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# A strong template identity creates powerful impressions

The acronym for *original equipment manufacturer*, OEM, gets thrown around a lot these days, making it tough to know whose product actually came first. For instance, take two projectors I saw go head-to-head in a magazine review a few years ago. Although they had different brands, they looked identical, and for good reason: One had been OEMed from the other. In other words, one company had (by agreement) simply put its brand on another manufacturer's projector. What I found amusing was that the primary manufacturer's projector ended up being rated *lower* than the OEM partner's identical product, due to the influence of a world-class marketing organization.

Same box, same image on the wall, same features. What made the difference? The same thing that can make the difference for us in our presentations: perception.

Yes, substance is essential. But from the moment they sit down, your listeners are letting their perceptions guide how willing they are to follow what you're about to say. Even before you open your mouth, they've formed one of two opinions based on something as basic as your title slide: that you whipped the presentation together with whatever time and tools you had handy or that you took the time to craft a unique, professional presentation. And one of the most useful tools you have for persuading them to listen to you is that most fundamental of silent impressions — your presentation template.

## Create a unique and creative template design

Most of us aren't nationally known speakers; we're working hard just to influence our little corner of the world. But that doesn't mean you

can't give yourself a unique identity. That's why I don't recommend using an off-the-shelf presentation template. We all see the same four or five PowerPoint templates used over and over. The audience's first impression? "Ho-hum — another PowerPoint presentation." When was the last time you said, "Another FrontPage Web site"? Or "Another QuarkXPress brochure"? It just doesn't happen.

In presentations, as in other designed products, our message doesn't have to be defined by the tools we use. It's defined by the clarity of our story, the passion with which we tell it and its relevance to our audience. Perhaps it's time to put some thought into creating a background that seamlessly ties together the elements of your company's identity. That probably won't come from a CD of background templates. Here's how to custom-create your own background instead.

## STEP 1: Frame up

To create a frame for your custom template, start with an 800 x 600 canvas in Adobe Photoshop 5.0, or whatever "paint" package you usually use. For electronic presentations, set the canvas resolution to 96 pixels/inch; for slides or over-

heads, 300 pixels/inch. Determine a color scheme consistent with your corporate or institutional standards. Then create a base color for your background layer. A mid-tone density works best here; you can always go darker later on.

## STEP 2: Integrate

Now you can integrate your key template elements. Hunt down a clean electronic version of your company logo (Photoshop is pretty friendly to most file formats) and create a new layer for it; splitting up all the background elements of the template into separate layers will give you more flexibility later in the process. Start by placing the logo at the bottom right.

A good, clean logo is essential to making a positive impression. Companies spend thousands of dollars for that very reason; your logo is no less important. Create more impact for your logo by trying some of Photoshop's easy-to-apply effects. You can create a slight glow, for instance, or a soft drop shadow to subtly set your logo apart from the background (assuming your company's visual-identity standards give you some creative leeway). In any event, keep the logo relatively small and unobtrusive. Then you can add



First, create a frame; then import your logo.





Step 4: Add some texture to enhance the look of your template.

other graphic elements. Look through company brochures to find these images, which should express a seamless extension of your corporate identity. Get the original artwork, if possible, to scan or import into separate Photoshop layers.

### STEP 3: Blend

You want this collage of elements simply to create an impression — nothing more, but nothing less. If any single element stands out, the audience member's eye will constantly be drawn to it. So it's generally a good idea to move the "identity" elements to the edge, leaving a clean, nondistracting center for your main text and graphics. To further blend in these outside elements, or even add a little Gaussian blur, check out the **FILTER** → **BLUR** menu; for text, such as a Web address, be sure to dial down the opacity. Photoshop has other masking techniques as well, so check with your resident Photoshop guru.

### STEP 4: Add texture

On a dark background template, subdued elements tend to disappear when there's too much ambient light around the screen — or with a not-so-bright projector. A light-colored background, on the other hand, may wash out onscreen. Either way, adding texture to the background gives it some dimension as well as some much-needed density. One way to do this is to create a new layer and apply a base color consistent with your company standards; **FILTER** → **TEXTURE** → **TEXTURIZER** will guide you to some Photoshop textures.

Or try **FILTER** → **RENDER** → **CLOUDS** or **FILTER** → **STYLIZE** → **EMBOSS** to create a unique effect. Be sure to reduce the opacity of that layer to create the subtle texture pattern desired. Drag the layer lower (on the layer palette) so it doesn't map over your logo, and keep it above your photo images only if you want them to take on the texture.

### STEP 5: Save it

When you think you're done, select **FILE** → **SAVE A COPY** and choose the JPEG format. Short for Joint Photographic Experts Group, this highly compressed file format retains the quality of your image and can be easily shared between Windows and Macintosh computers. (I've found that a JPEG quality level of 7 is usually sufficient, unless there are a lot of small details.) Put the compressed image into the PowerPoint background (**FORMAT** → **BACKGROUND** → **PICTURE** TAB), but not into the master. That way, the image's background will drop out nicely when printed in black-and-white from PowerPoint.



### STEP 6: Put on finishing touches

Your background is placed, but your template isn't quite done. Jump into your PowerPoint master slide and choose readable fonts (such as Arial, Univers, Garamond or Times) for your title and body text. Then align the title (providing enough space for a two-line wrap), adjust your body text around your background elements and add some appropriate bullets. In PowerPoint (97, 98 and later

versions), **FORMAT** → **SLIDE COLOR SCHEME** will take you to the master color scheme; find the usage descriptions for your colors and change the text colors accordingly for your new background. (Note that the last four colors become the first four colors in any charts you create.)

The acid test for any template design is how it looks in its final projected medium (i.e., LCD projector, slide projector, etc.). Design that looks great on your monitor can look quite different when projected.

### Impressions start here

Template design is clearly a process that requires some trial and error. But once your template is created, it will bring continuity (possibly for the first time) to your company presentations. Just as you can't "wing" a Web site without courting disaster, you have to give the same thought to your corporate identity when you design your presentations. Whether you're a seasoned presenter or a first-timer, this is where positive first impressions begin. ■

Note: Your finished template may look different when projected.

