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How to Make a “Good” Presentation “Great”

by

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Summary.

A strong presentation is so much more than information pasted onto a series of slides with fancy backgrounds. Whether you’re pitching an idea, reporting market research, or sharing something else, a great presentation can give you a competitive advantage, and be a powerful tool when aiming to persuade, educate, or inspire others. Here are some unique elements that make a presentation stand out.

- **Fonts:** Sans Serif fonts such as Helvetica or Arial are preferred for their clean lines, which make them easy to digest at various sizes and distances. Limit the number of font styles to two: one for headings and another for body text, to avoid visual confusion or distractions.

- Colors: Colors can evoke emotions and highlight critical points, but their overuse can lead to a cluttered and confusing presentation. A limited palette of two to three main colors, complemented by a simple background, can help you draw attention to key elements without overwhelming the audience.
- Pictures: Pictures can communicate complex ideas quickly and memorably but choosing the right images is key. Images or pictures should be big (perhaps 20-25% of the page), bold, and have a clear purpose that complements the slide's text.
- Layout: Don't overcrowd your slides with too much information. When in doubt, adhere to the principle of simplicity, and aim for a clean and uncluttered layout with plenty of white space around text and images. Think phrases and bullets, not sentences.

As an intern or early career professional, chances are that you'll be tasked with making or giving a presentation in the near future. Whether you're pitching an idea, reporting market research, or sharing something else, a great presentation can give you a competitive advantage, and be a powerful tool when aiming to persuade, educate, or inspire others.

A strong presentation is so much more than information pasted onto a series of slides with fancy backgrounds. To create a truly excellent display, you need to have a sharp understanding of fonts, colors, pictures, and flow.

As the chief evangelist for Canva, an entrepreneur with years of experience pitching, and a venture capitalist who has sat through many mediocre presentations, I have unique insights into what makes a presentation stand out. Let's talk about how each of the following elements can enhance the impact and retention of your message.

Fonts: Foundation of Readability

The font you choose to feature in your presentation plays a pivotal role in its readability and overall aesthetic. Sans Serif fonts such as Helvetica or Arial — boring as you may consider them — are preferred for their clean lines, which make them easy to digest at various sizes and distances.

Make sure to be consistent in font usage throughout the presentation, as it helps maintain a cohesive look and feel. Limit the number of font styles to two: one for headings and another for body text, to avoid visual confusion or distractions.

Font size matters, too. For body text, a minimum size of 30 points ensures legibility, while titles and headers should stand out at a size of 40 points or more. If you find yourself reducing font size to squeeze in more text, the solution is to tighten your thinking, not using a smaller font.

Colors: Visual Appeal and Comprehension

Have you ever seen movie credits with grey or blue text on a white background? Probably not. And there's a reason for that. The use of high-contrast color combinations

such as black text on a white background or white text on a black background ensures maximum visibility and readability. These combinations facilitate the audience's ability to absorb and retain the presented information. My preference is for white on black because staring at a bright white screen in a darkened room (as opposed to a printed page or a small computer) causes squinting and eye fatigue.

