Color, Culture and Visual Support

Certain colors and combination of colors can have special significance in different cultures. A white bridal gown is the symbol of purity in the West, while in India it's the color red. Green is associated with Islam in Saudi Arabia, money in the United States, and a symbol that a man's wife is cheating on him when worn as a green hat in China. The Egyptians associate yellow with mourning; the Thais connect that emotion to purple. And the list could go on.

An important consideration to look at when discussing cultural color associations, however, is the meaning objects and context give to them. On a personal level, if you ask someone to name their favourite color, they usually respond with blue or green or whatever. But when asked if they would want that color to be the color of their teeth or bathtub, they usually decline. It turns out that their favourite color is fine as long as it is restricted to a very narrow list of things or left as an abstract concept.

Likewise, many cultures have learned to associate particular colors to a specific object in a specific context. With other objects of the same color – a different response might be generated, or none at all. A red rose, red-shaped heart, and a red traffic light may provoke a certain reaction, whereas red poinsettias, a red pocket knife, and a flashing red light atop a fire truck will bring about another.

After more than two decades of holding international [presentation seminars](#), I have not found any significant link between colors used in a PowerPoint presentation and colors that might otherwise convey a special meaning in the speaker's own culture. So even though white carnations are associated with death in Japan, Japanese business presenters have no problems displaying charts on a white background while wearing a white shirt and occasionally using a white handkerchief to gently pat their slightly perspiring foreheads.

Rather than look at color from a cultural perspective, it may be better to consider it from an optical point of view. And hopefully it is clear that I'm talking about true visuals (i.e. graphs, charts, pictures, diagrams etc.) and not tex[t slides which are disturbing in every culture](#). We could ask, what will be clearly seen and easy for the eye to distinguish? What colors will provide good contrast and fall comfortably on the retina (i.e. blue, grey, green, crimson, black, etc.)? Your international audience ultimately will want your use of color to be helpful in elucidating your point and to make your ideas immediately comprehensible. They understand that slides used during a business presentation has its own context, which should insulate a speaker against any unintentional misuse of color – and culturally associated meaning.

Other tips related to visual support

When to use

- Only when necessary (ask yourself: "Do I really need a slide here?")
- It must be predominantly visual (photos, graphs, charts, images, etc.). Bullet point and "labels" (with a few words) are fine. Long and many text sentences, on the other hand, are not considered visuals.
- Use especially to make complex or complicated ideas easier to understand.

How to Design

- Not too complicated (audience should look up and understand straight away). Use the blend in function when necessary. Keep in mind that the threshold of objects on a slide is very low (usually no more than 5).
- Objects and print should not be too small. Audience members in the back should be able to see see it.

At the [International Presentation Academy,](#) we offer a 2-day Presentation Workshop in Munich (Germany) that will guide you step-by-step in the skill of developing your presentation. We will show you how to use the story-structure that is easy to follow and intereteing, deliver with

impact, and design viewer-friendly slides that help participants speak freely. For more information, contact us at info@ip-academy.de