

Title:

Presentation Design - Why Is "Well Done" So Rare?

Word Count:

876

Summary:

Your job as a presentation designer is to make ideas into visual images. For your presentations to work, the visual images must convey exactly what you want to say and require the least possible effort on the part of your audience to "get it". The difference between a visual that works and one that fails is good design.

To appreciate of how good design adds to the quality of our lives, it helps to look at some examples of truly bad design that we all deal with on an everyd...

Keywords:

public speaking, presentations, presentation skills, presentation design

Article Body:

Your job as a presentation designer is to make ideas into visual images. For your presentations to work, the visual images must convey exactly what you want to say and require the least possible effort on the part of your audience to "get it". The difference between a visual that works and one that fails is good design.

To appreciate of how good design adds to the quality of our lives, it helps to look at some examples of truly bad design that we all deal with on an everyday basis. Bad design abounds, and everyday our lives are a little less pleasant for it.

The really unfortunate thing about poorly designed objects is that countless unpleasant times might have been spared if only the designer had thought through his or her approach a little more thoroughly. The line between good and bad design is often fine. It can be no more than positioning a button in a spot not easily accessed by mistake; a label placed where it could actually be seen before the wrong action is taken; a multi-step process where you don't have to get to step seven before you realize you did step three wrong; or a lever or handle shaped more like the movement it wants you to make.

When you acquire a more developed sensitivity to design, you begin to look at

all things with questions such as, "Might it have been better to do it this way?", or "What would it have taken to make it work like this?"

Then take a look at the last presentation you delivered. Do you suppose there were elements that caused even temporary confusion? And then when you explained the element, did they say, "Oh I get it - but why didn't you just say it this way?"?

All bad designs cause the expenditure of more effort to produce the same result. The more effort it takes to absorb your message the less energy is available for processing the message itself. Effort causes discomfort. In the presentation environment, that can mean disaster because -for the very same reason- discomfort leads to disassociation from the message. That's why professional trainers make certain the learning environment is as comfortable as possible - fresh water, good seats, frequent breaks. "The mind can only absorb what the buttocks can endure" is old but still relevant. Bad presentation design is a pain in the ass, and it stops message uptake just as quickly.

Now let's step back from presentations for a few moments.

Think about the various devices - electrical, mechanical, architectural, digital, whatever - that you use or come in contact with on a daily or weekly basis. Keep in mind that anything manufactured for human consumption was first designed by a human. You know that some humans are more talented than others. If you're like most people, you have probably been annoyed or frustrated with a device than was designed by one from the less talented group.

Next time you use your hair-dryer, notice whether the high-low switch works the way you would expect, or to affect a High setting you need to push the switch to its Lower position. Can you get water into and coffee out of your drip-style coffee-maker without dripping any of either? Where does your refrigerator spew more ice - into your glass or onto the floor? Can your friends operate your microwave without your showing them how?

Discussing how design affects our everyday lives is purposeful in getting you to think very hard about how your presentation designs affect the people you subject them too, and why it is worth the effort to do them well. And although it is kind and thoughtful to design in ways that enhance, rather than detract from, the quality of your audience's experience, the bottom line is simple: good design goes down easier. You need every opportunity to get your audience on your side, and you must allow nothing in your control to discomfort the people you're trying to persuade. As Edward Tufte says, "audiences are fragile; respect them".

One last sad truth about bad design is that so many people who are frustrated by

things that don't work think it's their fault! When people don't understand what they're told, or audiences don't understand what they see on the screen, they often blame themselves - they believe that they're either stupid or slow or perhaps they simply learn in other ways.

Ask yourself: Do your presentations have a less-than-evident "operating system?" Before someone can get your message (the function of your presentation) do they first have to learn and comprehend your design?

Your main goal when designing a presentation should be to keep your audience's attention on your idea, your pitch, your proposal---your message. They should never be distracted by, or even really aware of, your design. Dazzling them with bells and whistles will help them remember the bells and whistles, not your message. You need to make your message the star so that nothing takes their minds away from it.

Your audience has gone to some effort to let you speak your piece. Thank them for showing up by rewarding them with good design.