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*tips to surefire,
do-it-yourself
graphic design for
lawyers who want
professional-looking
results without
the hassles*

Rescue Your Legal Exhibits

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With the trial's outcome depending on your ability to persuade, effective legal exhibits cannot be left to chance. The fact is, top-notch courtroom graphics—from photos, charts, graphs, and document pull-outs to maps, timelines, medical illustrations, and technical diagrams—help ensure that you receive the attention, *and verdict*, you deserve.

Yet when you decide to do the graphics in-house to reduce turnaround time or cut expenses, legal exhibits can be a source of frustration, embarrassment, stress, and perhaps lost cases. Following ten simple tips to surefire do-it-yourself graphic design, however, will help maximize your visual punch, minimize your mistakes, and give you the professional look your graphics deserve, not to mention, cut down on the headaches.

#1—Take a deep breath

Especially if you have a key presentation looming that needs charts, graphs, and visuals and all you have are loose papers and a migraine, first take a deep breath. Put on a fresh pot of coffee. Clear your workspace. Handle those last minute telephone calls. You are going to need to focus your attention on your design project, so prepare yourself. You're about to solve your graphic design problem in classic, do-it-yourself fashion.

#2—Outline your project

Make a simple list of the presentation graphics you think you'll need. Don't get into details at this point. For example, you might list: opening—photo of young couple before the accident; mid-point—accident timeline and photos of accident scene; close—chart of medical expenses and lifetime lost income. You just want to create a rough outline that can help steer you through the project.

#3—Define what you're trying to say

To keep your audience visually interested you must keep things simple and avoid clutter that will confuse your focus.

Communicate one concept at a time with your graphics. Your message can contain various parts, but your communication as a whole must concentrate on the key concept you want to get across. To shoot for more is to court disaster. At all costs, avoid making everything important, as that's the surest way to create visual anarchy. When you attempt to give great importance to more than one message (or visual item), you introduce confusion and succeed only in dispersing the viewer's attention instead of directing it where you want it.

Fast Facts:

At their best, graphics add humor, emotion, reality, believability, and playfulness to bring about understanding and agreement in viewers.

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#4—Keep it simple

Visually, simple is better than complex, especially when images will only be seen a short time. Avoid the complex since it obscures your message rather than clarifies it.

Use pictures, illustrations, graphs, etc., to punch up an important point and to make complex ideas simple. However, avoid literally mimicking what's said in the text. The graphics must enhance and play on variations of the text to make it more interesting—but never stray from the spirit of the message. At their best, graphics add humor, emotion, reality, believability, and playfulness to help bring about understanding and agreement in viewers.

Keep text simple and readable, without overdoing emphasis. Use changes of size, style, color, and position, including bullets, symbols, and other devices to highlight and organize your text in moderation. To avoid distracting the reader, limit the number of fonts to two or three in no more than three or four readable sizes. Keep the background simple, and use contrast to ensure legibility. Contrast is the noticeable difference between things and can be as simple as bolding or underlining text in some cases. But don't fill every bit of "empty" space: well-chosen space can serve to "frame" graphic elements you may want to emphasize.

#5—Lay out your type, graphics, and photos

Look at how the elements blend together. Lay out the type, graphics, and photos in a format similar to how they will be presented. If you know how, use computer formatting on programs such as MS Word or Excel to experiment with layout. Or you may want to lay out the physical materials on a desk or conference table. Similarly, you may want to tape or pin them to a wall or cubicle to see how vertical display affects their visual effect.

Now, here's where a little strategic thinking can set your graphic design work apart from the norm:

Visually group graphics to show similarity and build interest. Try to visually group objects using similarities of theme, color, direction, position, and alignment. Show what goes with what, so your viewers will draw the proper conclusions. For example, in a class action, photos of similar causes and effects can be grouped together to bolster expert testimony. Of course, things that belong together must have characteristics in common, and must be similar enough to be perceived as a group or set.

Also, make visual order part of your message. For example, decide when the viewer should notice your logo: Before reading the copy? After reading the headline? Should the viewer note your client's name before or after the point you're trying to make? These strategic distinctions can boost or detract both from your credibility and ability to persuade.

#6—Add emphasis with a little color and contrast

The graphics of your piece must be easily seen and attract more attention than anything around it. If not, your audience's attention



will go elsewhere: to the opponent's visuals, or even ads if you're promoting your services. To improve the odds of getting your audience's attention, use color and contrast in moderation to create interest. Remember to use emphasis sparingly, like spice in cooking, because a little goes a long way, but too much simply overpowers.

