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## Show What You Mean, Mean What You Show: Piloting a Graphic Design Workshop for Extension Professionals

### Abstract

Quality graphic design can enhance how Extension professionals communicate their messages. Even with limited training, many Extension staff create their own graphic designs for presentations, handouts, and marketing materials. To address this, a workshop was developed to educate Extension staff on design principles and effective techniques for creating various graphic formats such as posters, presentation slides, and flyers. After the workshop, participants applied the knowledge gained and sought further training.

### Introduction

At the core of Extension is the process of effectively developing and conveying information to the public we serve. However, *how* we share that information is often as important as *what* information we share. Graphic design is an important visual communication tool for Extension professionals to share their messages more

effectively. Effective graphic design can help Extension staff to present themselves and their work more coherently and professionally.

As our means of communication change and the public becomes increasingly bombarded with information, Extension professionals must find ways to make our messages distinct and attract the attention of our audiences. Initial impressions engage members of the public and entice them to spend time digesting the content more fully. Extension professionals must also strive to convey our messages to diverse audiences. The thoughtful use of color, for example, can help ensure a presentation is easily read by people with color vision deficiency. A well-designed chart or infographic can communicate ideas to individuals who may have difficulty reading or who may not understand the local dominant language.

As part of their Extension responsibilities, many staff produce their own graphics despite having minimal or no graphic design experience training. Most Extension professionals regularly create digital presentations and handouts as part of their efforts to communicate and educate the communities they serve. Staff at many county Extension offices are also tasked with developing their own marketing and promotional materials creating their own print and digital advertisements, flyers, and posters. They also create presentations and posters to display their scholarly work at professional conferences all on limited budgets.

Graphic design software and online applications are often readily available. However, without some basic understanding of basic graphic design principles, it can be difficult to communicate complicated information effectively visually to our diverse audiences. To bridge this knowledge gap, a workshop entitled “Graphic Design for Extension Professionals” was developed for an optional in-service training session during an Extension annual conference. The workshop was hosted by two members of the Extension faculty with backgrounds in landscape architecture design and requisite training in graphic communications. The workshop was formulated to provide Extension faculty and specialists with basic graphic design principles and demonstrate their practical application across common visual communication platforms.

In total, 83 people chose to participate in the voluntary session, representing roughly 25 percent of Utah State University's Extension's faculty and staff. A wide range of specialties and geographic diversity was represented by the attendees.

## Workshop Format

The workshop was 90 minutes long and structured as an interactive presentation (Zenni and Turner, 2021). The audience was well-engaged, and they asked questions and contributed their ideas throughout the session. The first section of the presentation established the basic principles and techniques of graphic design (Lin, 1993; Rand, 2016). These included the concepts of hierarchy, repetition, readability, movement, alignment, scale, balance, color, negative space, unity, consistency, and variety (White, 2011). The training also covered graphic requirements specific to university Extension publications such as including equal rights statements and using university logos appropriately.

# HIERARCHY

## Establishing a system....

- 1- That guides my **eye**
- 2- From the most **important elements**

To the least

Figure 1: Workshop graphic demonstrating the graphic design concept of hierarchy.

We then demonstrated the use of the principles taught in the first section of the workshop across some of the graphic formats commonly used by Extension professionals. These included conference posters, presentation slides, and marketing flyers (Sullivan, 2014). We started by showing successful examples and as a group applied our new understanding by deconstructing the examples to identify the design

principles that made them effective. We then looked at less successful examples of each format and discussed how to apply the design principles covered to improve each example.



Figure 2: Workshop graphic demonstrating a less successful presentation slide.



Figure 3: Workshop graphic demonstrating a more successful use of space.

The workshop concluded with a question-and-answer session. Participants were also provided with a handout summarizing the design principles discussed in the session.



Figure 4: Workshop handout summarizing basic design principles.

## Reactions and Results

Following the workshop, participants were sent a link to a digital survey asking about their experience (Dillman et al., 2014). The respondents universally agreed that their knowledge of the subject matter had increased and over 90% of respondents also felt the information they learned in the workshop would benefit their Extension work.

The survey also included open-ended questions about how the course could be improved and what else the participants would like to learn. The majority of these

responses were overwhelmingly positive. Respondents expressed their enthusiasm for the information they learned through the workshop and indicated an interest in additional in-depth training.

In addition to the survey, the workshop instructors were contacted personally by several participants who shared anecdotal experiences, positive outcomes, and their desire to share the information with others who had not been in attendance. One staff member with a teaching assignment expressed a desire to share the information with his graduate students to help them improve their academic poster development. Another explained how she had been thinking differently about her presentation slides and related how her audiences had reacted positively to her attempts to apply the principles taught in the workshop. Still, another participant shared how the workshop had helped her create a more polished conference poster.

Four months following the workshop, participants were surveyed again to determine how the workshop had influenced their work. 93% of respondents indicated that they continued to find the information presented in the workshop useful, while 55% continued to use the information frequently. An overwhelming majority (87%) requested additional, in-depth training on the subject in future workshops. However, the suggested topics varied and demonstrated the diverse graphic communication needs of the respondents and the breadth of potential topics for future workshops.

While the response to the survey was positive, the number of participants represents a limited group of Extension professionals. Repeating the program would reinforce the validity of the outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

The training necessary to facilitate efficient graphic communication can enhance the work of Extension professionals. Conducting a training workshop has been successful in improving the graphic design skills of Extension staff members. Our plan is to further support Extension professionals by organizing more workshops tailored to their needs.

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