

Using Visual Aids

by Elaine Cogan

People generally remember 20 percent of what they hear, 30 percent of what they see, and 50 percent of what they see and hear at the same time. Planners must realize this instinctively, as ubiquitous charts and graphs seem to accompany most of their oral presentations.

Unfortunately, use does not automatically ensure quality. Hapless planning commissioners often are captive audiences expected to endure their staffs' seemingly endless array of boring, repetitive, or unnecessarily complicated graphics. In my previous column, I cautioned planning commissioners not to meddle in staff or management affairs. But when it comes to visual aids, you may be neglecting your duties if you continue to endure those that are less than adequate. Be assured that if you do not understand them, neither will the public.

Moreover, as a planning commissioner you may — at times — be expected to make presentations to local organizations. Visuals may well enhance your speech, but again, only if they are clear and appropriate. You have a great variety to choose from, including: chalkboards or whiteboards; flipcharts; graphs; maps; overheads and transparencies; slides; and videos.

The following principles are a general guide to the use of all these visual aids. You are welcome to share the information with your planning director.

No one technique fits all. Use visuals to enhance, not replace, your oral presentation. Before deciding which visual aid to use, consider: the purpose of your presentation; how many will be in the audience and their knowledge of the issue; size of the room; and budget. Whatever medium you choose, make sure your visual is well done. A simple chalkboard or flipchart can be effective if you write boldly and do not

crowd in too many ideas. Pie charts are the best type of graph because they present proportions or relationships lay people can understand easily. Slide photos of particular sites can be either distracting or effective, depending on the quality of the photography.

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REMEMBER THAT
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BUT ONLY IF IT IS THE
RIGHT PICTURE!”

Make each visual simple and unambiguous. Now that computer programs can create graphs and charts at the flick of a button, too many people are tempted to use them without thinking through the message they want to convey. It is easy to be overly ambitious and try to present too much information. Your message should be obvious to the reader after just a few seconds of scrutiny. All lists should contain phrases rather than whole sentences. Never use overheads that contain densely packed text. Use familiar examples. When you were on vacation in Europe last year, you may have taken beautiful slides that relate to planning issues in your community. But if the audience is likely to wonder how you could afford such an expensive trip, junk those slides for examples closer to home.

Be sure the size and scale can be seen by everyone in the audience. Test your visual in the room you will use and discard anything that cannot be seen easily in the back row. If you find you have the wrong size visual for that meeting space, make your

presentation without it. This is much preferred than having the audience become angry or alienated when your visuals appear to be visible only to the “chosen few” in the first few rows.

Choose strong, generally accepted colors. The best for white charts are black or dark blue; for maps, blues and greens; and for highlights, red or orange. Graphic artists are too often tempted to use trendy colors ... mauve and pink were popular just a while ago. Colors that have a short lifespan will seem unduly frivolous to many citizens. You will never go wrong with familiar, primary colors that have stood the test of time and are easily understood. It is generally accepted, for example, that anything blue is a body of water, while green denotes trees or open space.

Do not neglect obvious information. Planners should know better, but may leave out the date or the name of the department or bureau. Too many maps and photographs lack a simple north arrow or the designation of major streets or community landmarks. These are important, not only for consistency, but also to help orient lay people who are not as savvy as you are.

Above all, remember that 1 picture is worth 1,000 words, but only if it is the right picture! If staff visuals are too complicated or obscure, do not hesitate to ask questions or request that they redo them. If you are using visuals as part of your presentation, be sure to follow the above guidelines and you will be rewarded with a receptive, attentive audience.

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