Developing Visual Aids to Enhance Presentations

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Nurses in multiple roles are repeatedly asked to share their knowledge, expertise, and experience in a variety of settings. Sometimes, this sharing is on an informal basis, such as presenting an in-service class to a small group of coworkers. On occasion, nurses may need to present results of data collection or projects to small but more formal audiences, such as hospital executive boards. And, nurses sometimes are called upon to speak to very large audiences consisting of peers, other professionals, or community members. Most presenters use some type of visual aid to help illustrate their message. Yet, presentation skills and visual-aid development are not included in the curricula of most schools of nursing.

Three components are needed for successful presentations: good content, skill in presenting the content, and effective use of support tools. Many articles in the nursing literature guide nurse presenters in researching and writing a presentation. Nurses can learn presentation skills by critically watching other speakers or from self-help groups, such as Toastmasters International. Nursing literature, however, is almost void of materials to help nurse presenters develop and use visual aids.

Using visual aids helps nurse presenters reach audience members who are visual learners as well as auditory learners. Nurses also can use visual aids to stress an important point, redirect the audience to another issue, and add variety in a time when listeners are entertained by fast-paced television and video games. Visual aids can make presenters look more professional as long as they are developed and used with skill. Many types of visual aids that nurses may find useful are available. This article specifically discusses flip charts, overhead transparencies, 35 mm slides, and computer presentations.

Flip Charts

Flip charts are appropriate when the audience is small. Minimal equipment is needed (keeping the cost of using a flip chart low), and room lights can be on (allowing the presenter to maintain eye contact with the audience). The disadvantages of flip charts are that they do not look as professional as some other types of visual aids and are not as durable, as the paper tends to tear with repeated use.

The most distant audience members must be able to easily read everything written on a flip chart. Presenters who have poor penmanship should find another type of visual or ask someone else to prepare the flip chart pages. If presenters choose to add information to the page during a presentation, light pencil marks can be written prior to the presentation and used as guides. Notes also can be written lightly in the margins with a pencil, allowing the presenter to appear to be speaking without notes. Changing the chart pages requires practice. For ease in flipping the pages, the corners of the pages can be folded up slightly prior to the presentation or clear tape tabs can be made across the bottom or up one side of the chart tablet.

Overhead Transparencies

Overhead transparencies are clear plastic sheets onto which black or color type, graphics, and photographs can be printed or copied. Displaying a transparency overhead requires the use of a projector, which many institutions have readily available. Presenters can produce transparencies prior to the presentation or write directly on the transparency during the presentation. Transparencies scratch easily and should be stored with paper between each sheet or kept in a plastic sleeve. Transparency sheets are slippery, so care should be used to prevent stacked transparencies from sliding off the pile.

When creating transparencies, one needs to keep in mind that the area that can be projected is only 7.5 inches by 9.5 inches, much smaller than the size of the transparency sheet (Rabb, 1993). Using transparencies smoothly and professionally requires practice. To project a small section of information at a time, a sheet of paper can be used to cover information to be displayed later. Several transparencies can be layered on top of each other and removed one at a time to show relationships among different items. If the transparency is mounted in cardboard, presenters can write speaking notes on the framed edges.

35 mm Slides

A presentation using 35 mm slides looks professional and shows preparation. Producing slides, however, requires time to both design and process them. And, processing can be expensive. When creating slides, one needs to keep orientation in mind so that all slides are either vertical or horizontal. Slides are placed in a slide carousel for projection. A smaller 80-slide tray is less likely to jam than one that holds 140 slides (Rabb, 1993). Once the slides are in the tray in the correct order and orientation, a marker can be used to draw a circle around the tray on the slide ends. This will leave a small dot on the top of each slide. For subsequent presentations, if all the dots on all the slides are in line, the slides can be assumed to be in the correct orientation.

Computer Presentations

Computer presentation programs, such as Microsoft® PowerPoint®, allow users to incorporate color, clip art, photographs, sound, and animation. Computer presentations can be ready for immediate use and changed easily to correct errors or incorporate into a different presentation. However, computer presentations are time-consuming to create and require computers both for creation and presentation. Colors may look different when projected than they appear on the computer monitor. If the computer used for projection is different from the computer used for creation, some fonts also may look different even though the program is the same on both computers. A special projector, which may not be available at all speaking locations, also is required. One always should be prepared to speak without the aid of the computer presentation in case equipment failure occurs.

Guidelines for Development

Studies have shown that visual aids without distractions increase the audience’s retention of the material presented (Bradshaw, 1997, 1998; Verdi, Johnson, Stock, Kulhavy, & Whitman-Ahern, 1997). A distraction is an element on the visual that takes the audience’s attention away from the content. Common distractions include misspelled words, small fonts, complicated backgrounds, and distracting animation.