"Garr has done it again. Don't go onstage without him." Seth Godin

presentationzen DESIGN

A simple visual approach to presenting in today's world

Garr Reynolds

Table of Contents

4

Using Images to Tell Stories

When I was 17, I created my first multimedia presentation. It consisted of slides for a big project for my high school biology class. The presentation was on issues related to the effects of pollution on the environment. The slide show was a visual affirmation of all the natural beauty around us juxtaposed with the needless manmade destruction to showcase the hypocrisy of human actions.

I created this presentation before the dawn of the digital age, when personal computers were not yet used in schools. So, when I say slides I mean real slides: 35mm transparencies that loaded into a round slide projector called a carousel. The presentation used two carousels working in sync to achieve the effect of a smooth cross-dissolve transition between slides. I added a prerecorded sound track and synchronized the music and images with the transitions on a single screen. It was simple, beautifully visual, and highly effective. The resolution of the photographic images was fantastic. It looked nearly as good as anything created today—but it was a ton of work and the presentation could not really be shared unless I lugged around a bunch of equipment with my teacher's help.

This was about eight years before Microsoft released PowerPoint, so I had no examples of how to create and deliver a multimedia presentation. Instead, I tried to glean visual storytelling and reporting techniques from network news programs and documentary films. The idea of using bullet points and long lines of text never occurred to me. The slides, after all, were to be a visual complement to the narrative. The slides were meant to illustrate, show evidence, and evoke emotions. I told the story.

Instead of titles and bullet points, my instructor talked about research, evidence, structure, and story—about having a point that moves people from point A to point B. The photographic slides produced by my 35mm camera were the only visuals I was allowed to use for the assignment.

Because film was expensive—and I had to wait two weeks for the slides to return from the lab—I thought carefully about the story I wanted to tell and the types of images I needed to support my argument, make my case, and tell my story. Only after I did my research and completed the plan on paper, did I set out with my camera to find evidence of the problem, taking pictures of what society had to lose (the beauty) and evidence of the threats to it (the pollution).

Long before I ever heard of concepts such as the cognitive load theory or the dual channels of cognition, like most students, I knew intuitively and through experience that quality images plus narration was better than narration plus a lot of text onscreen, even though I was years away from experiencing "death by PowerPoint."

These slides are from an updated version of that first multimedia presentation I did back in high school. I used the lyrics from a Tower of Power song called "Can't Stand to See the Slaughter" to introduce the theme of the talk. (Images in slides from iStockphoto.com.)

The Visual Matters

Traditional literacy is important, of course, but today multimedia literacy—text, audio, and images, including video—is just as important for learning, teaching, and communicating both complex and simple ideas. Some might consider it even more important. Multimedia is immediate and rich, and it enables us to amplify and clarify the meaning of content in ways text or narration alone cannot. The language of the 21st century includes images like never before. The legendary Will Eisner writes in his book *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2008): "The proliferation of the use of images as a communicant was propelled by the growth of technology that required less in text-reading skills...visual literacy has entered the panoply of skills required for communication in this century."

High-quality images make it possible for us to become true digital storytellers. The late Dana Atchley, the father of the digital storytelling movement, coined the term *digital storytelling* and according to him, "...digital storytelling combines the best of two worlds: the 'new world' of digitized video, photography, and art, and the 'old world' of telling stories. This means the 'old world' of PowerPoint slides filled with bullet point statements will be replaced by a new world of examples via stories, accompanied by evocative images and sounds."

Atchley was right. While there are still too many uninspiring presentations that use a strict bulleted format or are overly cluttered, more and more people are getting the message about the need to become better storytellers. They are starting to understand the profound power the effective use of multimedia has for helping us tell better stories.

