Creating Powerful Poster Presentations

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PATCHWORK

Creating Powerful Poster Presentations

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GETTING STARTED

Posters can be an effective method for communicating with colleagues. At professional meetings, posters are used to report on projects, to share research results and ideas, to educate and inform, and even to review history and tell stories. With the right tools and an understanding of basic design, creating an attractive, informative, interesting, easy-to-read, and portable poster is simple.

Just as a cake is baked for a special occasion, a poster is created for a professional event and a specific audience. To bake the finest looking and tasting cake, the baker uses a tried and true family recipe, precisely measured ingredients, expert mixing techniques and special decorating skills. This is also true for creating a poster. The author employs good design principles and elements, an attractive layout, the right mix of

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text, graphics and color, and uses the most appropriate tools to accomplish the job. Successful posters convey their message using attractive graphics, a minimal amount of text, and just the right amount of white space.

**DON’T BAKE A WEDDING CAKE FOR A RETIREMENT PARTY!**

When planning the poster, the first consideration is the audience. Who will be viewing the poster? Does the target audience consist of hospital or academic librarians, the general public, or professionals from other disciplines? It is critical to define and distill the poster’s message in order to engage the audience and attract interest in the content. Hospital librarians work in a unique setting, with issues, interests, concerns, and jargon that may not be understood by others. The poster’s story should be presented in simple terms, using language and point-of-view that is comprehensible to attendees.

The poster, just as the cake, should complement the event and audience. After all, you wouldn’t bake a wedding cake for a retirement party.

**THE DESSERT BUFFET**

Presenting a poster is different from presenting a paper. Presenters are asked to stand near the poster for a specified time period. At Medical Library Association meetings, this is usually two hours. A poster session may exhibit dozens of competing posters featuring an assortment of projects and topics in limited space. Session attendees wander the aisles, picking and focusing on those that capture their interest. Attendees have limited time and an array of potential posters from which to choose. One estimate is that an individual may take three seconds to decide whether or not to stop, look at, and read the poster; thirty seconds to gain an understanding of the content; and three minutes to read the entire poster. If the message is of interest, the viewer may then stop to ask questions or discuss details with the author(s).

Think of the poster session as a dessert buffet. For some, the chocolate cake with the bright colorful sugar flowers is most appealing, while for others, it’s the plain white cake with the whipped cream frosting that tempts.
IS THIS A LAYER CAKE OR A SHEET CAKE?

Before starting construction of the poster, be sure to verify the physical constraints of the space. It would be unfortunate if the poster didn’t fit the provided display board. While being too big creates problems, so does being too small. Be sure to confirm with the conference planners whether the space orientation is for landscape or portrait displays. If planning to use a computer to complement the poster’s content, ask for an electrical outlet. A table for handouts, business cards and treats are helpful but not always provided. In the event that the conference planners do not provide display boards, authors may be asked to bring their own board and easel. Plan accordingly.

HOW SWEET IT IS!

As with any presentation, the content is the most important component of the creative process. As the poster author, you will want to distill the essential message related to a choice project. For example, the subject could be research related to the use of electronic journals provided by the library to hospital health care providers. Effectively presenting the purpose, methods, data, findings, validity and conclusions of the research will be critical to the overall quality of the poster presentation. Then, if possible, reinterpret text graphically by creating a chart or table or picture to illustrate the story. When presenting a poster, less text is more. Use a minimal amount of words to deliver the content. Edit ruthlessly.

USING THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT

Until recently, creating a poster meant measuring, cutting, trimming, pasting, pinning, and the use of construction paper and oak tag. Computer technology, software programs and large color printers have provided new tools and techniques for the production of posters. One of the easiest applications for creating a poster is Microsoft PowerPoint®, a ubiquitous and user-friendly software program that is used for slide presentations. Other software programs include Adobe PageMaker®, Adobe InDesign®, QuarkXPess®, Adobe Illustrator®, Macromedia Freehand®, and Adobe Photoshop®. Each of these applications provides a variety of basic tools,
layout and drawing options, and image editing capabilities. The following is a brief overview of each application’s features.

