

**Better Oral Communications
for Range Management Series—No. 7**

Making Slides “Talk”

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In recent years most audiences have come to accept, even expect, the use of color slides in many types of oral presentations. Especially in scientific or technical circles, the “slide talk” has become so commonplace that it is now the dominant method of public speaking. Even outside those circles, modern audiences share the characteristic of pictorial sophistication. Nearly every listener has had extensive experience with television—many have been raised with it—and with motion pictures. Therefore, they know what good color pictures are, and as a result tend to have definite expectations of the speaker using slides.

Unfortunately, the practice is more often disappointing than fulfilling. Far too many speakers fail to remember that slides are a visual aid, not the talk itself, and use slides in ways that obscure rather than illuminate their messages. In so doing, they create a serious distraction and fail to capitalize on an unusually flexible speaking aid. Speakers must use slides skillfully if good oral impressions are to be created.

An effective slide talk begins with the realization that it is a talk illustrated by slides, not slides supported by talk. Thus all the rules of effective oral presentation, particularly those governing use of speaking aids, must be observed. In addition, some rules peculiar to slides must be followed, beginning with slide selection and completed by appropriate presentation.* The error of simply talking about slides, especially in an unstructured way, must be avoided.

Slide Selection

Due to the pictorial sophistication of most audiences, the major rule governing slide selection is use the best slide available. Ransack your own collection; buy, borrow, or copy slides from others; or mount a special picture-taking trip to acquire needed views; but spare no reasonable effort in assembling the best pictures available. To the maximum extent possible, use no slides with obvious technical flaws of composition, focus, or exposure. These will tend to draw attention to themselves rather than to their subjects. Only when illustration of a particular point is thought indispensable, and no better slide is available, should a sub-standard image be employed. In most instances, however, it will be possible to recast the talk sufficiently to avoid the necessity.

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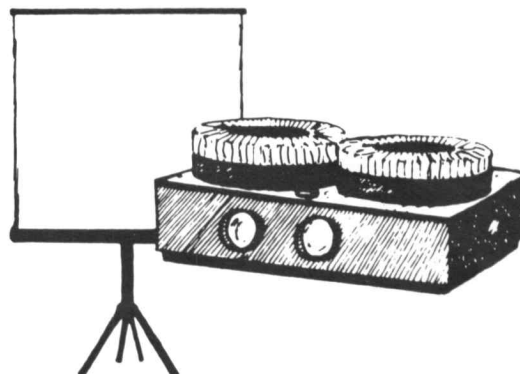
*Special note: The “canned” talk—projected images and recorded narration—depends even more heavily on these rules for its effectiveness, because the human contact of speaker with listeners is missing.

Within the overall guideline of slide quality, the criteria of any effective visual aid apply: big, simple, and imaginative, as outlined in paper #6 of the series. The most common error of speakers using slides is projecting material that is too small or too complicated (often both) for the audience to immediately recognize and understand. This objection most often applies to written or graphical material as, for instance, a picture of an entire table of data drawn from a publication. Remember that an audience struggling to understand, or even see, what is being projected on the screen is at best not listening to the speaker; at worst it has given up on the talk. To avoid creating such a serious distraction, project all of the slides before the talk to determine if they can be seen and understood easily from the most distant corners of the room. If this is not possible, hold each slide of written or graphical material at arm's length in front of a light source. If you cannot read its content easily and quickly, the material is too small or too complicated. Do not use it! Either replace it with an adequate slide, or do not illustrate the point at all.

Remember that while slides of natural scenes have inherent recognition and interest values, slides of graphical material do not. This is the place to exercise imagination in slide preparation. Take full advantage of color, and use composites (slides made up of more than one source, such as a simple graph superimposed on a natural background) to best retain attention.

Preparation

Unlike most visual aids, slides often occupy a large part, sometimes the entirety, of a talk. And their use involves mechanical equipment. Hence preparation for the talk is even more important than usual.



First, be sure that the slides are loaded in the tray or cartridge before the talk, and that you have personally run the entire program through to detect any upsidetown or backward slides, or any which drop into the gate poorly because of crimped corners or other problems. When you are satisfied that the slides are installed in the tray correctly, close or seal it so as to forestall spilling, and make no further changes. When the time comes for the talk, simply place the tray in the projector, confident that the slides are in their proper order. Do not evade this rule, because few things more quickly exasperate an audience—or more clearly show lack of speaker preparation—than misprojected slides.

