Successful Flip Chart Usage
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Flip charts have been staple items for aiding communication for trainers, educators, managers and meeting facilitators for decades. Still, many people do not maximize their potential or write off their benefit as being "old technology" in favor of electronic aids. In my opinion, this is a BIG mistake. Having used these handy pieces of equipment for years in many venues, I recognize their usefulness, flexibility and convenience as being valuable assets when I need to communicate to one person or a small group of 30-40 people. This is because, in an instant, I can make a point, create a visual image, or capture key ideas that are offered. These images and ideas can be used to enhance the learning and understanding of all present and to serve as a future reference.

Like any other tool, the flip chart must be used effectively to maximize its benefit. This takes a bit of training and forethought on the part of users. The following may help you get the most value from your flip charts the next time you use them.

Basic Layout and Design Principles

A simple way to approach flip chart design is to think of a phrase summarizing topics that will grab the audience's attention. Next, condense the details of that concept down to the fewest words necessary to convey the thought. Finally, decide on a graphic image that will complement the words and enhance the message.

When designing flip chart pages, incorporate the same elements used by graphic designers for the most effective delivery of a message. Two common characteristics are:

- *Arrangement* - The visual pattern of words and text created. Simplicity is the key when arranging flip chart ideas. Do not clutter the page with too much information, color, or image. Leave plenty of white space so that participant attention is not being pulled in conflicting directions. Typically, material displayed in the informal C, S, Z, or T pattern appear more dynamic, and will likely tend to catch the eye of participants.

- *Balance* - The further an image (or word) appears from the center of your page, the more it seems to draw attention in that direction. There are two common approaches to consider when displaying material on a page -- formal and informal balance.

  - **Formal balance** means that items are equally matched or displayed in a symmetrical pattern so that the participant's attention is not pulled in one direction or the other.

  - **Informal balance** shows objects that are asymmetrical or have objects that are not equal in size, shape, or pattern. This technique attracts attention to one area or another and can add contrast. Care must be given not to distract from the

intended objective when using this method. This can occur when the informal balance is too extreme.

Writing in a Straight Line

Writing in a straight line is a challenge for many people. For a polished look that aids reading and saves paper, your goal should be to write across the pages in a level, straight horizontal line. If you tend to have difficulty with this, one option is consider buying flipchart paper with lines or grids on it. You can also draw faint lines on the pages with a yardstick and pencil at 3 to 5 inch (appx 7.5-12.5 cm) intervals. A third alternative to use a yard/meter stick to draw one line at a time when you need to create pre-drawn charts. Still another option is to purchase a small device called a Line-Master. Load markers into its parallel openings and away you go, drawing up to six lines with one stroke.

If you are not using ruled paper, the trick to writing in a straight line has to do with where you position yourself in relation to the flipchart easel. If you are right-handed, stand just off center to the left of your easel, as you face it (lefthanders -- stand to the right as you face the easel). Try to be as far to the side as you can so that you will not block the reader's view as you write. From your off-center location, you should be able to write all the way across the page without moving. A key will be the length of you arms. This factor is what creates the typical "falling sentence syndrome," you may have witnessed, where the lines of text being written by a presenter tend to arch from a high point downward on the page. The trick is to write rapidly and not talk as you do so. Turn (to the easel), write (concentrating on keeping your lines straight), turn (to your audience), point (at what you wrote) and talk.

Saving Space

Save space by using numerical digits, symbols, abbreviations, and other devices when possible, but be consistent in the application of these, using the same spelling, symbol, or format throughout the presentation. Here are a few examples:

- Instead of the word "dollar" you could use "$."
- For the word percent, you can use "%".
- Instead of the word with, try "w/."
- Instead of without, try "w/o."
- Use numbers to replace words. For example, "2"
- Instead of to and "4" instead of for.
- Shorten sentences by using acronyms, numbers and abbreviations, instead of complete words, in order to get more information onto lines of text. Another option is to use only key words. When you use these short cuts, ensure that the symbols or whatever you choose are known to participants, or are explained when you first introduce them to the group.

When using abbreviations, there are a couple of different approaches to abbreviating or shortening sentences:

- Leave out vowels. For example, use *mngt* for management or *cnslt* for consult.

- Shorten words by abbreviating them and leaving out some of the letters. For example, *manage.* for management or *consult.* for consultant. The only problem with this technique is that abbreviated words that are complete words themselves (such as the examples in this paragraph) can be confusing, so be careful.

- Use acronyms (new words formed by using only the first letters of other words [e.g. USA]), numbers, or substitute words can be used to reduce the number of letters on you're a line (e.g. paper vs. document).

Choosing the Correct Lettering Style

When lettering your flip charts, use block letters such as those below (QuickType), rather than cursive or custom elaborate and/or intricate font types. This does not mean that occasionally you should not use fancier styles to emphasize a point or create an eye catching cover page or title line. Block letters, however, aid participant readability and comprehension.

Generally, letters can be drawn freehand. You can either do this or purchase the commercial lettering stencils at many school, office, department, or art supply stores. The important thing is that the end result should add value to your presentation. To find your own comfort level or style, experiment with a variety of letter shapes and thickness. Once you find a couple you like, practice drawing and using them regularly so that you become proficient at them and they present a professional image when using them.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m
n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0			

The bottom line is that whatever you are putting onto paper should be professional and useful. By practicing and remembering these basic skills, you can turn flip charts from that "thing" that sits in the corner to a useful piece of equipment that can enhance any meeting or learning environment content.

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