

Making Your Flip Charts More Effective

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If you are like me, you love to use flip charts in training and educational settings and in meetings. They are definitely low-tech but are so versatile and useful, I recommend that every manager have one in his or her office to capture key ideas during meetings and to make concepts visual and more memorable. The same applies to any learning event. You can add color, graphics, and virtually all sorts of effective enhancements to your charts to make them “speak” to learners.

The following are a few tips I’ve learned over the years for making flip charts stand out and support my verbal messages.

Each Word Should Be Legible From the Back of the Room

To ensure that those at the far reaches of your room can read your text, be conscious of where you position your flip chart easel and -- keep the layout simple and avoid "data dump." Too much information makes reading difficult or impossible and can frustrate or anger participants who cannot read what you have written.

Remember that your goal in using a flip chart is to highlight key words and concepts, not show your entire presentation outline on paper. Focus on enhancing clarity of your message and reinforcing your presentation.

I can recall one business presentation that I attended recently where I am convinced the speaker did everything she could to make the information unreadable. There were no title lines used; numbers were haphazardly spread around the page; she added more in the small margins as she spoke; and, she selected only a red marker even though she had an entire box of assorted colors to choose from.

I had to keep telling myself, "Bob, don't be so critical just because you know the ‘rules’ of flip charting." However, after the meeting, I asked someone else what they thought of the marathon meeting we'd just attended. Her reaction was, "I have a headache from all looking at all those numbers and trying to follow her meaning."

No more than 6-8 lines per page

One of the more common mistakes I see presenters and facilitators make with flip charts is to jam too much information on a page. This cluttered look is typically ineffective and frustrating for the reader. As with overhead transparencies, I recommend limiting the number of lines per flip chart page. A good rule of thumb is six to eight words per line; using two to three inch (appx 5-7.5 cm) lettering size, and having a maximum of six to eight lines of text per page (including your title line using approximately four-inch [appx 10cm] letters).

There are actually three good reasons for limiting the amount of information you put on each line and page:

1. Aesthetically it looks better since you eliminate unnecessary detail and clutter.
2. It aids the reader's flow across the page since they do not have to read as many words and can now focus their attention on what you are saying.
3. Most importantly, research shows that the human brain can effectively retain seven units or chunks of information (plus or minus two).

Like any rule, there are going to be exceptions. For example if you are writing a long list of items or capturing ideas presented from participants, and it is obvious that you will run on to a subsequent page. In such instances, you might go to the bottom of the page, tear it off and have someone tape it high enough on the wall where you can add a continuation when finished. You can then continue on the next page. Once finished, you can tape the second page at the bottom of the first providing a continuing list.

Limit information

Putting just one idea or concept on a page helps participants follow your presentation. When you complicate the page with too many or unrelated details efficiency is often lost. This is especially true when showing columns of numbers. Limit yourself to about 25-35 individual numbers on the page. If you have a lot of information, I suggest that you consider summarizing on your flipchart, then give a handout with the details. Simpler is better, with flip charts.

Fixing Your Mistakes

You do not have to throw away a page or obliterate a word with a marker when you make a spelling or grammatical error on a pre-drawn page. You have a variety of options for correcting errors or misspelled words. One technique is to quickly cut a piece of blank flipchart paper large enough to cover the error, put tape on the back of it, then attach over the mistake. You're now ready to continue drawing, and the correction probably will not be noticeable to most people in the room. Or, if you are preparing a fancy flip chart for a presentation and make a mistake, place a blank sheet of flip chart paper over the mistake you've made. Using an artist's Exacto knife or single edged razor blade and cut out the misspelled word through the blank page. You now have a blank section exactly the same size as the section where the misspelled word was earlier. Place the blank piece into the opening on your original sheet, tape it from the rear with scotch tape, and even the people in the front row will have trouble seeing the correction.

There are many other ways to enhance your flip charts, but these should get you started. For more information of creating, using, storing and transporting flip charts, you can get a copy of my Big Book of Flip Charts.

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