Second, prepare the meeting room well before the talk. Determine whether the room can be adequately darkened for a daytime show. If it cannot, take corrective measures to the extent possible. Find out where the switches for room lights are located, and have clear arrangements made with someone to control them. If possible, do not have the room completely dark; lights at the rear of the room will not seriously reduce image quality but will allow you to maintain direct contact with the audience.

Place the lectern in a position that will allow you to address the audience squarely, while keeping track of the projected images out of the corner of an eye. If notes will be used, make sure that a suitable lectern light is available and functioning, and if you'll need a pointer, have it at hand. (Only the flashlight pointer is acceptable, allowing you to point out specific objects on the screen without leaving the lectern.)

Third, place the screen so that it can be readily seen by all members of the audience. Then position the projector such that the image is as large as possible without spilling over to the wall. Avoid the keystone effect by having the projector at about the same height as the screen. Fill the screen to the top and sides (horizontal views), allowing for the greater height of vertical views if included in the program. Then focus the first slide, turn off the projector and leave in place! If the mechanics of the meeting require that the projector, its table, or the screen be moved before the talk, mark their locations with chalk or tape for fast and accurate repositioning. Make sure that sufficient control cable to reach the lectern is available and that the control works. Tie down all power and control cables so that no one stumbles over them.

Lastly, appoint a projector controller and provide clear instructions. Make sure that a spare projector bulb is on hand, or even an entire second projector. It is an axiom of slide talks that bulbs blow at the worst possible moment; recover as quickly as possible!

Presentation

Although slides represent an extensive use of a visual aid, remember that the speaker still has the responsibility to communicate with people in the audience. Therefore, you must first engage their attention by presenting the opening measures of the talk as in any speech: no slides and lights on.

With the subject introduced the talk can then slip easily into the slide illustrations by prearranged signals to the persons controlling the room lights and projector such that as the room lights go off, the projected image comes on at the pre-focused first slide with little or no pause in the progress of the talk.

During the course of the talk, use the slides to give emphasis to your points, but not substitute for them, and not create distractions. This will require:

1. Effective use of timing and pace of slide changes. Avoid leaving an image on the screen too long; equally avoid too rapid changes. Employ alterations in image duration and in rhythm and pace of slide changes to help maintain audience attention. Effect the changes by use of a remote control. If this is not possible, use prearranged signals with the projector operator. Never say "next slide, next slide . . .", and never commit the distraction of becoming predictable.

2. Consistent effort to talk to the audience, not the screen. Never look directly at the screen, unless identifying specific objects in the image, and never stand in front of it. Never misuse the flashlight pointer. All these create distractions. Instead, maintain eye contact with the audience, keeping track of screen images from the corner of an eye, and deliver your talk as effectively as you can.

3. Avoidance of talking about the slides directly. The audience is perfectly capable of perceiving a slide's content, especially when it supplements oral information; hence it is seldom necessary to say, "This is a view of . . .", or "This slide . . .", or similar phrases. There should also never be phrases like "I'm sorry this slide's too dark . . ." Adequate slide selection will remove the need for such comments, but if a poor quality slide is thought indispensable to the talk for some reason, never apologize for it. To do so simply draws the attention of the audience to the slide's defects and away from your message.

The close of the talk should be conducted with equal care. By arrangement with the light and projector controllers, reverse the opening procedure such that as the room lights come up, the final image either remains on the screen or changes to a "black slide" with little or no pause in the course of the talk. Be sure that an opaque card is the last slide in the program, so that the audience is never subjected to the blinding glare of a lit but blank screen. Instruct the projector controller to turn the machine off as soon as possible (the fan is a distraction). In short, do everything possible to deliver the closing statements of the talk to an audience giving its undivided attention to you, the speaker.

If you maintain the attention of the audience by observing these rules, it's highly likely that your talk will make a good impression, the goal of all public speaking. You will have done so by presenting a genuine slide talk, rather than just a collection of slides; that is, you made slides "talk", more precisely, they helped you talk.