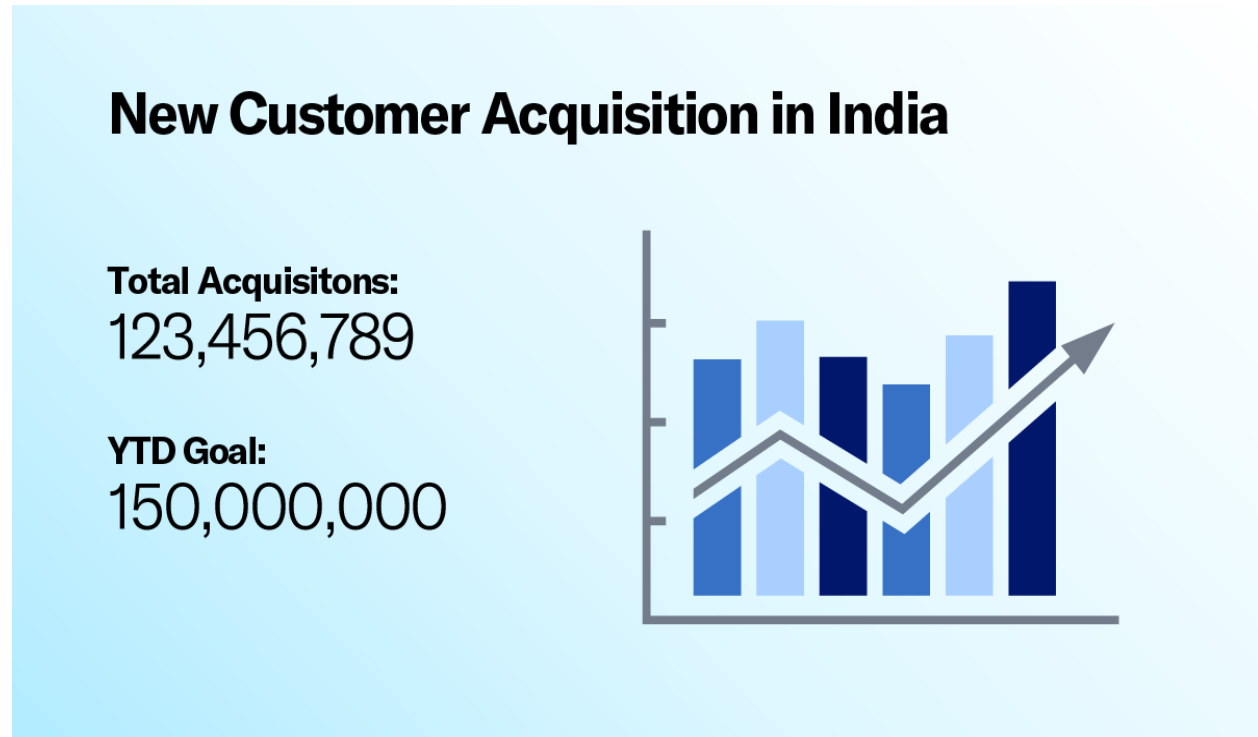
Colors can evoke emotions and highlight critical points, but their overuse can lead to a cluttered and confusing presentation. A limited palette of two to three main colors, complemented by a simple background, can help you draw attention to key elements without overwhelming the audience.

Don't: Use more than 2–3 colors.



Victor Metelskiy/Getty Images

Do: Keep the color palette minimal.



Victor Metelskiy/Getty Images

This isn't rocket science. You want a dramatic color contrast between the background your important elements. It's the same reason that fire engines are red.

Tools and guidelines are available to test color schemes for accessibility, ensuring that no viewer or attendee is at a disadvantage when reading or watching your slides. You should consider accessibility for all audience members, including those with visual impairments such as color blindness.

Pictures: Storytelling and Appeal

Pictures can communicate complex ideas quickly and memorably but choosing the right images is key.

While images are potent tools for storytelling, you should try to strike a balance between visual and textual elements on your slides. Images or pictures should be big (perhaps 20–25% of the page), bold, and have a clear purpose that complements the slide's text — as opposed to gratuitous “eye candy” that you think is cool.

Remember not to clutter your slides with more than one image as that can confuse rather than clarify the point you're trying to make. When choosing the image, pick one that communicates a single idea or feeling and serves to illustrate or enhance the message you are conveying.

Say, for example, you were to narrate the story of the Japanese surrender in World War II and the celebration of peace. Instead of using words to verbalize the emotions people may have felt, you could use the iconic photo — also known as ‘The Kiss’ — of a sailor kissing a woman on August 14, 1945 in the Times Square. Admittedly, this is a high bar, but you should aspire to a single photo that captures attention and says it all.

Or, if you are going to talk about the company’s limited edition product usage in a certain geography, it’s better to show pictures of your product in actual use by actual customers than trying to personify inclusiveness with stock photos.

