

# The Power of Pictures - *Instead of 1,000 Words* (Jan 2010)

By David Green

It's afternoon in a small ballroom at a posh Squaw Valley resort. In attendance are about 250 high rollers, including leading technology-company executives, industry analysts, angel investors and commentators.

The by-invitation-only event is put on by techno-evangelist George Gilder and *Forbes* magazine. All day, the attendees had been regaled on the future of fiber technology by cutting-edge researchers and corporate mavericks. They had seen enough graphs and charts and scientific gobbledy-gook roll across the big screen to make their eyes bleed.

Which is just the way I knew it would be. Sitting backstage with the slide-deck operator, I smiled to myself as a client of mine, Gordon Stitt, CEO of Extreme Networks, took the stage.

Gordon started off his presentation in very un-scientific fashion:

*A few months ago, I read an article about a man named John Smith. Innocent enough name, right? Probably everyone here has known a John Smith at one time or another.*

*But this is no ordinary John Smith. This is the former world-record holder in the 440-yard dash. This John Smith is arguably the premier sprint coach in the world. Maurice Greene, Ato Bolden, Jon Drummond, Inger Miller, Marie-Jose Perec – world record holders, Olympic champions, they all come to Los Angeles to work with him.*

*They come because John Smith has developed a radical approach to training sprinters. Actually, let me rephrase that: he's developed a radical approach to how to **think** about training sprinters.*

The rest of Gordon's speech was mostly...well, scientific gobbledy-gook about networking technology. But his opening remarks sent a signal that his speech would be about thinking differently – and his first slide got people seeing differently as well. It was a full-color photo of 100-meter sprinters at the starting line -- muscles tensed, gaze locked-in, all pent-up energy ready to explode.

I could almost hear 500 eyes grow wider from where I sat.

Gordon spoke for about 35 minutes. His slide deck held maybe 10 slides. There wasn't a single word of text on them. The 100-meter dash was the organizing construct for his speech – and every slide was another glorious shot of sprinters captured at a different stage of the race.

There was a break after he finished. As Gordon returned to his table, attendees flocked around him. As one e-zine reporter wrote, "It was as if he were a rock star and they just wanted to touch his cape."

## **Powerful packaging**

Why the powerful reaction?

It was likely due to the breath of fresh air that Gordon's approach brought to a stuffy ballroom, which had been lathered in techno-complexity from the first word spoken that morning. And that's the point. You can't change your content – whether you're giving a vision-of-the-industry keynote or a regional sales-strategy overview, your content's your content.

But you can change how you package it. And most importantly, you can change how it looks to people.

There are, of course, a growing number of books on the do's and don'ts of speaker support, and countless articles have been written on the subject. So this won't be a design primer. And I'm not going to tell you – yet again – about the need to limit the number of bullets and words-per-bullet on a slide.

So we're not going to talk about how to design slides. Instead, like John Smith, we're going to talk about how to *think* about visual support. More specifically, how to make your slides complement your remarks rather than repeat them – or compete with your presence on the stage. How to make them support your speech instead of subvert it.

Because all good things come in threes, here are my three guidelines for adding some punch to your PowerPoint decks.

## 1) Be visual

Simply put, you should do the talking, not your slides. We're visual animals, we humans. You put a new slide up, we're going to stop listening and look at the fresh eye candy. If the visual is a great frothy mass of data, with the circles and arrows and several paragraphs on the side, then we're going to tune you out for quite some time.

So give us a Tootsie-Roll Pop instead. A single image, or brief collection of interrelated images, that engage our eyes without distracting our ears. And the chewy treat in the center? It's how the visual pays off what you're saying – how it works with your spoken message. You can even make your words be about the visual – a caption, as it were, to introduce the next segment of your remarks.

For instance, my most avid readers may remember the example from my speech-leads article in the September issue of *PresentationXpert*, in which my tech-company client paid off his lead with the Alan Kay comment that "Perspective is worth 80 points of IQ." His keynote address was all about innovation as the key to economic recovery. The key to his message was that looking at challenges from a different angle is what leads to that necessary innovation – and about every third slide he used was an optical illusion.

