

Choosing The Right Colors For Your Next Presentation

based on the work of Margo Halverson,
Alliant Solutions

Color that will make your information stand up and be noticed, color that will shout out your message, color that will hit your audience over the head and grab their attention, whether they like it or not.

KEEP YOUR COLOR CHOICES SIMPLE

You're working on an important slide presentation. You've followed all the steps on your PowerPoint template. You've organized your information, created headlines and positioned your charts and graphs. All the elements seem to be in order, but the slides are lackluster. No, dull. Even you are bored with them. What will your audience think? You decide your slides need color, lots of bold, bright color - color that will make your information stand up and be noticed, color that will shout out your message, color that will hit your audience over the head and grab their attention, whether they like it or not. You add red, green, some blocks of blue. And, finally you add orange. You've always liked orange. By the time you're done, your slide presentation looks like a circus. Instead of enlivening your slides and emphasizing your message, you have ended up with a muddled mess.

PROFESSIONAL
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The solution is as simple as turning your head and looking out the window.

THE ERROR OF USING COLOR

Most people -- or at least those of us without an art background -- don't understand that the colors they choose are not as important as the relationships they create. Some colors work together; others fight against each other. Establishing sound relationship is key. Color is never viewed in isolation but is always judged within its environment. It is influenced by its neighboring colors. For example, place a bright yellow ball in a child's nursery, and it will fit right in. Place that same ball in a boardroom, and it will stick out like -- well, a bright yellow ball in a boardroom. So how are you supposed to know what colors work well together? How do you select colors that will get your message across with the appropriate tone and style? And how do you create these successful relationships? The solution is as simple as turning your head and looking out the window.

When you think of creating a color palette for your presentation, think of nature's palette. (OK, if you're working in a high-rise, you may have to use your imagination here instead of looking out your window.) Think of a summer coastal scene -- how the crisp blue-green of the ocean cedes to the rich stands of deep green fir trees that smack vivid against a cornflower-blue sky. Imagine a field in early winter -- the dull yellows and golds, the muted greens and the flat, somber sky. These colors all work together in harmony and look pleasing together. There is nothing showy or "shouting" about them -- and yet, they evoke a feeling and create a mood. There is a sense of balance and order. They work together. That should be your goal when making your color choices. Selecting color should never be arbitrary or merely subjective. "I like it" is not sufficient criteria for creating a palette; neither is "these are my favorite colors." You need a plan.

BEING INTENTIONAL IN CHOOSING COLOR

Where do you start? The first thing you need to decide is the feel you want for your presentation. Color has thermal qualities of warm and cool. Colors close to red-oranges are warm (think of "red hot"); colors close to blue-greens are cool (think of "icy blue"). Begin by selecting either a warm or cool hue. Choose only one or two vivid hues. Then, if you want to expand your palette and create visual variety, use a broader range of those colors. You do this through the use of tints and shades.

A tint is a hue mixed with white, and a shade is a hue mixed with black. For example, pink is a tint of red and brown is a shade of orange. By experimenting with tints and shades, you can create palettes that range from direct and playful to serious and somber. You can create a mood or feeling that will get your message across in the appropriate tone. Plus, you open up the color options before you, rather than painting yourself into a corner of clashing colors. The best rule to follow when selecting color is "Keep it simple." With color choice, more is not better. It is the color relationships you create that will make or break your presentation. Remember, choose only one or two vivid hues and use their tints and shades to broaden your palette. This will keep your slides clear and attractive. Follow these simple rules, and your presentation will be a color success.