other research discovered that audiences learn better when extraneous sounds and pictures are excluded from the main text (4).

Visually challenged persons can today "see television shows" with a process called Audio Description. A narrator describes key visual elements of the scenes turning visual images into mental images for the blind "viewer." Select SAP (secondary audio program) on your remote control to try this yourself. When people with seeing eyes watch these shows with audio descriptions of the scenes, they experience an improvement in comprehension. One such person interviewed on the radio program Weekend All Things Considered about "Hearing Pictures," (6) explained that even though he had no problem seeing the images, he still missed features that the narrator described: "Like people in the background doing things, body language,…now I can really see and hear what they're talking about."

Guess what. The same happens when your audience watch your visuals. If you don't point out and explain all the details on your graphic visual, you have no assurance that the audience will see what you want them to see. Reference Figure 3 and see the dramatic improvement you achieve when visuals are explained.

Poor delivery methods lead to cognitive dissonance, or: You chance loosing an audience when delivery is poor.

"But reading the visual is contrary to everything I have been told." Well then, now is the time to realize that substantial research supports that reading and addressing a well designed graphic-based presentation visual (as defined in reference 2) is exactly what is needed for optimal attention, comprehension and recall.

Here is a typical situation, observed all too often: The presenter places a sequence of visuals, one after the other, in front of the audience. As each visual is projected, the presenter talks—but not about what is on the visual. The presenter makes no attempt to explain the visuals or at least talk about the topic reflected in the visuals. In other words, this presenter gives two talks, one verbal and one visual. This is shown in Figure 4. There is an immediate disconnect or cognitive dissonance. It violates common sense and is certainly not supported by research in cognitive learning strategies. This leads to information overload and happens

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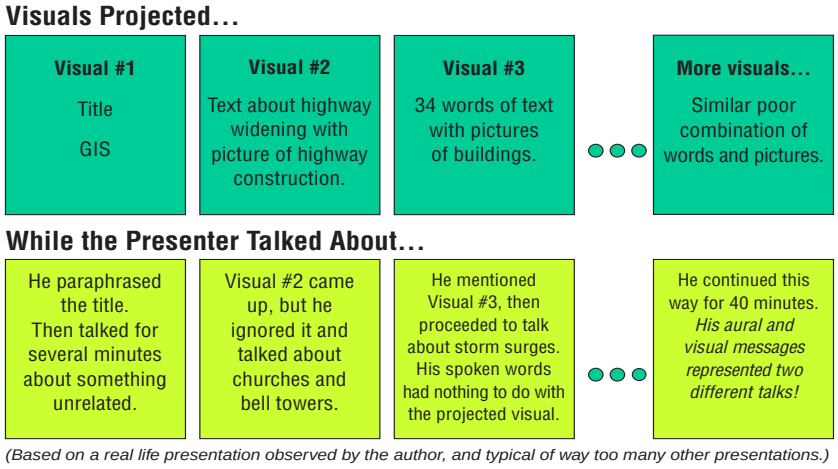

Fig 4: Disconnect between visual topic and spoken topic leads to poor comprehension. The audience has to integrate a visual message with a different aural message.

all too frequently. The audience' ability to process the two-channel information input is compromised and boredom sets in. They look for escape routes and nap, read, talk, or leave the room. (The darker the room, the easier the escape!)

The solution is simple and highly effective.

Well-documented research and more than 40 years of actual practice by graduates of my Theme-Modular presentation seminar proves that addressing visuals is a key factor in assuring audience' attention, comprehension and retention of presented material. This is but one of the powerful techniques participants in my seminars learn. The results? They experience note-worthy improvement in win rates. And, technical presenters who dread presenting have found a tool that leads to self confidence and strong audience acceptance. "Great presentation, George!"

1) Knudsen, Dag I. (2002). Hear!Hear!Hear! The Message: The Pitfalls of "Dazzle," And What it Means to Have an Audience-focused Presentation. <http://www.dagknudsen.com/articles>

2) Knudsen, Dag I. (2002). Look!Look!Look! The Visual Aids: Presenting a Way To Create Visual Aids That Overcome The Need For Distracting "Dazzle." <http://www.dagknudsen.com/articles>

3) Clark, R. C. and Mayer, R. E. (2003). *e-Learning and the Science of Instruction*, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, San Francisco, CA.

4) Doolittle, Peter E.,(2001). *Multimedia Learning: Empirical Results and Practical Applications*, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

5) Gladwell, Malcolm, (2002). *The Tipping Point*, Little Brown and Company, New York, NY.

6) National Public Radio, Weekend All Things Considered, *Hearing Pictures*, June 2, 2002.

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