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Make Your Reports POP With Creativity, Color, and Call Outs

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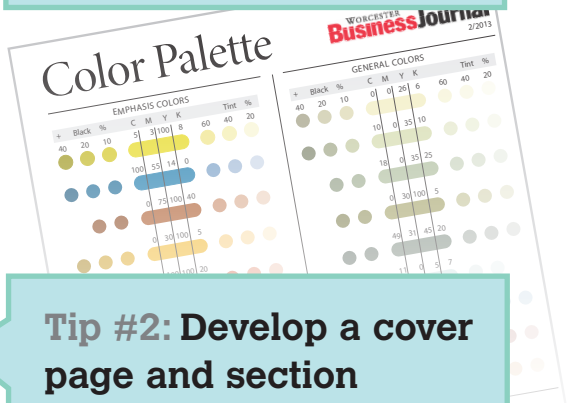
As researchers, we are challenged with presenting our findings in an informative, persuasive, and entertaining way. The addition of visual elements to a PowerPoint report enables the reader to quickly and easily understand the point being made, since the results are presented more succinctly and memorably.

Tip #1: Choose a color palette

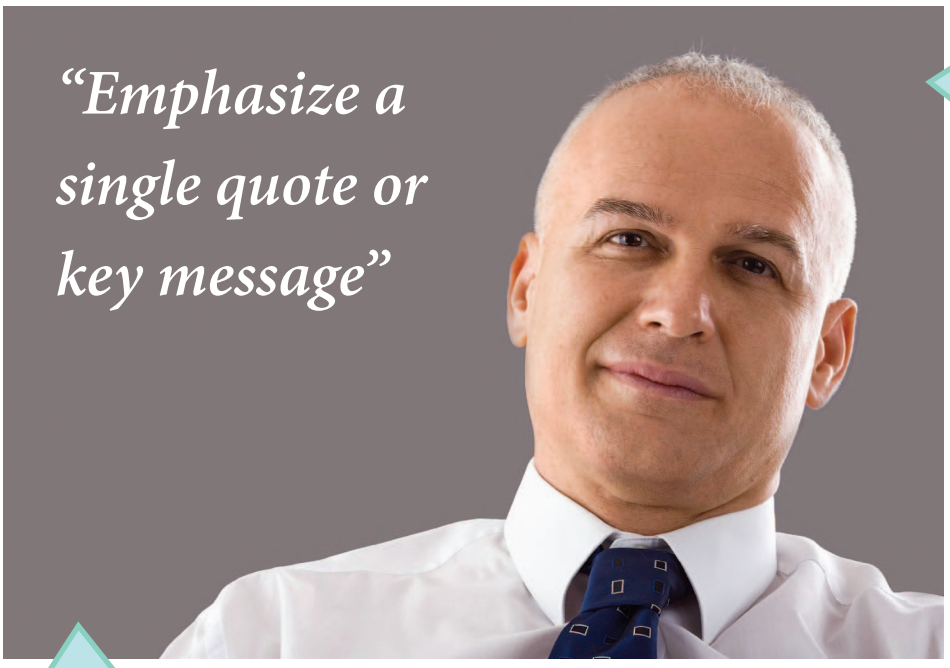
Whether you are using your company's template, one provided to you or creating one from scratch, using a consistent set of colors adds a polished look to your report. Choose a couple of main colors and then add in a few others as an accent. You could consider matching the color palette to the brand or industry for which the research was conducted. For example, if your report is for T-Mobile, you might want to incorporate the pink from their logo. You can use a free tool called "Colorpic" (available at http://www.iconico.com/colorpic) to mouse over the pink on the T-Mobile website and determine what Red/Green/Blue numbers you need to recreate that same pink in your report.



Tip #2: Develop a cover page and section dividers

In addition to spending time on the content, be sure to consider the look and feel of the cover page and section dividers. The cover page is a perfect opportunity to highlight the topic being researched, position a product as the hero, or use images to provide insight into the research story being told. Keep in mind that the cover page sets the tone for the report inside.

Section dividers should be bold and include some elements from your cover page design. However, they should be stripped down with little detail to quickly show a new section is being introduced. One way to test your approach is to look at the report in "slide sorter" view to make sure section dividers stand out.



Tip #3: Use photos

Photos are an obvious and easy visual addition to a report. It's important to keep in mind that any photos added must have a role. Consider including photos you have taken of the research participants, scanned materials created during the research process (collages, artwork), and visuals shown to participants during the research (print ads, website pages, products).

Photos can also be incorporated to emphasize a point or tell a story. These photos are more likely to come from an "image bank" rather than from the research. Develop an image bank of photos that you have taken yourself, purchased, or downloaded for free. Then you can refer to that resource any time an image is needed. This will cut down on the time spent searching for the perfect image. Some potential resources for images include: morguefile.com, sxc.hu, fotolia.com, compfight.com, kozzi.com, corbisimages.com. Shutterstock.com and istockphoto.com (my favorite resource) provide free images each week.

Since a standard PowerPoint slide is 1,024 pixels wide, when purchasing or collecting images, be sure to obtain only those that are 500 pixels or larger. This will enable you to incorporate full slide images, if desired. Images with transparent background (.png files) are also good ones to look for and add to your collection.

