

FINANCIAL TIMES

WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 17 1997

Viewpoint

Alastair Grant on the false lure of computer visual aids

In thrall to wizardry

Business and travel magazines are filled with advertisements for projectors linked to sleek laptops. The ads have slogans such as "Image is everything" and pictures of rapt audiences watching colourful graphics. The message is clear: we should all use computer generated packages to be credible and anything else is outmoded.

Software, such as Corel Draw, Freelance, PowerPoint and others, is ever more powerful and easy to use. Laptops are now fast enough to display without delay. LCD projectors such as Sony, LitePro, Epson and others can throw a bright picture on to a screen. They are multimedia and so can show videos and play sound. These machines are getting lighter, brighter and cheaper.

The effects are often impressive, but are audiences or individual listeners actually better off? Does the presenter create a better image? Is more business won?

The reality is that excessive use of computer-generated visual aids can destroy a clear message and sideline the presenter. Audiences fail to pick up the key points as they are overwhelmed with complex information. Presenters become diminished in

stature when there is a continuous stream of bright images and when the audience is so busy trying to absorb visual detail that they fail to connect with the presenter.

The best advice given to companies making presentations, and business pitches in particular, is to use multimedia laptop presentations with extreme care.

- Make sure the visuals support you and you don't end up a hand servant to the goddess of technology. You are the most important visual aid.
- Do not have the machine on all the time. Be brave and talk some of the time without visuals.
- Limit the amount of graphic information.
- Word slides are boring and seldom remembered.
- Remember that being creative is not spending hours designing a complex 3-D chart but being able to give a simple, non abstract description of your point by using vivid example, anecdote or analogy.

Alastair Grant is a partner of Grant Pearson Brown & Co, a London-based communications skills and events consultancy