These were unique and fresh illusions, not the "faces or vase" illusions that we've all seen a thousand times. So they were great for reinforcing his "see differently" message. There was a danger, of course, that they could be too engrossing as attendees tried to suss out the "other" perspective. So we used them as "chapter headings" (see "Be Focusing" below.) As he moved from one segment of his remarks to the next, he would comment on it in a way that helped the audience crack the illusionary code. For example, here the speaker used an illusion (pictured below) to both pay off a messaging point and help him transition from a general comment to a specific:

The speaker's lead-in remarks:

*That's why you want to work with companies with a deep-seated culture of invention. They are your source for the disruptive innovations that enable significant competitive advantage. And we do that by bending our perspective so that we can look at what you're up against from a different angle. The big inventions that can make the big difference for you come from companies with a distinctive vision – companies who are willing to challenge conventional wisdom in order to reinvent an industry.*

*Because, as the illusion (below) suggests, there is no single, black-and-white answer. Look at it one way, it is a man blowing some intense saxophone. Look at it another way, it is a coolly alluring young woman. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about when I say the greatest advances come from companies who are willing to buck industry norms and beliefs...*



Choose the right visual images and you not only create a more interesting slide deck, you create a more interesting speech.

## 2) Be focusing

After the 2004 U.S. presidential election, there was an article in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* about the key to the Republican victory: they had been able to “frame” the debate on issues. This approach has since been largely written off as political “spin,” with both parties becoming so proficient at it that they often cancel each other out.

But when you’re giving a speech or presentation, your only “opposition” is the preconceptions that attendees have brought with them. Every member of your audience comes with their own pre-established framework. If you’ve got a new message – or equally important, if you’ve got a not-so-new message that you want people to hear with fresh ears – then you need to reframe the way they hear you.

And that’s what your slide deck can do for you. You can do it with a visual. A lot of speakers use a cartoon to do it – it says “Here’s my cynical/humorous/informal view on the matter.” Or you can do it with words. Just don’t use too many of them. A single sentence will do. A one-line question will often do it better – questions force the audience to both intellectually engage and often re-think their preconceptions after you make your point.

Here are some sample one-liner slides from the perspective/innovation keynote above:

- **Suffer from a lack of vision and you run into walls.**
- **How can we best serve our customers’ interests?**
- **Even if a company has a vision, sometimes its field of view can be limited.**
- **The challenges to extending the enterprise aren’t going to end with wireless.**

Each of these slides served as what I call a “chapter heading.” The speaker left the slide up there for a bit as he talked so that it provided a continual framing device while he made his sometimes controversial argument. One-liner slides like these help the audience focus in on a specific perspective or train of thought, which will give more power to your words.

## 3) Be provocative

I'm a big fan of the book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. I cited my favorite maxim from the book's authors in the last article I wrote for this newsletter: "be unexpected." But let's take that a step further. You want to not only be unexpected and shake up the audience's preconceptions. You also want to be stimulating, to provoke them to think in new ways and consider the world from a different angle.

Carmine Gallo had a recent article in PresentationXpert drawn from his new book, *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs*. One of the points he makes about Jobs' approach to presentations surrounding product launches is that he always crafts a headline that captures the essence of the new product – and provides the framework for how the audience views everything he then says about the product.

Consider these Steve Jobs' headlines:

- *1000 songs in your pocket* [iPod]
- *Apple reinvents the phone* [iPhone]

Jobs wasn't just providing a catchphrase. He was turning the world as we knew it on its head – and that allowed the audience to hear the rest of his speech in a way that reinforced this new perspective he had given them.

Okay, so maybe you won't be introducing the Next Big Thing in your next speech. But you can still shake up people's preconceptions and clean the slate for them to hear you with fresh ears. Here are a few more one-liner slides from that perspective/innovation keynote:

- ***So, has all the good stuff already been invented?***
- ***Is it possible to seize opportunity during an economic downturn?***
- ***Are you innovative?***  
***I'm innovative.***  
***But is that the same thing as being inventive?***

I know, I know, that last one is three lines. But the three lines are more playful and engaging, and the takeaway is the same as if it had said "Is innovation the same as invention?" Besides, the point here is that each of these slides challenges the conventional wisdom that many in the audience may hold near and dear. When you do this, you create some intellectual (and emotional) space in the attendees' minds that you are then able to fill with your distinctive viewpoint and critical takeaways.

So you have a choice. You can create slides that bog your audience down in minutia, bore them to death, steal your thunder, and even make your presence on stage superfluous. Or you can create slides that challenge your audience's thinking, make you more memorable, and advance your cause.

If only all your decisions could be this easy.

#### **About the Author**

David Green is principal of UnCommon Knowledge, a speechwriting and strategic communications consultancy in the New York City area. He has written speeches for senior executives at Hewlett-Packard, Mercedes-Benz USA, Advanced Micro Devices, Johnson & Johnson and Extreme Networks, among others.