

AV PRESENTATIONS: PIZZAZZ WITH A PURPOSE

Pamela Picard
Chicago, Illinois
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Editor's Note: You'll quickly notice that this article was written with the business executive in mind, but the philosophies presented here are every bit as applicable to planetarium presentation. The "products and services" of our business is the selling of "ideas, understanding and support" for astronomy specifically and science in general. Keep this perspective in mind as you read this article!

“In multi-image, film, slides and video, it is all too easy to confuse 'show business' with your business... Visual media can convince, persuade and achieve results when you avoid the 15 deadly mistakes that kill effective communications.”

Today's sophisticated visual media, including multi-image, film, slides and video, offer corporate executives a dazzling array of technological feats and state-of-the-art effects to dramatize, excite, entertain, inform, motivate and inspire. A professional audio-visual mix of "show business" and your business is stunning and effective.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to confuse "show business" with business. If you spend big bucks for big productions that look sensational but say nothing, you have committed a business blunder.

Be it products, services or ideas, sales is your business. Visual media can convince, persuade and achieve results when you avoid the 15 deadly mistakes that kill effective communications. Check you next multi-image show, slide presentation or videotape against the following common mistakes to assure effective visual communications.

1. You confuse business with "show business."

Glitzy photography, dramatic special effects and hot music are no substitute for content. Start planning with the same attention to detail as you would in developing a marketing strategy: research, relevance to competitive position and consistency with objectives. A detailed script treatment defines specific goals and relates step-by-step who, what why and how it will be executed.

2. You forget the real reason for using visual media.

When introducing new products or strategies, you want to promote attitude and behavior changes. In short, you want to sell. Visual media offer a slick promotional format for products or ideas but are not "brochures on film." Allow the visuals to do the talking. Choose words for power; use with economy. Write with a visual eye.

3. Your objectives are fuzzy.

Unclear objectives create fizzle, not sizzle. The more specific goals are, the better. Objectives that are too broad are a prayer, not a plan. Zero in on precisely what you want your audience to feel, think or do. Clarify thinking in a single-purpose statement. Then plan theatrical elements to meet that end.

4. You sell features, not benefits.

Though they may be scrupulous about this strategy in the print media, many companies fall victim to the "ain't we great" syndrome in the visual realms. Here, as elsewhere, unless you sell benefits to the audience, what makes you great falls on deaf ears no matter how loudly you tout it. Rules one, two and three: answer the question, "What's in it for me?"

5. You write for the wrong people.

Many visual productions have gone astray by missing the mark on audience mentality. Know your audience inside out. Age, interests, lifestyles, tastes. Appeal to viewer's perceptions of themselves; remember their perceptions of you. "Walk a mile in their shoes." Talk their language. Appeal to heart and head. Target visual productions as carefully as you target new business prospects.

6. You spoon-feed pabulum.

Credibility can make or break you. When you tap dance around issues or spoon-feed pabulum to people instead of answers and solutions, you lose attention, interest and believability.

7. You make one production work too hard.

It is ideal to budget for a single "one show does it all" production, but it rarely works. When the budget is limited, invest your money in the most important priority or create a modular format: one set of visuals to be presented with audience-specific narration and separate soundtracks. The costs are modest compared to the results.

8. You equate creativity with effectiveness.

Visual media, especially computer graphics and animation, offer a great deal of razzle dazzle. But the razzle can baffle when it is the end rather than the means. For example, special effects for the sake of special effects, dramatic photography without relevance and music that fights or drowns narration are ineffective approaches. The aim is creativity for a reason. As David Ogilvy states: "If it does not sell, it is not creative."

9. You overload the show with too much baggage.

Too much information and too many details are too much baggage. Refine data to one clear, concise message. Keep it simple. Keep it short. Allow the medium to "give 'em a taste, leave 'em a thirst." Save details for one-on-one sessions, brochures, workbooks or workshops.

10. You bury the audience in statistics.

Statistics are convincing support material. But when numbers become "the show," the show is dull. Pare figures down to the bone. Surround statistics with interesting facts, industry news or compare your data to the competitions or other markets. Focus on what the numbers mean. Use charts, graphs, color and special effects to animate statistical information.

11. You aim to please the wrong people.

Everyone wants to be a hero with management. But when you set out to score points with the boss, you are in danger of losing the audience -- and the game. Make your audience the heroes. Aim to please the people responsible for the effort. Audience response and action are the stuff of which heroes are made.

12. You forsake execution for catchy themes.

The "theme" of your production is the critical umbrella that unites theatrical elements and audience involvement. Catchy themes are terrific. More important, however, is how that theme is executed: how it is integrated with audio-visual components, marketing objectives and reality; how it is carried through scripts and presentations; and how material is paced, timed and presented, professionally and like clockwork.

13. Your production is too long.

It is not how long you make it, it is how you make it last. A good rule to remember: the mind will absorb only what the fanny can endure. So plan visual communications to appear on screen only as long as you need to deliver the message. When a longer presentation is necessary, vary the pace in narration as well as music tempo.

14. You take yourself too seriously.

Just as trading substance for style is inappropriate, you can also browbeat an audience with serious content. Humor, when presented correctly, is winning. It softens audience members, making them more receptive to hard facts. It makes presenters more human, more appealing. Have fun with "the wrong way" to reinforce "the right way." Use amusing anecdotes to support key points. Lighten up.

15. You design by committee.

It is often unavoidable, but "design by committee" murders many great concepts. At the same time, it kills scripts and scriptwriters. If your company does not delegate authority well, try for a consensus early in the pre-production planning stages. Involve writers and producers with "the committee" members for their input and viewpoints. Use the conceptual treatment to achieve agreements or change direction. Allow everyone an opportunity with the script's first draft; then do you best to disengage the committee from the production. If that is impossible, do your best anyway and pray.

As more companies, organizations and associations turn to visual communications to enhance image, create awareness, build better relationships and team spirit, hone sales skills and boost business, dig into you media productions with the same enthusiasm and attention to detail you use in creating marketing plans.