On the Use of Visual Aids

The speaker’s greatest asset is the uncluttered force of his or her presence, personality and conviction. Way, way too often, slides are distracting and boring--and no good speaker depends on them.

Simple graphs are fine, and so is anything that makes numbers easier to understand, but on the whole, word slides are distracting and force the audience to choose between listening to the presenter or reading the slide. If they choose to read the slide, there’s a good chance they’ll lose something of the thread of your talk, and an audience once lost is almost irretrievable. The bottom line is--get and hold your audience’s attention; don’t divert it to a slide screen.

In short, nothing beats the old face to face. It is the way that almost every important communication of your life has been delivered. It is why you stand there in front of an audience instead of sending a Xerox.

Having said all that, here are three important guidelines for constructing slides:

1) Make certain relationships between or among ideas are visual

2) Give charts interpretive titles

3) Make certain text is message focused.

Remember, **you’re telling a story**--a story which will allow us to imagine a course of action and decide whether or not to do it. Let your strategy and conclusions drive the structure of the presentation, not the process of how you got where you got. You can explain your process if called upon to do so during Q and A.

Ideally, you want to **thumbnail the presentation** in the opening minutes by giving us your overall strategic thrust (I can’t overemphasize the importance of stating that clearly and forcefully) and your agenda. Be strategic, both in the way you organize your material and in the language you use to present it. If something you’re going to say resides outside a reasonably predictable norm, prepare the audience. For example, “. . .that may seem like a large number, but let’s take a look at the facts which enable us to arrive at that number. . . .” Pay attention to keeping the audience with you throughout.

**Pay attention to your bullets.** Too often bullets are simply generic lists of things to do and leave critical relationships unspecified. Lists communicate only three logical relationships: sequence in time, priority in order of importance, and membership in a set, where often the nature of the relationship among members of the set remains unstated.
Finally--and very importantly--**anticipate questions**. You have only 20 minutes to tell your story. Anticipate questions you might be asked and prepare answers to as many as you can. It’s often a good idea to have back up slides expressly for such anticipated questions. Repeat a question only if everyone has not heard it or if the question is long, rambling, or involved, in which case you want to paraphrase what was asked, both so that you know what you’re answering and to enable you to frame the way you want to enter the answer.