

Session Objectives:

- When to use visual aids?
- Selecting a suitable visual aid
- Introducing visual aids in the text

When to use Visual aids

Before trying to know when to use visual aids, it is important to first understand the role played by visual aids in enhancing the process of communication. Therefore, it is necessary to first know why business professionals use visual aids in their reports and presentations.

Why are visual aids used in presentations and reports?

Visual aids help in communicating information more clearly than what is possible using only textual matter. They help to clarify and simplify data. The ability of visual aids to attract the attention of the reader helps them serve as attention-getters. Thus, visual aids can be used to emphasize important material and to persuade the reader to understand or agree with the writer's point of view.

Example: A quarterly sales report submitted by a sales executive will be clear and easy to understand if it is presented in a tabulated manner showing the targeted, actual and difference in sales. If, however, the sales report were to be presented in the form of textual matter, not only would this be complicated and difficult to understand but will also make comparison difficult.

When to use visual aids?

Visual aids are used to make reports and presentations more effective. They are used to support and clarify textual descriptions through graphics, diagrams etc. They simplify complicated descriptions by breaking them into various components and depicting them together using flow charts, diagrams etc. Visual aids are used to emphasize important parts of presentations or reports by means of pie charts, line charts etc. They are used to summarize the major points in a report or narrative by summing them up in the form of a table or chart.

Selective usage of visual aids

Selective usage of visual aids is necessary since use of too many graphics and other such visual aids may result in distracting the attention of the readers from the central idea of the presentation or report. Also, visual aids should complement the textual matter. They should not be used in place of textual matter.

The following questions require to be answered to know whether a visual presentation is effective or not?

- Does the visual presentation help enhance the readers' overall understanding of the subject?
- Can the information be conveyed in words rather than by visual means?
- Will the textual information add meaning to the visual display?

- Is the visual presentation easy to understand or does it confuse the readers?

Selecting a suitable visual aid

Selecting the right visual aid could be the most vital decision in making a report effective. The visual aid selected should be the one that best conveys the message to the readers.

Various visual aids available are discussed below:

Tables

A table is a systematic presentation of data in columns and rows. A table is the most suitable visual aid when detailed, numerical information has to be presented in a clear and simple manner. A table consists of horizontal rows and vertical columns with headings to indicate what they represent.

Bar charts

The bar chart, also known as simple bar chart or single-range bar chart, is a graphic aid used to depict quantities. The bars may be presented either horizontally or vertically and the length of the bars indicates the quantity of the variable.

There are two types of bar charts:

Multi-range bar chart: Multi-range bar charts are also known as comparative or cluster bar chart. A multi-range bar chart is used to express data that change over time. A multiple-range bar chart can effectively compare more than one set of data at each point on the X-axis or the Y-axis.

Stacked bar chart: The stacked bar chart is also called as the component, 100 percent or segmented bar chart. This type of bar chart is used when it is necessary to show how the various components contribute to the total figure. A stacked bar chart allows comparisons of components for more than one time period.

Gantt chart: Gantt charts are horizontal bar charts that represent time relationship graphically. Time is represented on the horizontal axis while tasks are represented on the vertical axis in a Gantt chart. The length of the bars indicate the amount of time taken to accomplish each task. Gantt charts are a useful tool for managers and help them in planning, allocating and scheduling resources.

Line charts

Line charts are used to indicate the changes that take place over a period of time. These can successfully indicate trends and display variations within each time period. Time is depicted on the horizontal axis, and the amount is depicted on the vertical axis. In a line chart, more than one line may be plotted on a single graph. This facilitates comparisons.

For example: Sale of small, midsize & large cars may be plotted on a single graph. This graph would depict the increase or decrease in car sales, in each of these segments.

Cumulative line charts, also known as surface charts or area charts, are used to depict cumulative effect or how various components contribute to the total.

Pie charts: Pie charts are similar to the stacked bar charts and represent how the parts of a whole are distributed. These are useful in depicting percentages but ineffective in showing quantitative totals or in making comparisons. Each slice should be labeled and colored, or shaded, so that each portion of the pie can be differentiated from the other. The slices of the pie should be arranged in such a manner that the slice depicting the largest portion of the pie should begin at the 12 o'clock position.

Pictograms: Pictograms are visual aids which use pictures to depict numerical relationships. While using pictograms, care should be taken that all the pictures in a particular pictogram are of the same size.

Maps: Maps are useful in illustrating geographic relationships. Apart from being less confusing than a verbal explanation, maps are a more interesting and concise way of presenting geographical data. For example, when a tourist guide provides you with a map; it is easier for you to understand about the location of various places that you will be touring, as against the guide's verbal explanation about each location.

Flowcharts and Organization charts: These are used to express the physical or conceptual relationships between various components of a process or departments of an organization, etc. Flowcharts are an indispensable visual aid to illustrate processes, procedures and relationships between components.

Organization charts depict the location, functions and interrelationships between various units of an organization.

Other visual aids

Apart from the visual aids that have been discussed above, floor plans, photographs, diagrams, cartoons and blueprints may also be used in reports. The easy availability of these sophisticated graphics and drawing software has led to increasing use in many reports and presentations. These software, being easy to use, are being increasingly used by managers to develop creative visuals for inclusion in internal reports.

Introducing visual aids in the text

Text and visual aids should serve as partners in the communication process. The visual should supplement the text and the text should add meaning to the visual.

Reference to the visual should be given before the reader comes across it in the text. This helps to draw the attention of the reader to that aspect of the visual that the writer wishes to emphasize and to supplement what has already been said in the text. However, if reference to the visual is not given in the text, the readers may draw their own inferences from the visual rather than what the writer wants them to infer. Thus the visual needs to be integrated with the text.

Summary

Use of visual aids in presentations help to clarify, simplify, emphasize, summarize, reinforce and unify information and help to attract and impress the readers. Visual aids thus play a major role in making an effective presentation.

Visual aids are illustrations in tabular, graphic, schematic or pictorial form. Selection of the visual aid influences the quality of the report or presentation.