PowerPoint offers some formatting tools that enable you to incorporate various image styles, such as a frame/border around your pictures, beveling or soft edges. You could even rotate an image. I would caution you not to overuse the special effects: keep in mind that a consistent style throughout your report delivers the desired professional polish.

Tip #4: Use images creatively

There are many ways to incorporate images into your report. They could be used in place of words, to provide more detail, or explain different options. Maps are great ways to add color and perspective as well as provide a basis for identifying geographic differences. Images can be inserted as part of a slide or as the full slide. For example, pre-designed images with blank areas for quotes or text are a perfect way to highlight findings. They can be expanded to take up the full slide with text boxes laid over the top.

Images can also be used to exemplify the findings. To illustrate the various aspects of the ideal children's section of a public library, I inserted a full-slide image of a children's library and then overlaid text boxes highlighting the key features present in the image.

Tip #5: Emphasize a single quote or key message

Images can be used to highlight a quote or learning that is critical to the research. Incorporating a large or even full-page image of a person, along with that quote, adds strength to the message. Consider using photos of research participants or purchasing an image that resonates. Be sure to position the photograph so the person is looking toward the quote rather than away from it. Readers will naturally follow the direction the person's eyes are looking right to the quote or learning you are emphasizing. (See example above).

When incorporating text into a PowerPoint report, be sure to select a sans serif font (the kind without the extra feet). A font like Arial or Tahoma works well. Also, consider the size and style of font you are using. The "Word Art" button allows for quick addition of reflections, outlines, and bevels to text.

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Tip #6: Incorporate call-outs

Identifying important aspects of an image with a red circle or an arrow is an excellent way to direct the reader's attention to something they might have missed. For example, if you have an image of a research participant on a shop-along, you might want to circle the coupons in her hand to emphasize that coupons will drive purchases.

Tip #7: Show the process visually

Any time you can tell a story or show the process visually (research flow, participant approach to a task), do it. Fewer words and an ordered process (represented by arrows or numbering) can effectively outline what could have taken multiple slides to explain. If the process requires more than one slide, consider adding a numbering system to the slides to emphasize the steps of the process.

Tip #8: Visually separate data

Lists or groupings of information are perfect for inclusion in visually appealing boxes. Incorporate different shaped boxes, 3-D elements, and color. Consider color-filled boxes with white lettering. If it's a list of companies, include their logos rather than citing their names. Flat stripes of color are another way to divide up and highlight groupings of information. This technique is great for removing some of the bullet points you might be using to emphasize groupings. Don't forget about other shapes, including pyramids and Venn diagrams. Both are great for visually presenting hierarchy and relationships.

Although sometimes overused, word clouds are another great way to group data in a graphic way. They are designed to visually give prominence to words/themes that appear more frequently. As you are working on the visual layout of your information, remember to look for ways to cut some of the text. There are likely some words that are not necessary and can be eliminated.

Tip #9: Use commercially pre-made slides

To save time, commercially made slides are a good option. Assuming your contents fit, there is no need to recreate the wheel. Slideshop.com is a great resource for commercially made slides. Their website is searchable by topic and enables you to purchase themed sets of slides. If you sign up for their newsletter, you receive 10 free slides. Plus, you can visit their website weekly and download one free slide each time. If you don't want to spend the money on pre-made slides, you can always use a website like slide-shop.com to generate ideas for potential slide formats.

If you would like to incorporate 3D images in your report, Perspector.com is a resource worth checking out. The site provides 3-D graphics for inclusion in PowerPoint. I found the site to be a bit tricky to use, so it's probably a better tool for those who have mastered PowerPoint and are looking for something additional to make reports more visual.

Tip #10: Consider using plug-ins and outside apps

Depending on your needs, incorporating outside plug-ins and applications might bring that needed spark to your report. Brainshark.com is a great stand-alone application for presenting your report online. It is easy to use and free. Brainshark enables you to upload your PowerPoint deck and add audio narration and background music to your slides. Once created, the slide show can be launched to show each slide (which advances automatically) and play the audio narration and/or music.

Rather than being used as a stand-alone, Animoto.com enables you to create videos that can be embedded into a presentation. When you upload your images and text, this tool adds background images and music that you select from a range of options. This would be a great tool to insert findings from the perspective of the customer, including pictures of research participants and comments they shared. (However, it does not allow for narration.) If the clip is under 30 seconds in length, you can use Animoto.com for free. For anything longer or for a wider selection of backgrounds and music, there is an additional cost. Once your clip is created, you will need to use a product like Zamsar.com to convert the video to a PowerPoint friendly format (.wmv for PC or .mov for Mac).

Final thoughts

As you work to make your reports more visual, keep the following in mind.

- Talk with your audience to understand their needs and expectations. As you develop the report, first determine the contents and learnings you want to include on a slide, and then decide what would be the best way to "display" the information visually.
- Choose a look and feel that you like. As you review other reports or presentations, look for slides that you feel do a good job of visually presenting the information. If there is a format that you don't like visually, even if you think it presents the information in a visual way, don't incorporate it into your report.
- Be consistent in your approach throughout the deck. Mixing together wildly different formats, colors or styles takes away from the professionalism of the report.
- Finally, remember that making your reports more visual is an iterative process and will take time. This approach will require you to think differently about how you present the results.

As you start to think more visually, you will be able to build a toolbox of images and slide formats that work well and can be applied to future reports.

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