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Revive your Presentations with Visual CPR

By Cliff Atkinson (published February 2003 at www.PresentersUniversity.com)

If a presentation doctor were to run an EKG on your visuals, what would be the diagnosis? Erratic visual palpitations? Peaks and valleys of visual variety? Skipped visual beats? A significant risk of visual cardiac arrest?

It's easy to see how anyone could be faint of heart these days with the prevailing visual diet of presentations. There are the empty calories from AutoContent Wizards. The over-processed nature of bullet points. The fad diets of generic templates. And an underwhelming lack of exercise when it comes to critical visual thinking skills.

These unhealthy visual trends have led to widespread presentation symptoms that are enough to cause presentation health officials alarm. The most common symptoms include: sensory suffocation from reading too much text, visual fatigue from seeing the same template slide after slide, intellectual deficiency from a lack of effective informational graphics, and mental malnourishment from missing meaning.

But take heart. Anyone can begin a healthy diet of visual stimulation and effective media design. With these prescribed Visual CPR principles, you'll bring your visuals back to life in no time.

The ABC's of Visual CPR

Just as in the medical world, effective visual CPR is as easy as remembering the ABCs: Airway, Breathing and Circulation:

Airway. Resuscitate your presentation with the best design inspiration you can find. That means looking beyond off-the-shelf templates, and into the sophisticated media world that surrounds you. You are not a template. Neither is your presentation. Don't let a cliché piece of clip art or stock photo get in the way of effective communication. When you turn on a television or watch a movie, you won't see template-based design. But what you will see, when done well, are consistent color palettes, themes, grid-based composition and creative use of white space. Think outside the beige box of a computer screen. Get inspired by the best design you see on billboards, magazine ads, broadcast and film design. The Broadcast Design Association <http://www.bda.tv> is just one of many web sites where you can keep up to date and inspired. At the very least, if you've invested in branding your marketing materials with professional design, extend that visual branding into your presentation.

Breathing. Nourish your audience with really nutritious visual content. You are presenting your own or your organization's most important intellectual property. Ensure you're presenting it in the most coherent, visually digestible way. Keep up to date with the best techniques of distilling complex information into effective visual interfaces. The advent of the web spawned a lively culture of information designers and architects who do just that for a living. You can keep posted on these techniques and resources at web sites such as InfoDesign at <http://www.bogieland.com/infodesign>. Equally important is learning the art of sequential frame storytelling. This helps sets the framework for your story and the visual narrative arc that allows you to inhale and exhale intellectual substance through your presentation's lungs. Anyone who designs presentations should pick up a copy of the important book about how to tell a story in a series of frames called "Understanding Comics" by Scott McCloud. Let your presentation breathe. Relax, and inhale the information, and exhale understanding.

Circulation. Jump-start the passionate heart of your message and get it pumping through your entire presentation experience. Many people think that the origin of human communication is the mind. Yet in reality it's the heart. The heart is the source of the conviction, emotion and creativity that inspires us to communicate in the first place. When painters have something in their heart they need to say, they put paint to canvas. When sculptors have a vision in their heart they want to liberate, they chip stone with chisels. And when presenters have something in their heart they want to express, they can now design visual media. Speaking with images projected on the wall is a powerful art form we're only just beginning to appreciate and understand. Although it's very easy to find a writing class, it's hard today to find a visual thinking class at most universities and schools. So you have to take your visual education into your own hands and fortify yourself with the information and practice that can put effective visual thinking techniques into action. We are at the beginning of seeing a vision for presentations that brings together great media design, solid information architecture, and a deep passion to release the messages from our hearts that we need to communicate.

Nobody said keeping your visual faculties healthy would be easy. But with a little CPR, ongoing visual exercise, intellectual stretching and heart work, you'll keep your presentation's heart healthy, beating and strong.

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