The world is comprised of a growing number of visual creatures, or audiences who receive most of their information from a visual source. Whether content is passively served from television, or actively requested from YouTube, these visual creatures crave one element above all—action! It is the visual performance, the overt action and the physical movement that brings a story to life.

Presenting is no different. Do you really believe your well-crafted message and masterfully designed PowerPoint visuals deserve a poor performance? In theatre, the playwright supplies the words, the director adds a visual structure, and the actors deliver the performance. As a presenter, you likely play all three roles (writer, director, and actor) as you take what was once in print and bring it to life for people to enjoy. Delivery is merely a three-dimensional view of content.

While the way we communicate varies, some studies suggest that 55% of everything we say is gathered from what we LOOK like when we speak. Another 38% is derived from how we deliver the information and only 7% is interpreted from what we actually say, or the words that flow from our mouths.

Some may argue about those percentages, but most will agree that the delivery style of the messenger strongly effects the interpretation of the message. Visually speaking, the actions of the presenter are a critical part of communication that either distracts from or adds value to the spoken content.

The easiest way to develop a presentation skill is to work on the external elements first because that is the only way to see visible improvement over time. Just as a writer must develop the external or structural elements of grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure before embarking on the novel, a presenter must learn physical actions before developing the internal skills to control emotions.

Here are five basic external skills needed to satisfy the action-starved audiences who eagerly await your messages:

1. **Establish an Anchor**

When presenting with visual support, you need to set an anchor for the audience so they can watch you and reference your supporting slides. Position your body to the same side as the reading anchor in the language you’re presenting in (i.e., left-to-right or right-to-left). For presentations in English (and many other languages), you should stand on the LEFT SIDE of the room -- that is, the left side from the audience point of view.

We read words from left-to-right. The eye is less distracted if it sees the presenter speaking from the left, and then glances slightly to the right to read the visual, before returning to view the speaker again.

2. **Build a Triangle**

Visual creatures demand action and, as a visual presenter, you must provide that action by moving your body. The only way to know how or when to move is to know *where to move first*. To do this, create an area in front of the audience in which you can move. This imaginary area is called the Presenter's Triangle™
To create this triangle, while standing at a fixed distance from your display equipment, draw an imaginary line from the person sitting to your far right, to the left-edge of your screen. This becomes the long end of this triangle, an angled wall if you will (see graphic.) From each end of the imaginary line, draw two lines meeting at a 90° angle to complete the shape behind you. This puts you inside a large triangle. Use the "angled-wall" as your boundary because if you step through the imaginary wall, people on your right will not be able to see the screen.

The good news is that there are only three positions of the triangle: the front, nearest the audience; the middle, where you should be most of the time; and the back, nearest the screen. You have to move and change space every now and then to keep the audience engaged with action.

Movement doesn’t mean running back and forth, meandering aimlessly, or drifting from place to place for no apparent reason. Treat the three positions of the triangle like peg holes or stopping points. You move to these points periodically, every few minutes perhaps, remaining in a particular position as you speak.

From a strategy perspective, choose the back of the triangle when your support visual is complex, so the audience can more easily compare what is on the screen to what is being said. Choose the front of the triangle when you want a closer connection with the audience, or more impact and personal interaction.

3. Play an Angle

The body can be used for emphasis. The positions of your shoulders enhance communication. For most of your talk you should be at a 45-degree angle to the room itself. To create the angle, point your
shoulders to the opposite corner of the room. This is a REST position of the body. It establishes a non-threatening stance for the audience and opens your body to the screen when you need to gesture or move.

When you square your shoulders to the back of the room, you move into a POWER position of the body. It's a signal that the information being communicated is of greater importance or carries more emphasis. But don't stay in the power position too long or the effectiveness will diminish.

You can vary the rest and power positions in any of the three areas of the triangle based on how you want to deliver the information at any point. Because action drives information in a presentation, you can see how choreography (movement) drives content.

Decide where in the triangle you want to be when delivering certain content, and then check your visual design (simple or complex) to see if it supports your chosen spot in the triangle. If you already know that a “busy slide” requires you to be in the back of the triangle, but for impact you prefer to be in the front of the triangle, then change the visual content, since it represents only 7% of the communication.

4. Lend a Hand

Most presenters have a hard time figuring out what to do with their hands. But the audience’s eyes travel wherever the hands go. Try not to put your hands together for more than three seconds, and don’t keep your arms locked at your sides as if your elbows were nailed to your rib cage.

Be careful about folding your arms in front of you, because when your hands are locked under your arms, your gestures will be completely limited. Also, don’t clasp your hands together behind your back since your hands should always be in view of the audience -- a hidden hand can translate into a hidden agenda.

If you don’t know what to do with your hands, simply give in to the law of gravity. By nature, the earth will take your hands to your sides when you are not gesturing.

The hands can be very potent communication tools, and one of the best actions is a “reaching out” gesture. When the palm faces up as the arm extends out toward the audience, the reaching out gesture indicates approachability. Used mostly when interacting, the reaching out gesture visibly supports the “offer” being made.

For example, if you pose a question to a group, you are essentially making an offer to the entire audience, seeking input. If you don’t use your hands when making the offer, the audience assumes that the last person you look at is required to respond to the offer. However, if you open your hands to the entire group, “reaching out” toward them, making the offer to everyone, the audience will realize that anyone in the group is being encouraged to respond to your offer.

Beyond interaction, the hands direct attention or justify reasons for action. For example, by gesturing with your left hand to the screen, you can help guide the eyes of the audience to specific points in your content. If you decide to move from the front of the triangle to the back, use your left hand and gesture to the screen.

This will justify the “retreat” of the body, an action which can appear distrustful or insecure when moving away from people. By using your gestures logically and correctly you can orchestrate your content in a more visual manner.

5. Shift the Weight

If your weight is evenly balanced, with your heels both touching the floor at the same pressure and your chin centered on your body, your gestures will likely appear rigid or unnatural. Consider an “off-balance”
perspective. If the body weight is on one foot or the other, gestures look smooth.

The easiest way to know if you are shifting your weight properly is to keep the base of your neck lined up with the same foot you're placing your weight on. The rhyme is "Whenever the chin is in line with a knee, gestures express most naturally."

With your weight shifted, gestures appear more natural and you will look relaxed. In addition, by having your weight shifted without gesturing, the move to gesturing -- using one or both hands -- is much easier. Even when not gesturing, you should keep a relaxed stance by simply placing your weight on one foot or the other.

When your body looks more relaxed you are perceived to be in control of the situation and you appear more confident. Remember, Soldiers stand at attention, but Generals relax.

Using physical movements and physical space are just some of the external ways your body uses visible actions to help you make all the right moves in all the right places.

*Editor’s Note:* These non-verbal skills can be evaluated with an online self-assessment tool tied to published research, a tool that evaluates 21 skills in every presenter. The assessment tool measures the level of effectiveness of speakers for different audience types and identifies specific challenge areas to help presenters self-improve. To see a sample of the self-evaluation form, visit [http://medianet-ny.com/wordpress/assessment-tools/](http://medianet-ny.com/wordpress/assessment-tools/).

**About the Author:**

Tom Mucciolo is president of MediaNet Inc., a presentation skills company in New York City specializing in the design and delivery of electronic presentations.

©2009 MediaNet Inc