**Microsoft PowerPoint.** Most people are familiar with creating and delivering a slideshow using PowerPoint. The program is simple and easy to use. In essence, a poster is just one large slide. To start, determine the poster size. From the File menu, select Page Setup and Custom from the Slides sized for: pull down menu. Enter the orientation, width, and height before starting to design the poster. Use the familiar Draw tools for creating text boxes, drawing, coloring, fill effects, placing objects and inserting images or photographs. Cost to print a poster can range from $30 to $100+ depending on size and printer services. Be sure to request a proof before approving the final print as colors can be altered in the process.

**Adobe PageMaker.** PageMaker is a desktop publishing program. It allows the integration of text and graphics from a variety of sources, including documents created in Microsoft or WordPerfect® applications. PageMaker also provides options for creating and building a template that can be used as a starting point for designing other forms of publications.

**Adobe InDesign.** InDesign is a page layout tool that has a variety of features for creating a poster using images and text. The program has a learning curve but those who use Photoshop and Illustrator will see familiar toolbars and menu items. After completing the poster, use the Package command to place all relevant files into one folder.

**QuarkXPress.** QuarkXPress is another desktop publishing program. QuarkXPress uses text and picture boxes for content. The user has control over the size, shape, layering, color, and other properties of each box. There is a bit of a learning curve and the software is relatively expensive.

**Adobe Illustrator.** Illustrator is a vector-based graphics creation program with a wide variety of custom graphical and text tools. The learning curve for Illustrator is steeper than with other programs, but the advantage is smaller file size and the ability to print or export to almost any format. The program is relatively expensive and may not be warranted for the average librarian creating only an occasional poster.

**Macromedia Freehand.** Freehand is similar to Adobe Illustrator.

**Adobe Photoshop.** Photoshop is an image editing/paint program. It works with bitmapped or rasterized images only. Photoshop has many advanced features for photo retouching and color painting. There are two versions of Photoshop. The full version is designed for professional users and Photoshop Elements is designed for non-professional users.
Elements has 80% of the functionality of Photoshop Professional but at a fraction of the cost ($100 versus $800).

**CAREFULLY CHOOSE A RECIPE AND INGREDIENTS**

Following the right “recipe” for an effective poster involves using and applying design elements and principles to combine graphics and text. Design principles can be compared to the techniques in a recipe instruction: folding, whipping, sautéing, mixing, etc. Design principles include repetition, emphasis, balance, and unity as explained in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Design principles can be compared with the techniques in a recipe instruction: folding, whipping, sautéing, mixing, etc. (1-3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using Design Principles</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repetition</strong></td>
<td>Repeat elements to create patterns and elements. (Also called Harmony.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasis</strong></td>
<td>Creating a center of interest guides the audience to what’s most important. “What stands out gets noticed first.” (1, p. 34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance</strong></td>
<td>Distribute the elements of design (white space, text, graphics, and color, etc.) equally to create visual stability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unity / Consistency</strong></td>
<td>Integrate, group and align all elements so that they look like they belong together. “Every element should have a visual connection with something else on the page.” (3, p. 27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Design elements are the characteristics of the ingredients: flavors, aromas, texture, colors, etc. Design elements include line, shape, texture, space, size, value, and color and are explained in Table 2 (1).

