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What Are Your Visuals Saying About You?

By Jim Endicott, Owner/Manager of Distinction

I should have known better. My morning routine has become like a comfortable pair of shoes but today I diverted from it. You see, my usual latte drive-thru was badly backed up and I was in a big hurry so I went to another one down the street. I know, I know - where's my loyalty but I'm not into the real esoteric morning beverages and thought I had nothing to lose. I'm a "double 20-ounce mocha, light on the chocolate, extra hot" kind of guy. Milk, chocolate, a couple shots of espresso and a double cup - how tough could that be to duplicate? Evidently tough enough because what I got didn't taste at all the same. So, if everyone uses the same ingredients, how could it taste so different?



I'm not going to attempt to analyze a latte for you but it does raise an interesting question. If you and I and just about every other presenter in the United States have access to the same presentation tools, *how come some are masterful works of communication art while others appear to be electronic circuses that use everything short of dancing bears and clown cars?* (I take that back, I saw some clown clipart in a presentation a few weeks ago.) There are a few areas that truly differentiate these two presentation approaches and they are directly reflected in the **quality and type** of visuals a presenter might use.

Step 1 - Ask yourself a very important question

Sit yourself down this morning (with your latte), clear your mind for a moment and ask this question. Your answer will directly affect your choice of artwork, software and even the decision to seek out some professional help. Here it is. *"What are the stakes associated with your presentation today?"* Quantify it. Project those results out over a period of time. Short of internal presentations, the stakes are higher than you might think. If it's a sales presentation, and assuming that a higher quality, more professional presentation could enhance your team's ability to close sales (and reduce sales cycles) by even 10%, what would it mean in dollars and cents on a \$10 million sales quota? Let me do the math for you - \$1 million dollars. Only 5% you say? Even leaving \$500,000 on the table because we fail to count the cost is way too much.

Step 2 - Professional benchmarking

Let's assume for a moment that you've determined that a professional presentation is in order. Not something whipped together by an administrative assistant during their lunch

break but a real quality presentation. Now, I want you seek out some other professional marketing tools to benchmark against. Let's see - an annual report, a high quality professional brochure or perhaps a very nice ad in an in-flight magazine. Let me tell you what you won't see in those professional materials. You won't see clipart. You won't see low resolution artwork borrowed from someone's website. You won't find simply arrows that don't line up quite right or colors that are chosen by some sort of random methodology. "Wait a second", you might be saying. "Those are different!" Are they really? We sometimes want to believe that because our computer desktops are littered with software to make presentation creation "easy" - ergo we are professional designers. If only it were that way. If it were, the water pick in my bathroom would make me a dentist and I could save a few thousand bucks a year. The truth is that our business presentations are not handicapped like a golf game by the tools our audiences happen to recognize. We're evaluated on *quality of the images* used to tell our stories and how *effectively we deliver* that message - period.

Step 3 - Choose your graphics carefully

Choosing graphics for a presentation for many is like a great big Easter egg hunt. We run around turning over every presentation we can find to grab whatever artwork is even remotely close to our topic. Not a great graphical fit? Not a problem. The audience will "get the idea", besides, it's "just a presentation." Keep in mind that artwork you may find (including logos) on websites might be screen resolution (comparable to your laptop presentation requirements) but the files are often used very small to facilitate fast downloads. When stretched up in a laptop-based presentation the artwork gets jaggy and grainy - a very bad combination. Also the colors have frequently been optimized to 8-bit, 256 colors for the same reason compromising the quality of the image that could have leveraged 16.8 million colors possible on your laptop computer. The difference is significant in the quality of the final image.

Clipart, although fun and entertaining, is rarely appropriate for professional audiences. We try to seek out more relevant images, often photographic ones, that are much closer fits to the topics we're covering. Illustrations that have been created for our professional brochures can often times be re-purposed for electronic presentation by simply lowering the resolution to 72 DPI and saving the file out in a jpeg format to import into your presentation. Be creative and look further than just the close at hand sources for your presentation images. *Audiences will recognize the extra effort.*

Step 4 - Get another set of eyes to look at your presentation

I know your presentation software told you that professional presentations could be "created in minutes" but I'm afraid that's not always true. If it were, we'd never have to sit through any presentation bombs but the fact is we do all the time. With all the freedom the software gives us, it also empowers us to make some very poor custom layout and design decisions. If you don't happen to have a design background, you will blissfully continue to create sub-standard presentations while your audiences chuckle under their breath. If you have access to a marketing or graphics department, get a second opinion on what you've created from those who work design every day. Doctors get second opinions. Why can't you? The time invested just might save you some serious embarrassment.

Step 5 - Good delivery skills make simple visuals great

Lest we think good visuals will overcome lackluster delivery, they won't. As a matter of fact, the opposite becomes true. The cleaner and more articulate your delivery (not perfect

delivery, just practiced), the less emphasis is required for on-screen support. Remember, *your screen visuals are there to support you, not vice versa.*

Maybe you've always thought that a latte is a latte and all presentations are created somewhat equal. The truth of the matter is that they're not. You see, there's no such thing as "just a presentation" anymore. My reputation, your reputation, your sales performance, the perception of strategic partners, your credibility - all hang in the balance each time we get up in front of a group. The choices of the images we use to tell our stories often communicate to our audiences more about us than we would probably care for them to know.

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