Attention does gravitate toward the area of greatest contrast. (That's why print is usually black-on-white, which makes the letters stand out for easier viewing, instead of say, black-on-brown). For example, in a visual ad or billboard, a single sentence on an otherwise empty page demands attention. You can't help but read it. Other examples of good, eye-catching contrast: a white spotlight in a dark theater; a 3-D object jutting out of a flat wall; a moving object among motionless ones (or a stationary object among moving ones); and a bright, colorful poster over a dull, monochrome background. Similarly, at a trade show you'd want your signage to run horizontally if you're competitors' signs run vertically. In each case, your audience is visually attracted toward what stands out or offers contrast.

Here are a few types of useful contrast to consider using in your graphics: *large/small, light/dark, flat/3-D, high/low, short/long, strong/weak, smooth/coarse, one/many, full/empty, warm/cool (colors), before/after, complex/simple, straight/winding, round/angular, continuous/interrupted, horizontal/vertical/diagonal, etc.*

For a series of visuals, use contrasting sequences to build interest as well. Contrasting sequences such as before/after, young/old, or gradations of color can guide and build the viewer's interest by suggesting degrees of importance, recognizable patterns, or consequences. When establishing what the viewer should notice first, second, and third, control the order in which he perceives the various items, using a scale of contrasts from most different to most similar. The greater the contrast, the more importance a visual item is given.

#7—Get a fresh perspective

After focusing on your graphics project, it helps to get a fresh perspective. Ideally, you should ask someone with art or design experience a few questions. How do these graphics strike you? Do they support the message? What would you change? The less they know about your presentation, company, or product the more helpful their opinion, as it will more closely approximate your audience's reaction. But really, anyone's opinion helps to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in your designs, so don't be afraid to ask. And don't be afraid to accept criticism. If no one is available, take a break from your project if at all possible, so you can approach your graphic project with fresher, less biased eyes.

#8—Put on the finishing touches

Then adjust your graphics project according to the objective feedback you received. Here's where you may brighten or lighten colors, change font sizes, or rearrange graphics for better overall layout.

Also, round out your pictures and graphics with carefully chosen words. From caption to headline and story, words are a critical part of the message you're visually communicating, so they must be chosen and arranged carefully for the whole to work. Include only what's important, so as not to dilute your carefully crafted message.

Along these lines, speak your viewers' language in a way that addresses their problems and answers their needs. For example, if your picture shows a healthy Mr. Jones tussling with grandkids after successful bypass surgery, mention how the new procedure has reduced recovery time to three weeks from the normal three months in a majority of cases.

#9—Take one last look

No matter how careful you are there's always last minute mistakes to catch: misspelled words, misaligned margins, or graphics that still need to be rearranged to lessen distracting "white" or trapped space. Use spell and grammar checkers, then print out sample copies to test overall visual effect until you are satisfied with the results.

#10—Print out and mount your final presentation

Since all your previous work counts for naught if the final graphic product isn't displayed and mounted properly, it's critical to prevent the wrinkling, bubbling, warping, and peeling that can sink an otherwise impeccable graphic presentation. To this end, I have long used and recommended Pres-On products. Well known amongst professional graphic artists and photographers, Pres-On has a broad line of do-it-yourself, self-stick mounting board products for just about every application. I've mounted everything from extremely large oversize prints like architectural renderings and giant logos, to small decorative items, and consistently Pres-On mounting products make it very easy to do and give me professional results.

Their newest mounting product *Score & Snap*, is made of a thin, surprisingly strong, plastic material that's coated with self-stick mounting adhesive. It was designed to mount legal exhibits such as documents, photos, charts, graphs, maps, timelines, and other display elements quickly and easily, with the capability to correct mistakes, but with subsequent permanent positioning. Once a graphic is mounted, the protective plastic can be easily scored with an X-Acto knife, then snapped off into the desired shape. Because of the consistency of the plastic material, its versatility in positioning graphics, and its clean edges, it makes it easy to produce a spectacular looking finished product that won't come undone at the worst possible moment.

With a firm grip on your legal exhibits, you can now look forward to the trial without knots in your stomach. With the knockout graphics you cranked out on a shoestring budget, you'll be in line to win yet another case and perhaps make partner in record time. As a parting tip, ask for a raise, as you've just added polished graphic presentation to your list of job skills. Just keep your Legal Exhibit Rescue Tips handy because the next trial might not be so easy. ◆

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