The well-known dictum “form follows function” was coined by architect Louis Sullivan in 1896. Applied to poster design, this dictum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using Design Elements</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Line**              | “Any mark connecting two points” (1, p. 12) | Lines can be used to:  
  - organize information  
  - direct attention  
  - separate content  
  - suggest emotion  
**Use Line to** separate or organize |
| **Shape / Form**      | “Anything that has height and width. Everything has shape” (1, p. 14) | Shape is used to:  
  - outline objects  
  - attract attention  
  - communicate ideas / concepts  
  - add excitement  
**USE SHAPE TO** ATTRACTION |
| **Texture**           | “The look or feel of a surface.” (1, p. 16) | Texture is used to:  
  - add visual interest  
  - create a feeling of richness and depth  
  - relate an image to its background  
| **Space**             | “The distance or area around things. Also known as white space or negative space.” (1, p. 18) | Space is used to:  
  - add emphasis to the objects on the page  
  - add separation to objects  
  - bring objects together  
**SPACE** Use space to add emphasis, to separate |
| **Size / Scale**      | How big or small | Scale can be used to:  
  - add emphasis  
  - attract attention  
  - create a feeling of depth  
**use SCALE to add emphasis** |
| **Value**             | “Darkness or lightness of an area” (1, p. 22) | Value is used to:  
  - visually separate text  
  - create pattern  
  - give illusion of volume and depth  
  - create a mood  
  - dramatic or calm  
  - add emphasis  
**use value to visually separate** |
| **Color**             | Hue, intensity, value | Color is used to:  
  - highlight  
  - attract  
  - tell the reader where to look first  
  - create a mood  
  - group elements  
**use color to highlight** |

TABLE 2. Design elements are the characteristics of the ingredients: flavors, aromas, texture, colors, etc. (1-3).
means that the purpose or function of the poster shapes the look, feel, and design. A well-designed poster is an effective poster if it delivers its message to its audience.

**MIXING THE INGREDIENTS**

Layout is the arrangement of graphics and text in a two-dimensional visual space applying the principles and using the elements of design. A good layout attracts the audience’s attention and makes it as easy as possible for them to understand the message that the poster is delivering (1).

**Tips and Tricks**

- Use a grid to create a layout
  - Arrange the text and images of the poster using an invisible grid.
  - A grid helps align and group the images and text on the poster.

- Follow the “rule of thirds” (also known as the “Golden Rule”)
  - Divide the poster into thirds vertically or horizontally.
  - Place the most important content of the poster (graphics and text) within these thirds.
  - This makes the poster design more interesting and draws attention to the important content of the poster.

- Using text in posters
  - Text should flow from left to right and top to bottom.
  - Text should be readable from a distance (5 to 10 feet away).
  - Text for poster title should be greater than or equal to 80 pts.
  - Text for subtitles should be greater than or equal to 72 pts and text for subheadings should be greater than or equal to 48 pts.
  - Text for body should be greater than or equal to 24 pts (4).
  - Avoid all CAPS.
  - Black text on light background is most readable.
Avoid excessive use of font styles and colors.

**sans-serif vs. serif**

*script* or decorative (1, 2)

- Using color in posters
  - Use color for emphasis and to attract attention.
  - Complementary colors: add visual energy and contrast.
  - Analogous colors: create visual harmony.
  - Warm colors: use for foreground.
  - Cool colors: use for background.
  - Light colors: best for background (1, 5, 6).

- Other tips for sharpening your design skills
  - Study graphic design around you.
  - Study other posters: notice what you like and don’t like.
  - *Practice, practice, practice.*

**BAKING AND PRESENTING THE CAKE**

Printing the poster is the final step. Printing services are available at hospitals, academic institutions, and commercial companies. Instructions for printing the poster will vary depending on the service. Knowing the limitations of the printing service at the start will save time, energy, and frustration. Printers may have software program and file format restrictions, as well as specific processes for dealing with images and graphics. In any event, a poster is priced by the square foot and can cost up to $100 depending on the size. Be sure to request a proof before approving the final printing. Check to make sure the graphics don’t look
pixilated and that text and colors haven’t shifted. A cardboard tube for
transporting the poster is available for purchase.

**BON APPÉTIT**

Designing a powerful poster on a personal computer is a simple pro-
cess that involves selecting an appropriate software program and learn-
ing some basic design elements and principles. A powerful poster will
communicate your message more effectively, clearly, and attractively
to your colleagues and peers. These techniques are appropriate for
poster presentations at local, regional, national, or international meet-
ings. In addition to posters, these techniques can be applied to create
signs for program announcements and to advertise institutional events.

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