Storytelling is a shared experience between speaker and listener. Images can help make that experience more powerful because they help us connect better with our audience. In the book *Going Visual* (Wiley, 2005), authors Alexis Gerard and Bob Goldstein have this to say about using images:

> *...images have a unique power not just to convey information, but also to build unity and consensus around that information to promote action and decision making.... Because images are complete and detailed and deliver an information experience that has greater impact than words, a common base of visual information proves to be the most efficient form of shared experience from which to make decisions.*

Gerard and Goldstein explain that the evolution of visual communication technology consists of three main elements:

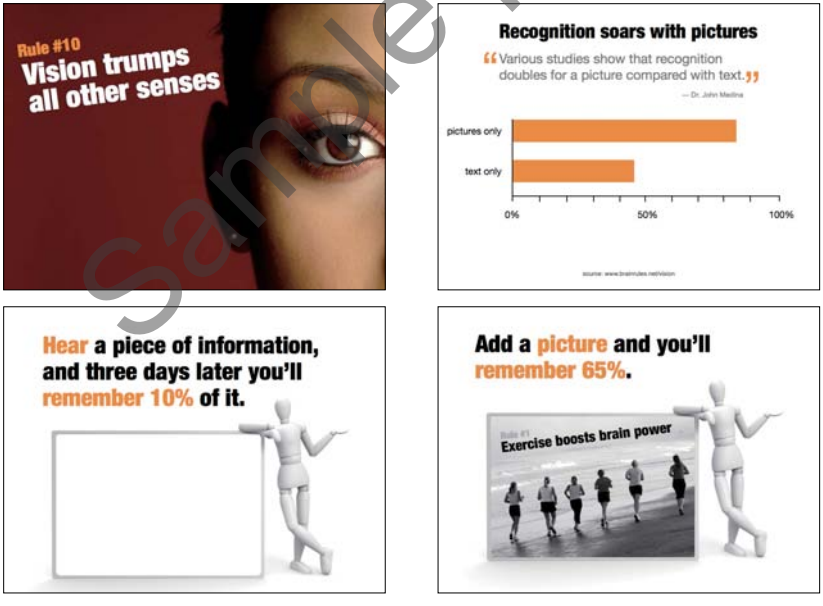
- Skill level—technology has made visual communication easier to produce.
- Time requirements—creating and using images takes less time today.
- Audience reach—technology now allows us to communicate with more people visually.

In one of my past presentations I showed the evolution of visual communication as explained in *Going Visual.* To do this, I created these simple slides that were very effective at instantly showing that we have indeed come a long way in the evolution of visual communication.

Slides adapted from *Going Visual* by Gerard and Goldstein. (Images in slides from iStockphoto.com.*)*

We Are Visual Beings

Vision is our most powerful sense. Therefore, designing messages that include images is a highly effective way to get people's attention and help them understand and remember your content. Most live slideware presentations today still contain a lot of text. However, according to Dr. John Medina, author of the best-selling *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School* (Pear Press, 2008), this is inefficient because our brains are not as good at identifying letters and words as identifying and remembering pictures. Says Medina, "Professionals everywhere need to know about the incredible inefficiency of text-based information and the incredible effects of images." Dr. Medina says that all professionals should "burn their current PowerPoint presentations" and instead create slides that take advantage of our incredible ability to understand images. Each presentation case is different; however, evidence shows that we should strongly consider the use of images in the design of presentation visuals.



Slides adapted from *Brain Rules* by Dr. John Medina.
(Images in slides from iStockphoto.com.)

Power of the Photograph

I love still images because the photograph captures a moment in time, allowing the viewer to slow down and think and wonder and reflect. Many filmmakers—especially documentary filmmakers—use still photos as a complement to motion pictures or video. Photos allow for greater emphasis and may have less distracting elements, giving the presenter or narrator/filmmaker more freedom to augment the photo for a desired effect. Still images also allow the viewer time to interpret their own meaning from the image. We can learn a lot from documentary film, especially from the kind created by Ken Burns, whose films rely heavily on still images.

