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## My Message is My Brand, Not My Logo: Q&A with Jason Fried

By Cliff Atkinson

When it comes to presenting information on the web, **37signals** is a beacon of simplicity and clarity. This sought-after team of design and usability experts unblocks obstacles in the way of effective web experiences, increasing profitability for their clients. What would happen if simplicity and clarity were to illuminate PowerPoint and Keynote presentations? Things would definitely look different, according to Jason Fried, 37signals principal, co-author of **Defensive Design for the Web** and creator of **Basecamp**, a web-based project management tool.

**Cliff Atkinson:** Most web designers build web pages from a template, so why didn't you use a template to create your recent presentation? **Download PDF // 2.5MB**



**Jason Fried:** I'm a big believer in context over religious consistency/continuity. While our presentations do have a consistent visual language (based on a few different slide templates/ types), our slides don't share a common header or footer. I'm often annoyed by presentations with common headers and footers. Is the audience so dense that they are going to forget who is presenting and needs to be reminded by a logo or corporate branding on every slide (of course they aren't, but why do so many presenters treat them as such?)?

I believe the most effective slide designs are those where the message is the absolute focus. Nothing should get in the way -- no header, no corporate branding, no logo, etc. If a slide requires a full screen image, then the image should get the full screen and not have to be shrunk and wedged into place so it conforms with template or corporate branding guidelines. Same with a word or a phrase or a series of points -- give the information the full stage at all times.

**CA:** Don't you miss an opportunity to brand your company by not including your logo on every slide?

**JF:** I might miss an opportunity to brag, but not to brand. My message is my brand -- not my logo.

**CA:** Why don't you use any bullet points in your presentation? Shouldn't a slide include everything you're going to say, so that your audience, and you, won't miss anything?

**JF:** I think the visuals should support the verbal presentation, not repeat it. I don't want my audience to have to read the screen. They should be able to get the point by just scanning the screen. The simple visuals and more elaborate verbals should come together to make the point without someone having to fight to listen and read at the same time. It's hard to absorb when your eyes and your ears are competing for the same information.

We use the bullet point concept, but we don't use bullet points. Sometimes we'll have three short bits of text on the screen, but we'll center the group vertically and horizontally instead of left justifying them and plopping a bullet in front of them. Honestly, I think bullet points in presentations are unfortunate carryovers from print design.

Bullets are useful when they are mixed in with paragraphs of text (they help you identify key points in a sea of words), but since presentation slides should just contain those key points, why do you have to use actually bullets to call out the points? When points stand alone, why do you need to make the point that they are points? Seems like clutter to me. If you have so much text on the screen that you need bullets to distinguish one sentence from another, maybe you should think about cutting down on the text and being more concise.

**CA:** *Many of your slides have only a few words, or a picture, and do not hold up well to Edward Tufte's criticisms in The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint in which he argues for presenting more, rather than less: "Often, the more intense the detail, the greater the clarity and understanding - because meaning and reasoning are contextual. Less is a bore." Is less a bore, or more?*

**JF:** It depends on the message and I think Tufte would agree with that. Some information needs elaborate visual and textual support. Other information can be conveyed with a single picture or a simple chart. A simple, perfect picture can be all the intense detail that is required to get the point across.

Ultimately what really matters is the skill of the presenter. I'd say Steve Jobs is one of the best presenters alive today and his slides are ultra simple (and often set in, *gasp*, Comic Sans!). But, Jobs captivates. He puts the right words and the right pictures in the right place. His sense of timing is impeccable. After I hear Jobs speak for two hours I can go off and tell someone else about his presentation in detail even though there were no bullet points, no complete sentences, no "consistent" branding on his slides. How many other two-hour presentations lead to as much retention and desire to spread the message?

**CA:** *When I look at your slides and cannot tell exactly what you said during the talk, does that mean you did a good job or a bad job of designing them?*

**JF:** Good design is all about designing for the intended audience. When I design my slides, I design them to support my presentation to my intended audience -- those in attendance. If I intended the presentation to travel to people who didn't attend, I might design them differently. So, I'd say it's incomplete to judge them without the context of the actual presentation.

**CA:** *If the effectiveness of web design can be measured in terms of page visits, clickthroughs, conversion rates, search results, etc., what would be some effective ways of measuring the effectiveness of presentation media?*

**JF:** That's really a great question. In the end, it's all about sharing knowledge (and that's a two-way street). I'm not sure if there's a realistic metric for measuring that. But, I guess if people leave the presentation inspired by new ideas and have a deeper understanding and respect for the material, then I'd say it was a successful session. I also think that the more questions and conversations there are after the presentation, the better it was.

*Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant who helps organizations solve problems related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at [www.sociablemedia.com](http://www.sociablemedia.com), read more articles and interviews [here](#), or email him [here](#).*

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