



Picture It: The Power of Visual Speaking

by Gary Genard

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Picture It: The Power of Visual Speaking

TV has upped the ante for presenters. To reach today's audiences, you need to imitate the preeminent persuader of our age.

by Gary Genard

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE YOU at persuading audiences to see things your way? If you fail to speak visually, chances are the answer is “not very.”

Blame it on the preeminent persuader of our age, television. Over the past half-century, television has transformed virtually every form of public discourse in America. It has altered our diet so that we respond best to bite-sized pieces of information, and we expect—even demand—that messages be served up with a reinforcing image.

As speakers, then, we are faced with the challenge of satisfying our audience's expectations without imitating television's superficiality. We can, and must, do this—not by merely offering visual reinforcement of our ideas, but by conceptualizing and conveying those ideas in visual terms.

Whatever your profession, if you can learn to create word pictures in listeners' minds, you have a much greater chance of getting your message across in a way that's both resonant and memorable.

The TV says so

Your listeners have been trained by television, and they have learned well. You must, in turn, respond to their visual expectations by re-creating the persuasive techniques that TV uses so effectively. There are at least four ways you can do this:

1. Open with a surprising or dramatic situation.

Hook an audience as TV shows do. One of the best ways to do this is to set up a vivid situation, problem, or conflict, then frame your message around addressing or solving it.

Here's an example from a speech by John F. McDonnell, chief executive officer of McDonnell Douglas Corporation, delivered at a CEO conference in Amsterdam:

Immanuel Kant, the great philosopher, was in the habit of keeping paper and pen on his bedside table. Often, he would wake up in the middle of the night and jot down a thought or idea. Then he would go back to sleep. One morning, he awoke convinced he had discovered the answer to a question that had puzzled him for months.

While dreaming, he had a dazzling insight that seemed to break the mental logjam. He seized the paper on his bedside table in eager anticipation. There he found the words: “Think in different terms.”

McDonnell goes on to discuss the “moment of discovery” that European companies arrive at when they realize that “drastic change” is needed to meet the challenge of savvy and evolving competitors.

Notice how your own mind brought forth visual images to make the vignette come alive, thereby imitating the effect of a gripping opening scene in a television show. By opening his speech this way, McDonnell hooked his audience with an arresting, image-rich anecdote that led directly into his main point.

2. Carefully choose and develop the imagery you use.

In imitating the visual effects of TV, avoid what I call the razzle-dazzle effect. You know what this is: image collages, full of sound and fury, in newscasts and sports programming, movie trailers, game shows, commercials, and everything in between. The problem with the razzle-dazzle effect is that music, sheer noise, and the frantic manipulation of images substitute for substance. As media critic Neil Postman puts it, the technique offers “fascination in place of complexity and coherence.”

At its best, television captures viewers with images that are thematically meaningful and linger long enough to resonate in the mind and emotions. Images that arrive and disappear too quickly cannot be properly absorbed and so have little effect. Television viewers can't “turn back the page” to reread what they haven't grasped, and neither can your listeners.

The CEO who sets up his image firmly at the beginning of a speech by saying, “The other day I saw an amazing sight on the floor,” and then goes on to speak about this one amazing thing, is already headed toward a more successful message than the leader who begins with a laundry list of ideas, visual or otherwise. (Less effective still, of course, is the speaker who begins, “I want to talk

POLISH OR PERISH

TV viewers are a tough crowd. Whether they're seeking information or diversion, they've been trained to expect a smooth, seamless integration of voice and visuals. Now as never before, how well you use visual aids—once considered only embellishments—strongly influences how effective your presentation is.

Visual aids must complement, not compete with, your message, emphasizes Thomas Leech, a presentations consultant and author of *How to Prepare, Stage, and Deliver Winning Presentations* (3rd ed., Amacom, 2004).

The first step toward accomplishing this is knowing where you will stand when presenting. Leech suggests standing to the right of the screen so that, facing the audience, you appear to their left. Thus, the discussion moves from you to the screen, from left to right from the audience's vantage point, which is how we read.

Display images only when you're ready to use them because people are distracted by visuals that aren't immediately pertinent to the information being conveyed. "Too often," Leech writes, "before they even say anything, presenters turn on the projector. Then, for the next five minutes, listeners look at a lighted screen containing no image, or at an image that adds nothing to the opening components."

Instead, make sure your visuals are ready to go, but darkened—focus on them only when you're ready to speak to the information they're meant to relay. And remove visuals once they've served your purpose, since people's attention will inevitably be drawn back to them. Erase the blackboard or turn to a blank page in the flip-chart; cover the overhead projector or minimize the computer image.

Why is this so important? Because if your words and your visuals are not aligned, your message can get lost.

"The result is internal disorientation, quickly leading to a channel switch in the brains of the listeners," Leech writes. Staying on track can be tricky. For instance, dead time often arises as you're switching overheads or clicking through to the next frame in your PowerPoint presentation.

