

Going creative with PowerPoint

PowerPoint has become the default method for creating pitch and credentials documents in many professional services firms. But despite its popularity, it is not what it was designed for. Grahame Jones of Soukias Jones Design discusses some of the drawbacks of PowerPoint for producing paper-based documents.



By Grahame Jones

You have been asked to develop a presentation for a prospective new client. PowerPoint slides start arriving in your inbox from different contributors, all in a variety of styles and formats. Using your basic knowledge of PowerPoint, you try to address these inconsistencies, but you are not an expert or designer.

With the tight deadline approaching, you cobble together the presentation despite the printer playing havoc with the colour-rich slides. You bind the document, but can't help thinking that blue plastic binding combs and clear acetate covers don't give the right impression.

Finally, you hand over the document to the partner as he rushes to his waiting taxi, grabbing a few brochures along the way.

Sound familiar?

LIMITATIONS OF POWERPOINT

All too often, hard copy PowerPoint presentations – and the way they are packaged – do not reflect a firm's brand. Nor do they distinguish one firm from another. And as more and more firms look to minimise the printing of brochures in favour of offering bespoke information, how do they communicate in a way that is compelling, distinctive and consistent with their brand?

PowerPoint, like Word, is used very widely in professional services. In the right hands and for the right purpose, it is a powerful visual tool.

But all too often PowerPoint is not used in the right way. It was designed to produce on-screen or projected presentations, where its flexibility is invaluable. When it comes to paper-based documents, however, it is unwieldy and does not have the capacity to create visually rich presentations. This is the preserve of specialist drawing programmes, like Quark or In-Design, but few fee earners or business development staff know how to use these.

Consequently they fall back on PowerPoint to create the presentations, but they lack the skill set and experience to maximise what PowerPoint can achieve. Even working from supplied templates, the end result is often average at best.

OTHER CONTENT & DESIGN ISSUES

Content – Fairly basic templates are often provided to give users the flexibility to shape their own presentations within corporate guidelines. Fine in theory, but the success of creating a truly compelling presentation that aligns the firm's credentials with the specific needs of prospects depends on the skills of the user, and of course, the time available. With tight deadlines to meet, users often opt to re-work a previous presentation, without considering how effective it was in the first place.

Imagery – The use of imagery presents real challenges. Firms normally have banks of images covering every conceivable subject, most of which are freely available from libraries. Sourcing something different, however, is difficult. Users often revert to the 'safe' option – clichéd images that fail to inspire or differentiate. For firms that operate across different cultures, the task is even harder. Finding an image that works well in all markets is tough.

Colour – It is tempting to try and enhance text by using large areas of colour or highlighting. It might look great on screen, but usually plays havoc with the average colour printer. The end result is disappointing: the colour reproduction is poor and inconsistent, especially when trying to match colours from different printers within the firm. The cost of new toner cartridges can also be significant.

Packaging – With an eye on simplicity and speed, firms often use off-the-shelf solutions to package their presentations. But these make it even harder for them to differentiate themselves. Clear acetate covers and hard backs are popular, bound together using plastic binding combs – all perfectly practical solutions, but hardly innovative or distinctive.

HOGAN & HARTSON CASE-STUDY

All these issues were facing US-based international law firm Hogan & Hartson prior to its merger with Lovells. The BD team was conscious of the need to get the best from PowerPoint for pitches

and credentials documents, so needed help. The firm needed an approach suitable for the diverse interests of an international, full-service firm, but that worked within an existing brand identity.

The overall aim was to improve the visual standards of the firm's paper-based presentations developed in PowerPoint, supporting its business development activities and reducing the need for costly and quickly outdated print brochures.

RESEARCH INSPIRES SOLUTIONS

First step was examining Hogan & Hartson's existing templates, tender documents and credential presentations – both soft and hard copies. Armed with this knowledge, different design routes were explored, focusing initially on the hard copy covers and divider pages.

TAKING A GLOBAL VIEW

The next stage of the design phase was to explore how covers and divider pages could be used more creatively to help express the firm's credentials. In doing so, we were given creative freedom to fully exploit the firm's brand identity guidelines, including the use of colour and imagery.

The first task was to explore how best to reflect the firm's global profile. We investigated images of globes but conscious of how clichéd they can be, we also reviewed other pictorial representations and typographical routes (below).

After viewing a series of presentations, the firm chose its preferred design – a typographical treatment of the firm's key attributes on a



black cover; with no accompanying imagery (top right).

Conscious of how marking and finger prints can affect black covers, a soft lamination card was used with excellent scuff resistance qualities. The soft lamination also created a high quality, upmarket feel consistent with the qualities of a premier global law firm.

Other production values were added to support the firm's high-end positioning: embossing, Half Canadian binding and metal wiros, all adding that extra mark of quality.

The overall effect of colour, typography, embossing, lamination and



binding combined to create a very distinctive and sophisticated product.

PUSHING POWERPOINT TO ITS LIMITS

The next step was to create designs for different types of PowerPoint text pages – title pages, text heavy pages, long and short biographies, organisational charts, maps and more.

In doing so, we refrained from using large areas of colour to avoid print quality issues. The capabilities of PowerPoint were stretched and the Quark designs successfully translated into workable, easy to use PowerPoint templates. After a period of testing within the client, the final master templates of 26 predefined pages were launched.

The templates provide the framework for creating bespoke client-centric presentations. They do so by retaining the majority, if not all, of the integrity of the original designs. Although the templates were designed to be intuitive and user-friendly, basic training was provided for staff to ensure quality and consistency in actually using the templates.

CREATIVE APPROACH FOR MEMORABLE PRESENTATIONS

As the work for Hogan & Hartson shows, adopting an innovative approach to designing covers, layouts and templates provides the scope for creating memorable pitch and credentials documents.

As Jo Michaelides, formerly marketing director for Europe & Asia at Hogan & Hartson, commented: "Discouraging lawyers from producing costly, glossy brochures is difficult when the alternative is visually much less appealing, but makes sense from a content perspective.

"This project gave us just what we needed – high design, easy-to-use, bespoke layouts and sophisticated packaging fully in keeping with our brand. We were able to spend our time where it mattered, on the content, rather than reformatting slides and trying to be amateur graphic designers."

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