Designing Effective Slides

Idea In Short

Effective slides require designer thinking, deliberate whitespace, restrained color and minimal text. Consultants who treat slides as billboards for executives fail their clients. Arrange, contrast and reduce to make ideas easy to decode.

Think Like a Designer

This is the final section review of Nancy Duarte's Slideology. The book offers lessons worth selecting and sharing with consulting audiences. Consulting presentations, for better or worse, are fairly conservative and regimented. The parts about color, tone, font type, backgrounds and icons can feel superfluous.

For the big three and big four consulting firms, templates are set and follow corporate brand guidelines. If you search for PDFs of major consulting firms, you will see they are internally consistent. McKinsey looks like McKinsey. Deloitte looks like Deloitte. Duarte calls these management-consulting-type presentations with lots of data.

The first lesson is to think like a designer. Designers focus intensely on the experience, engaging all senses including sight, sound and touch. When working with behavioral health patients, for example, what environment do you want to create? 1

Duarte says, "Design at its core is about solving problems. Essentially, designers focus on the experience, making it as beautiful and memorable as possible. To succeed as a presenter, you need to think like a designer."

Arrangement and Contrast

Arrangement matters the way it does for an interior designer creating a living space. What goes in the room, where it is located, the point of focus, the flow and the relative size all

matter. Junking up a slide with tons of text or graphics is not effective communication. It is lazy.

Duarte rightly says it is the presenter's responsibility to keep the audience engaged and to make ideas easy to decode. This is why consulting presentations follow the pyramid principle and lead with the answer. Executives, who are expensive and impatient, should not wait to hear the main points.

Use contrast to direct attention. This seems obvious to PowerPoint veterans, but use color sparingly and effectively. A former CEO gave constructive feedback on a graph: "If you want to point out X, why are there five different colors? Just highlight everything else gray and highlight the focus red." 2

Whitespace and the Three-Second Rule

Duarte calls whitespace "breathing room" and notes that consultants are uniquely bad at using it. A busy, confusing slide would be far better showing a fraction of the information and letting it speak for itself. It is a perfect example of what not to do.

Duarte writes, "It's okay to have clear space. Clutter is a failure of design." Whitespace is not wasted space. It is the visual pause that lets the audience process what matters.

The three-second reading rule deserves scrutiny. The book focuses on stand-and-present-to-large-audience presentations. However, most consulting PowerPoints go to intimate groups or become printouts discussed over a conference room table. Duarte asks whether the message can be deciphered in three seconds, like a billboard.

For 80 percent of slides made over 15 years, the answer is no, and that is acceptable. She may have a point for large-audience events of 300-plus people or product launches. For strategy or operations presentations, it is unlikely a chief experience officer will glance at a slide for three seconds and approve consolidating all accounts receivable functions. 3

Titles, Font Size and Animation

The advice to avoid two-line titles produces mixed feelings. The argument against over-complicating the title area is understandable. However, many consultants use the title bar to

tell a specific narrative and storyline. They do not like to leave the message to chance. This is typical for consulting decks.

Validating font size is great advice. If your font is too small, you are dead. You will look foolish. Remember that people are seeing the slide for the first time and not everyone has good eyesight. Go to the venue for a dry run. Guy Kawasaki famously said, "A good rule of thumb for font size is to divide the oldest investor's age by two, and use that font size."

Limit animation. Duarte did not say it forcefully, but the directive stands. Text fades, reveals, disappearances and movement have a place for lectures and one-way broadcasting of dense content. For most contexts, animation comes across as gimmicky and overdone.

Duarte writes, "It's tempting to make everything buzz like a fly or swoosh like a rocket. Don't do it. Every change, no matter how subtle, creates a distraction."

Reduce Text and Think Like a Director

Reducing text on slides is essential. There is something called PowerPoint English, which uses as few words as possible to convey the point. The preference is for bullets not to carry over to the next line unnecessarily. Phrases like "measured as outcomes, not inputs" and "defined around patient, not supplier" are terse and meaningful. A high school composition teacher would disapprove, but it says a lot in a small space.

As a presenter, you are telling a story with context, content, continuity and drama. Duarte says, "Great presenters connect with their audience, speak naturally, and allow the slides to enhance the story." Do not forget to storyboard from start to finish.

Create drama through pauses, which are powerful. Use the B and W keys in presentation mode to turn the screen black or white, forcing the audience to focus on you. Use the stage, body posture and vocal inflection. Make it interactive where appropriate. Use props, videos, flip charts. Turn the projector off when it serves the message.

The Golden Rule

Duarte ends the book with the right tone and message. The golden rule of presentations is simple: never deliver a presentation you would not want to sit through. This single sentence

captures the empathy that separates competent presenters from great ones.

The best slides disappear into the story. They support the message without competing with it. Design is not decoration but problem-solving, and the problem is always the same: how do you make an idea easy to understand, remember and act on?

Applying These Lessons in Consulting

Consulting presentations differ from keynote speeches, but the design principles transfer. A strategy deck reviewed by a steering committee still benefits from contrast, whitespace and reduced text. The audience may be five executives rather than 500 attendees, but their attention is just as scarce.

The title bar is where consultants can apply the most leverage. Rather than a generic label like Market Overview, a consulting title should state the takeaway: Market share declined 12 points in two years. This approach, sometimes called the action-title method, forces the slide to carry a point of view. The reader should grasp the argument from the titles alone, without needing the body text.

The discipline of reducing text also sharpens thinking. When you cannot fit your analysis into a few terse bullets, the problem is usually that your thinking is not yet clear enough. The constraint of a single slide forces the synthesis that consulting clients actually pay for.

- 1Duarte: Slide:Ology
- 2WAP Journal: Slide:Ology Review
- 3Medium: Slide:Ology Book Summary

Summary

Great slides serve the story, not the speaker's ego. Think like a designer, use contrast and whitespace, validate font size, limit animation and reduce text. The golden rule is simple: never deliver a presentation you would not want to sit through.