

Learning slide design from an IKEA billboard by Garr Reynolds

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Can you learn how to make better slides by looking at a few signs around your local IKEA store? This may sound absurd, yet the lessons are all around you, and you can indeed learn a lot from a well-designed billboard, including those created by IKEA. On page 140 of [Nancy Duarte's Slide:ology](#), Nancy says that good slides in many ways are most similar to billboards. That is, the audience should be able to get the meaning in a very short amount of time.

"Presentations are a 'glance media' — more closely related to billboards than other media.... Ask yourself whether your message can be processed effectively within three seconds. The audience should be able to quickly ascertain the meaning before turning their attention back to the presenter."

— Nancy Duarte

Billboards & slides: "glance media"



Good billboards and other signage, must (1) get noticed, (2) be read/understood, (3) be remembered, and (4) we hope an action is taken or

one's thinking is influenced. The first three in particular apply to presentation slides as well. I am not suggesting that you literally copy the style of the signs outside an IKEA. But you can incorporate the same principles for your school projects that designers use for billboards and other 'glance media.' Most people could not care less about a billboard or the signs outside an IKEA store, of course. As a Media Arts student, you need to slow down and pay attention to "the design of it." You need to notice the elements such as color, size, shape, line, pattern, texture, emptiness, alignment, proximity, contrast, and so on.

Samples from the local IKEA in Osaka

Yesterday I took these snaps of the signs outside my local IKEA store in Osaka. With the exception of the subject matter/content, how are these signs similar or dissimilar to the visuals used in school projects?



Above: Notice how the images are large and "fall" off the edges of the frame. Lots of empty space and a clear design priority. Text can be easily and quickly read from a distance and at a glance.



Above: The billboard on the left is the actual one at IKEA in Osaka. Then I asked myself the question: What would happen if everyone had the

power to create billboards? On the right is the answer, an "overload-by-billboard" version of the IKEA sign featuring the same content on the left (with more detail added). So what's wrong with the version on the right? If it were a sign or billboard the passerby would miss all of it (if they noticed it at all). If it were a slide used in a live talk, all that information and clutter in the frame would not only be distracting and hard to read, it would raise the question: Why are you there? (a question my buddy [David S. Rose](#) — "The Pitch Coach" — always asks.)

8 lessons learned from standing outside an IKEA store

Below are eight things you can take away from the billboards shown above and apply to your next presentation project. (The sample slides are from my slide library.)



(1) Make it visual.

Slides are visual aids, not "text aids," right? Again, it must be noticed (we notice compelling visuals), understood, and remembered (we remember images). We are visual beings. You do not have to use slides, but *if* you do, make them highly visual. And remember [brain rule #10: Vision trumps all other senses.](#) (See the book [Brain Rules.](#))

(2) One slide, one point.



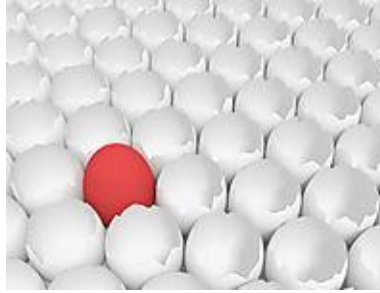
IKEA does not try to cram many products into a sign or give a lot of information about that product in a sign, though there is plenty of space to do that if they wanted to. Instead they feature a single item at a large size — it gets noticed, read, and remembered. For presentations, "one slide, one point" is a good *general* principle to follow. Don't be afraid to tell your visual story over many frames.

(3) Make type big.



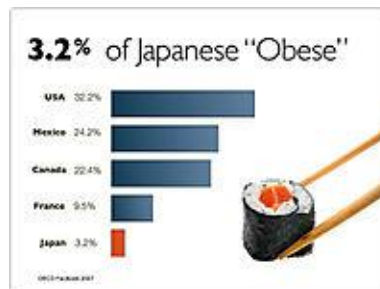
As designer **Robin Williams** says, "Don't be a wimp!" People are indeed too wimpy when it comes to text on a slide. The type on the IKEA building, for example, is enormous and the billboards too feature bold type that sticks out. Display type should get attention and get the point across. Big gets noticed and read, and *big* makes for easy contrast with *small*, aiding in guiding the viewers eye.

(4) Contrast rules!



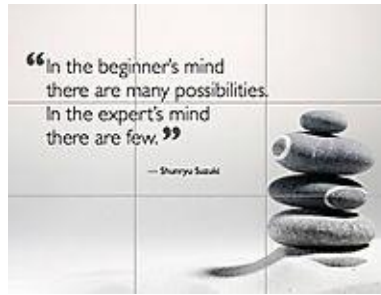
Contrast is perhaps the most important principle of all. You can achieve contrast in many ways, size (big/small) space (near/far), and color (light/dark, warm/cool), etc.

(5) Don't be afraid to let your images fall off the edge.



The product images displayed on IKEA signs fall off the edge. That is, part of the image does not appear or "fit" in the frame. The frame (billboard or slide, etc.) seems bigger and more engaging when an image falls off the edge such as those pictured above, as if the entire image is too big to fit. This is a common effect but ignored by many presenters who are careful to keep every element within the slide frame. Falling off the edge can make the images seem larger while at the same time leaving more empty space on the canvas, giving more clarity to the overall visual and plenty of breathing room for another element.

(6) Rule of Thirds.



The rule of thirds is a good general principle to follow for arranging elements on your canvas (slide). The IKEA samples above do not follow it rigidly — it is only a general principle — but each billboard has plenty of empty space and clear design priorities. Usually the eye is drawn to the large image first and then the large display text. There are many more examples of the rule of thirds applied to slides in [Presentation Zen](#) (pp.151-152) and in [Slide:ology](#) (p.161)

(7) Empty space.



The rule of thirds is useful for achieving a more balanced look that utilizes empty space. Others will tell you to fill that empty space for myriad reasons including that "it looks more serious" if every bit of the slide is filled with text, data, and images. Resist the urge to add more. There are no prizes given for making your slides as dense as possible. [See this recent Dilbert comic](#) on this issue.

(8) Have a visual theme.

The IKEA signs are all different but they are clearly from the same "brand" and follow a theme, yet there is no decorative template. For slides you do not need to follow a pre-packaged template found in the software, but there does need to be a visual theme. This can be achieved by using the same typeface, the same genre of photography, same background color, and so on.

Learning from the streets Yes, slides and billboards are different, but presentation visuals have much more in common with billboards and other signage than they do with documents. As you walk the city streets, begin to pay attention to the ubiquitous signage with a critical eye, asking yourself what works and what doesn't, and why.

References

Article redacted and edited to meet grade 9 educational standards

Reynolds, G. (2008, August 25). Learning slide design from an IKEA billboard. Retrieved September 21, 2017, from <http://www.presentationzen.com/presentationzen/2008/08/learning-from-the-design-around-you-ikea.html>