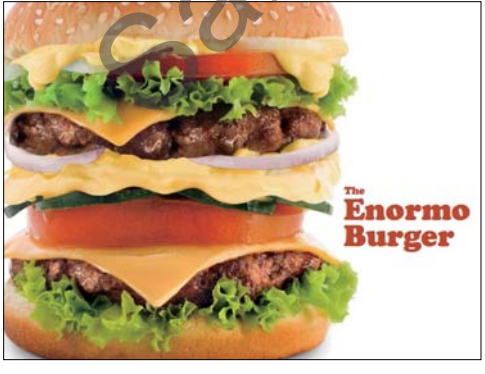
One tip is to avoid the usage of imagery only as ornamentation. What you see in a Ken Burns film is a simple and powerful use of photos and other imagery that support the narrative and illuminate the story on a visceral level, thereby making the experience richer and more memorable. When we hear a story that is amplified by compelling photography, the issue in the story becomes less of an abstraction. The issue becomes more concrete and emotional. The next time you give a presentation about an important but complex topic—especially a social issue—see if you can illuminate the general topic by focusing on a particular story. This is a technique that storytellers, such as filmmakers, often use. Powerful images plus thoughtful narration—and maybe even a bit of text—can help you tell your story in ways that bullet points never can.

The use of large images in these slides make an especially powerful impact. (Images in slides from iStockphoto.com.)

Full-bleed images offer ultimate impact

Margins around an image give it a sort of protective frame. When you compare two or more images on slides, margins are necessary to clearly differentiate among the images. Generally, however, people use images that are too small, making it hard for audiences to see the content, thereby reducing the impact of the photo.

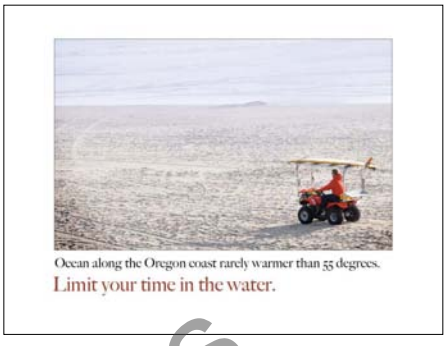
When it makes sense to do so, I suggest you *bleed* images off the edge of the slide frame. That is, fill the entire slide area with the image. (Bleed is actually a term that comes from the printing world. In a book like this one, when you want to fill an entire page with an image, you must use an image that is just a tiny bit larger than the area of the page. In other words, you bleed the image off the page to make sure none of the underlying paper color shows through the trimmed page, which would destroy the effect.) With slides, all you need is an image that is exactly the same size as the slide. If your slides are 1024 x 768 pixels, for example, then the dimensions of the image need to be at least this large to fill the screen. A full-bleed or full-screen image gives the illusion that the slide is bigger than it is. This is especially true if part of the subject in your image runs off the screen. For example, a burger shop may make a poster featuring a picture of their "Enormo Burger," but with part of the burger bleeding off the edge to suggest that it's so big it can't fit within the frame. This makes the image more compelling and it draws the viewer in.



The image in this slide bleeds off the edges, making the slide feel bigger. (Image in slides from iStockphoto.com.)

Here is an example of a smaller image producing less impact. Which slide better reflects the idea of an enormous burger?

Here, the image is framed against the background slide template. The background is a distration.



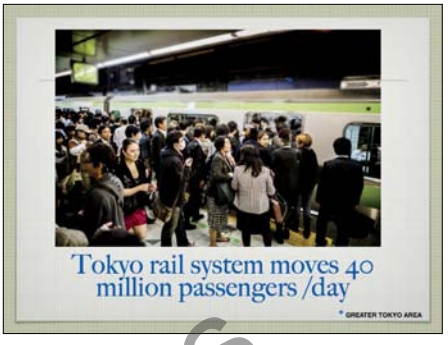
Using a white background creates more of a formal border, which emphasizes the photo.

This is a partial bleed. The photo makes a bigger impression, yet still has a border at the bottom.

I prefer a white partial border as it seems more harmonious with this image and more professional.

