

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 21, 1994

ENHANCING COMMUNICATION USING A PRESENTATION PACKAGE

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ABSTRACT

The development of a presentation is discussed. Six uses of presentation software are cited. Software and hardware requirements are addressed and the advantages and disadvantages of using the packages is discussed. Recent reviews of software and hardware are cited.

INTRODUCTION

To be effective, verbal communication must be received and understood. However, there generally are distractions and noise, which interfere with the communication process. Such impediments can be partially overcome by using visual communication along with the verbal message. Visual communication has generally taken the form of blackboards or flip charts. Technology added overhead projection and slide projection.

Overhead transparencies are a significant improvement over the blackboard and flip chart. A series of transparencies can be developed prior to the presentation and shown in any order desired. The transparencies can even be created in color, although most professors are limited to black and white transparencies due to cost considerations. Transparencies are very portable so long as the proper projection equipment is available. However, once a transparency is made, it cannot be altered. Transparencies also require lead-time prior to the presentation.

Slides offer most of the advantages of transparencies. They can be made in color at a reasonable cost and are easy to transport. However, slides must be properly positioned in a slide tray prior to showing and shifting the order of presentation is much more difficult. Slide projectors are not as readily available and the lead-time required to create the presentation is generally much greater than for overhead projection. Good slides also tend to be more difficult to create, as they require some skill in photography.

A new visual communication tool was introduced to ABSEL members at the Knoxville, Tennessee conference by John Pisciotta from Baylor University. He demonstrated how the computer presentation package Aldus Persuasion could be used to enhance classroom communication. This paper will build on that presentation by discussing uses ABSEL members can make of a presentation package, the software and hardware requirements for its use, the advantages and pitfalls of using presentation packages and finally prospects for the future.

USING PRESENTATION PACKAGES

Presentations are developed by using software to create a series of slide images, which may be saved in a file. The file may be accessed later when it is time to make the presentation.

Several different media may be used to make presentations. The slide images may be printed and transferred to transparencies for overhead projection. The images may be put on individual slides for use in a slide projector. The images may also be projected directly from a computer. In all cases, the presentation package will simplify slide creation and will allow creation of professional looking slides.

Slide images may be projected from a computer using one or more computer monitors or some type of projection equipment. Projecting a presentation directly from a computer offers several advantages. First, it shortens the lead-time between development and presentation. Second, changes can be made until the presentation is made. Third, the slide

sequence can easily be changed at any time during the presentation. Fourth, students see technology, which many of them will use, on the job. Finally, an image is created of being up-to-date both in use of technology and in the messages delivered.

To create a presentation, an outline is entered into the computer using presentation software. The structure of the outline determines how the material will appear on the slides. Each major heading begins a new slide. Slides may also be created for subheadings. A common mistake is to put too much on a slide. It is far better to use more slides with less information per slide.

A presentation may consist entirely of verbiage. However, this is not making the best use of the media. Presentation packages have graphics capabilities, which allow the creation of graphics on slides or the importation of graphics files. The graphics consist of tables and charts or graphic images. Tables and charts are created as they are in spreadsheets. They may also be imported from spreadsheets and scanners.

Graphic images are relatively inexpensive to buy with 500 or 1000 images selling for fifty to sixty dollars. Thus it is easy to include professional looking graphics in a presentation. Images may be easily altered after being imported into a slide. They may be resized, rotated, repositioned and recolored.

Color makes a presentation stand out. However, color adds a new unfamiliar dimension. Color requires more expensive equipment, but the results can be stunning. Color presentations look very professional. The difficulty with color is in deciding what colors to use. What color for the background? What color(s) for text? What about charts and tables? The most interesting color choices involve graphic images. Some come in color and others do not. All can be changed. Color should be used to emphasize points. It draws the eye to specific areas of the slide.

There are at least six uses which ABSEL members can make of presentation packages: 1. Communicate administrative information, 2. Create experiential environments, 3. Post bulletins and newsletter summaries, 4. Emphasize important points, 5. Summarize class sessions, and 6. Fill knowledge gaps.