Slide Layout: Art of Composition

A common pitfall many people make is overcrowding slides with too much information. When in doubt, adhere to the principle of simplicity, and aim for a clean and uncluttered layout with plenty of white space around text and images. Think: phrases and bullets, not sentences. Think Apple store, not swap meet.

Don’t: Use low contrast colors and overcrowd the slides.



Our Values

- **Integrity**
We will strive to do the right thing, even when no one is watching. We will act ethically and transparently in transactions, inside and outside the company.
- **Innovation**
We will always be curious, question our assumptions, and challenge the status quo.
- **Diversity**
We will celebrate diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and insights. We believe that ideas can come from anywhere.

Hinterhaus Productions/Constantine Johnny/Getty Images

Do: Make a clean and uncluttered design.



Hinterhaus Productions/Getty Images

It's also important to establish a visual hierarchy on each slide to guide the viewer's eye to the one critical place. Make use of font size, color, and the placement of the text or images strategically to differentiate between elements of varying importance. A viewer shouldn't have any doubt about what the focal point of each slide is. A great example of this is Steve Jobs introducing a new product. Notice how his slides have three to five words in a 150–200 point font, and one picture.

Making your design theme consistent across slides contributes to a professional and cohesive presentation. This includes uniform use of colors, fonts, and layout styles. Consistency also helps in reinforcing brand identity and makes the presentation more digestible for the audience because there aren't conflicting thoughts and ideas.

Flow: Removing Barriers

Let's begin with the opening of your presentation. A good opening or first slide should be able to grab the audience's attention and state the purpose and objectives in the first thirty seconds.

Think of your presentation as a rocket on a launchpad, not an airplane on a runway. An intriguing question, a surprising fact, or a compelling story can set the tone for the entire presentation, signaling its value and relevance to the audience.

A well-organized presentation follows a logical and linear flow — guiding the audience through the content in a coherent manner. It's advisable to group related topics as it aids comprehension.

For instance, if you're giving a product update, discuss marketing and sales issues at the same time because of their inherent connection rather than forcing listeners to shift mindsets — say, by moving from marketing to design to sales. You can then move on to solutions for overcoming the issues you present. This kind of a smooth transition between topics helps the audience follow the argument you're making or the story you aim to tell.

When it comes to length, try to contain your presentation in 10 to 15 slides—few people can remember 10 things from a presentation and even fewer can communicate that many.

These practices are based on a harsh reality: The purpose of a presentation is not to impress your audience with a work of art. The goal is for people to understand and remember what you said or be persuaded to take a specific action. Your creativity and coolness may look great on greeting cards, party invitations, and social media, but when it comes to presentations, less is more. This is how remarkable people make remarkable presentations.

- **Guy Kawasaki** is the chief evangelist at Canva and was the former chief evangelist at Apple. Guy is the author of 16 books including *Think Remarkable: 9 Paths to Transform Your Life and Make a Difference*.

Create an Effective Slide Deck

A great presentation depends on more than the high-quality information you're sharing. Here are some essential principles to help you create a memorable slide deck.

Choose the right fonts. Use sans serif fonts like Helvetica or Arial for a minimal look and better readability. Stick to two font styles throughout your presentation—one for headings and another for body text—and ensure consistency throughout. Keep the body text at a minimum of 30-point size and titles at 40 points or more.

Opt for high-contrast colors. High-contrast color combinations ensure maximum visibility and ease of reading. Limit your color palette to two or three main colors to avoid visual confusion and maintain focus on your key points.

Use pictures effectively. Select images that communicate your message powerfully and succinctly—and use them sparingly. Limit yourself to one meaningful image per slide to maintain clarity and reinforce your message without distracting from the substance.

Aim for a clean layout. Avoid clutter by using a simple layout with plenty of white space. Emphasize key points in bulleted lists rather than paragraphs. And use a visual hierarchy to guide the audience's attention to the most important elements first.