To overcome such synchronization problems, practice leading into your charts. Leech advises highlighting that change is about to occur, which allows you to recapture the attention of your listeners before you broach a new topic. For example, you might say, "Now that we've looked at data suggesting the benefits of a new marketing approach, we can examine the one

approach that seems most promising." Then, and not before, show the accompanying visual.

Once the visual is on display, remember to orient the audience before launching into details. People tend to jump right in, explaining the significance of a point on a graph—all while listeners are still trying to discover what the x and y axes signify. An astute presenter first explains such things as graph axes or column and row headings for tables so that listeners have the basic tools to understand her ideas.

Viewers also require direction when it comes to bullet points or lists. In smaller venues, use your hands to direct audience members' attention. In a large room, use a pointer to indicate the bullet you're referring to.

And paraphrase, don't read verbatim, those bullet points or lists. Reading straight from your visuals is, according to Leech, "perhaps the most detested practice" of presenters.

Focus on the audience, not the screen or equipment. Many speakers, once the visual appears, forget to make sustained eye contact with their listeners. Once you've looked at the screen to point out a specific item or lead people through a complex diagram, face your listeners as much as possible. Remember, you yourself are a visual—the most important one of all.

Finally, pay attention to your hands. If you're using a pointer, don't toy with it; the audience will inevitably be drawn to the motion. And avoid these common positions, writes Leech:

<i>Fig leaf</i>	Hands gripped together in front of the groin
<i>Reverse fig leaf</i>	Hands gripped behind
<i>Mortician/ concert singer</i>	Hands gripped at the navel
<i>Gorilla</i>	Arms hanging stiffly away from the body on both sides
<i>Challenger</i>	Arms akimbo
<i>Death grip</i>	Hands clutching the lectern, chair, pointer, or notes
<i>Tightrope walker</i>	Both hands gripping the pointer, held parallel to the floor at waist level

—Janice Obuchowski

Visual Speaking *(continued)*

about how we can all become more dedicated in the job we do every day,” without employing any visual imagery at all.)

For maximum effect, the visual images you use in your speech should be vivid and concrete.

“The vibrant tropical colors of the dresses and hats displayed in your farmers’ market,” as an image delivered in a speech on trade policy in another country, for example, is infinitely more engaging than, “The clothing displayed that gave evidence of your nation’s entrepreneurial spirit.”

And strive for originality: employing imagery that is overused (e.g., “Think outside the box”) is as bad as not using imagery at all.

3. Make your presentation episodic.

Conflicts and problems shrink radically in the blue glow of television, with life-altering crises introduced, struggled against, and resolved in 40 or even 22 minutes (with commercials). Another way to state this is that TV shows are episodic: they take place between commercial breaks. Of course, the shows try their best to leave viewers hanging as each segment ends so that we come back to see what will happen next.

Structure your speech so that it contains “episodes.” Doing this will create a sense of anticipation in your listeners even as it gives them a little time to rest and regroup as you move from one major theme to another.

Giving them time to rest is easy—you can do this simply by pausing and indicating that you’re going to delve into a new aspect of the topic. Creating a sense of anticipation in your listeners as you make this transition is more challenging.

To pull this off, you will need to use two tools, one that’s part and parcel of visual speaking and one that complements the craft:

- Your sheer physical presence as a living, breathing speaker centrally concerned with the needs of your listeners in real time.
- Your voice, the subtlest instrument of persuasion ever developed.

If you trust in your voice, it can become a paintbrush flush with images and colors that will allow you to paint

pictures in the air between yourself and your listeners. Use pitch inflection, coloration, pauses and longer silences, shouts of surprise versus quiet whispers, and all the rest of the subtle richness of your vocal expression. How to do this? First, allow your voice to become flexible—any good vocal coach can show you how. Then give yourself permission to use that marvelous instrument to create whatever images your story calls for.

Used together, your physical presence and your voice can help you engage and persuade listeners, by lending you a vividness and immediacy that easily surpasses the unblinking glass screen of television.

4. Strike a confident, knowledgeable, and conversational tone.

One of the advantages of television personalities is that their delivery is not only flawless (by virtue of the teleprompter or acting training), but also intimate, in ways that platform speakers are hard-pressed to match. TV’s talking heads speak to us right in our living rooms, as we relax with family and friends in the most domestic of settings.

As a business speaker, you have the difficulty of creating a similar dynamic between yourself and your listeners. But the elements of nonverbal communication at your command give you another advantage that the electronic box will never equal. The immediacy of your voice and speaking style in the here and now is one such advantage, coupled with an absolute focus on the needs and reactions of your listeners.

Use eye contact. Convey calm and confidence through your movements. Use inclusive rather than exclusive gestures. Take advantage of your proximity to your listeners and your command of space to create a genuine relationship with your audience.

Peter Jennings can appear to be looking at and talking directly to an audience, but you can actually do so. Audience members will sense this immediacy instinctively if you are on your game and respond strongly in kind. ✱

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