EQUIPMENT REQUIREMENTS

Equipment capability appears to be highly correlated with cost.

Software

A number of presentation packages are available for IBM compatible and Macintosh computers. Recent reviews for IBM compatibles may be found in *Byte* (Clarkson 1993), *Info World* (Fridlund 1993), *PC Computing* (Gralla 1993) and *PC Magazine* (Gunn 1 1992). Reviews of Macintosh packages are found in *ComputerWorld* (Slater 1993), *MacUser* (Cryan 1 1993a) and *Mac Week* (Bishop, 1 1993).

Hardware

A minimum computer configuration is 4 megabytes of RAM and a 40-megabyte hard disk. More of both is desirable. A color monitor is a real plus. A notebook computer is recommended due to its portability. Two features to look for in a notebook are simultaneous display of

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the notebook monitor and the external monitor port and a sleep capability.

Computer presentations require either monitors or projection equipment. Projection equipment is more desirable when class sizes are large. A computer projection panel with an overhead projector or a computer screen projector may be used. A projection panel requires an overhead with a high powered light. The picture is generally sharper and more visible if the lights in the front of the room can be dimmed.

Color is expensive but highly desirable. Fortunately prices are coming down. Recent reviews of projection panels are found in *Info World* (Wallace 1993), *MacUser* (Brisbin 1993) and *PC Computing* (Lindstrom 1993). The latter article also reviews projectors.

ADVANTAGES OF PRESENTATION PACKAGES

Presentation packages offer several advantages for the classroom. Professional looking visuals can be created with a minimum of effort. It is not effortless, but compared to other methods, the effort is minimal. Students will be impressed with the technology. It also provides an opportunity to see another type of software package they will encounter in the business world. Communication tends to improve, interest seems higher and students appear to take more away from class.

Developing a presentation file for each class forces careful planning for the course. The quality of instruction tends to improve as do teaching ratings. Once the files are developed, they can be used repeatedly. With the files on disk, material can be easily reviewed and updated. One of the benefits of using computer files is that they can be altered until the moment class begins.

DISADVANTAGES

Time is required to set up the equipment in the classroom unless the room has a dedicated computer already connected. All of the required equipment must be in the classroom prior to class time. This may require lugging equipment. When depending upon others to provide the equipment, plan on a slip up or two. The equipment must be hooked together and connected to a power source. This takes time and cord confusion is common. Cords also make good trip wires.

Rooms and lighting can be a problem. If the lighting in the room cannot be varied, students may get frustrated because the screen is difficult to see. The shape of the room may create difficulties in locating equipment for proper viewing or for clear focusing of the image. The arrangement and number of chairs may also make positioning difficult.

Finally, there is the problem one faces with any technology. Occasionally something goes wrong. This is especially true the first time something new is tried. A dry run before class begins is highly recommended, preferably several days before so any problems can be solved prior to class. Even under normal conditions, bulbs burn out, disks fail, files become damaged, cables fail or are lost, equipment does not arrive on time, etc. ABSEL members tend to have more experience with technology than the average faculty. They are more accepting of the risks as the price for progress.

FUTURE

Multimedia presentation software has been recently introduced (Cryan, 1993b), and it appears to be defining the direction presentation software will take. Multimedia software offers animation, sound, movies and the ability to interact with the presentation. Being a new class of presentation software, each vendor has a different idea of what the market wants. This will shake out as the product market matures. Right now it is in a state of flux.

Multimedia software requires high-end machines to run efficiently. The software also requires other hardware resources not required by the slide presentation software discussed above. Most classrooms are not set up to take advantage of this technology. While multimedia presentations are quite impressive, they take much more time to develop. Most ABSEL members would be advised to master a standard slide presentation package before attempting multimedia. While the developments are interesting to watch, unfortunately in the near term most ABSEL members are not likely to have the resources available to benefit from multimedia presentation packages.

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