With a full-bleed (or full-screen) image, the background slide is gone. Now the image becomes the background and the type becomes part of the image, creating a more dynamic, engaging visual that is easily seen from the back of the room.

Here, the image is rather small and the background template from the slideware is "noisy" due to all the gridlines.



The image is at least larger, as is the text, but it is still not a very clean slide.

This is not bad. The template is gone and the image has a frame, which makes it seem like a snapshot from the station. The text is easy to see.

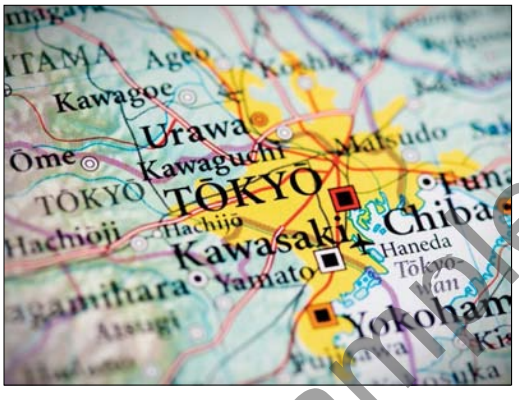
Here, the image is even larger, filling the whole screen from left to right, and the text looks good. The highlight color (green) is taken from the train.

Now the image takes up the entire screen for a more dynamic effect. The type is easy to see in both cases, but a black box is added to the version on the right for even better legibility.

BEFORE

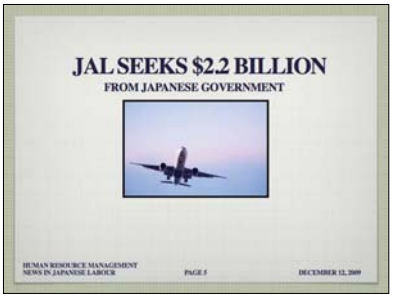
This is an example of taking a busy slide and breaking it up over several slides (in this case, four slides). The slide on the left repeats many of the things the presenter will share with the audience before he describes the efficient rail system that moves an incredible amount of people all around the city each day. But instead of using loads of text on a slide, he uses large dynamic visuals in harmony with the flow of his narrative. There are now four slides. First he explains what is meant by "Greater Tokyo." Then he takes the audience onto the train platform to give them a feel for the crowds. The slide than fades to a blurry version of the same photo so that the text—his key point— can be seen easily. The last side appears as he emphasizes just how large a number 40 million is by comparing it to the population of New Zealand.

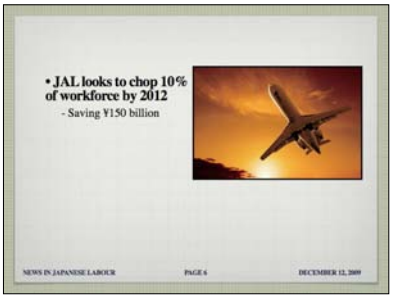
AFTER

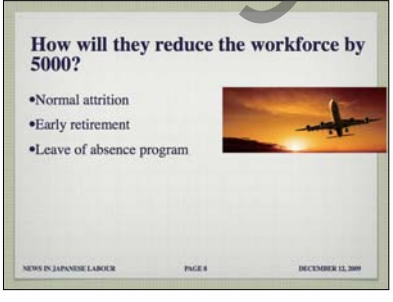


(Images in slides from iStockphoto.com.)

BEFORE





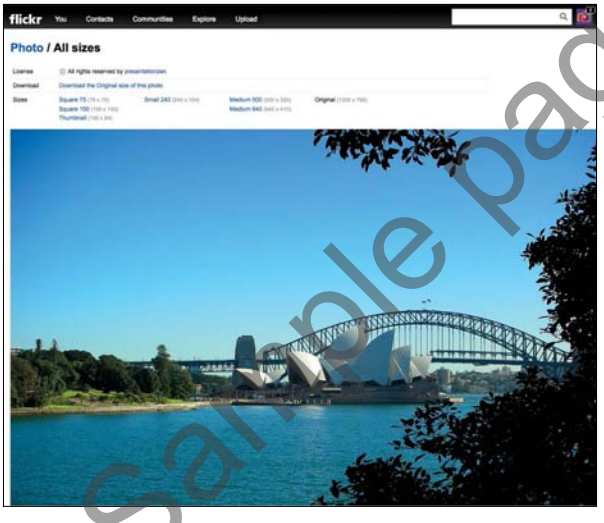


AFTER

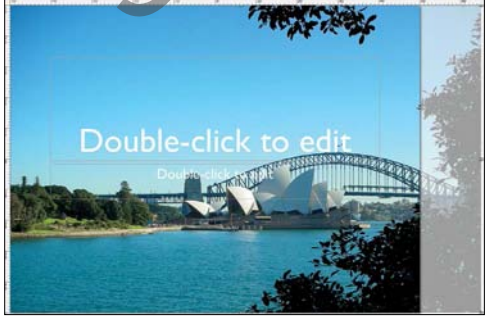
The slides in the left column are the originals. Note how the message in each slide has greater impact when the image fills the slide (right column). (Images in slides from iStockphoto.com.)

The ideal resolution for projection

As a general rule, use images that are 72 ppi to 100 ppi with dimensions that are the same or very close to the slide dimensions. For example, 800 x 600 or 1024 x 768 when you want to use an image that fills your entire slide (a slide with an aspect ratio of 4:3). For slides with a more cinematic aspect ratio of 16:9—an aspect ratio increasingly common at large events such as TED or professional conferences—photos may need to be at least 1280 x 720, a popular resolution for a 16:9 screen.



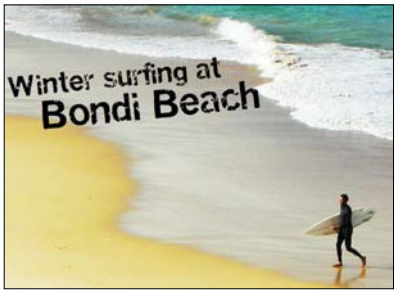
Flickr offers millions of searchable images with a Creative Commons license. When you find an image you like, right-click (Control-click) the image to see all the sizes available for that image. In the example on the left (one of my snaps from Sydney), the largest size in this case is 1200 x 768. My slide dimensions are 1024 x 768, so this image will work fine. Once in slideware (below left) you can see that the image is a bit wider than the slide, but I can simply move the image to the left to get the framing I want. Simple.



Improve images through cropping

Cropping is a technique for reframing or adjusting the composition of an original photograph. Of course, it's always better to take the perfect shot or purchase the perfect image, but that does not always happen. Cropping changes the image to better suit your needs. For example, you may have images of interesting subjects, but the composition is not what you had hoped. I have loads of holiday snapshots that are not that great, but can be improved with a bit of cropping.

I took this shot of Bondi Beach in Australia a few years ago using a simple digital point-and-shoot camera. The original resolution was 300 ppi, measuring 2816 x 2112 pixels. The size of the file was 4.2 MB. For images that will be placed in slideware, a resolution of 72 ppi or 96 ppi is usually fine. So I first reduced the resolution to 72 ppi, which decreased the file size to 1.9 MB. Next, I decreased the dimensions of the slide to something closer to 1024 x 768, the size of my slides, using basic photo-editing software. Because I started with such a large image, however, I can go inside the photograph and frame it in a way that is a little more interesting and specific. Using the cropping tool, I selected an area of the photograph that shows only the surfer, leaving plenty of empty space in case I want to place text inside the image. Now, the image measures just a bit over 1024 x 768 and the JPEG file size is about 300 KB. I could reduce the file size further through more compression, but this would decrease the quality of the image.



The large image is the original snap I took at the beach. The image below is the cropped version of the image, which is now the same size as the slide on the right (1024 x 768 at 72 ppi).