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Visual order in the court

Evidence specialist uses graphics to make sense out of complex cases

A good picture might be worth a thousand words, but Marsha Drebelbis contends that an effective courtroom visual can translate into guilt, freedom or millions of bucks.

Call her a master of sign language. The 57-year-old president of Litigation Graphics Inc. cuts to the chase with videos, photographs, charts, timelines, 3-D



CHERYL HALL

models and other displays. There's nothing worse than a jury nodding off during vital testimony.

"Attorneys don't call me for the simple cases," she says. "They call me for the ones they've been working on for years."

"They look to me to get to the essence of a story."

Since 1988, Ms. Drebelbis has built a specialty graphics division that will bring in \$300,000 this year.

She's president-elect of Demonstrative Evidence Specialists Association, the national professional organization of this specialty, and acquainted with the latest graphic technology. But that's not necessarily her tool of choice.

"Attorneys and jurors do not trust leading, bleeding-edge tech-

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MEI-CHUN JAU/Staff Photographer

Marsha Drebelbis' company, Litigation Graphics, specializes in presenting evidence in ways that don't put juries to sleep.

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Evidence of a job well done

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nology," she says. "As evidential experts, we know just what elements to use because we know how it will play in a courtroom."

The low-tech poster board is often the visual of choice. It can remain on its easel in full view of the jury, and jurors can take it with them during deliberations.

Ms. Drebelbis has worked on cases ranging from an automobile wreck to a multimillion-dollar battle over groundwater contamination five years ago. Adjacent property owners sued a manufacturer for allowing toxic chemicals from its plant to seep into the soil.

Her presentation for the plaintiffs started with fly-over video of the property, switched to still photography and eased into animation to show how particles seeped into the adjacent property and contaminated the water.

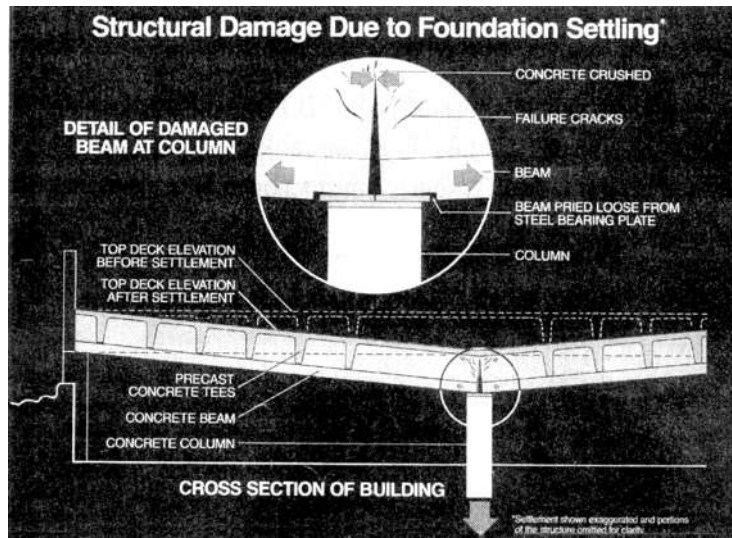
"We showed jurors what they'd see if they had microscopic eyes," she says, adding that the jury awarded \$23.3 million to her side.

Brian Melton of Shackelford Melton in Dallas says Ms. Drebelbis was "a tremendous asset to me in effectively presenting complex information" in that case and others.

Keeping their attention

Gretchen Benolken of Benolken & Everett in Denton used Ms. Drebelbis' service recently in a three-week, convoluted and document-intensive real estate case.

Ms. Drebelbis edited down hours of videotaped depositions to less than three. She created a CNN-esque running test so that jurors could see, hear and read the testimony.



MEI-CHUN JAU/Staff Photographer

Litigation Graphics makes charts to help juries understand complicated subjects.

"The alternative," says Ms. Benolken, who's still waiting for a verdict to be handed down, "is to put someone on the stand to read the questions and answers. You miss the long exaggerated pauses, the glances to the lawyer, the facial expression and the inflections."

And it tends to put the jury to sleep?

"Absolutely,"

Ms. Drebelbis, a farm girl from central Kansas, earned bachelor's degrees in art education and in fine arts at the University of Kansas.

"My orientation has always been to teach and have the audience learn effectively," she says. "The more senses you enlist — smell, taste, touch, seeing and hearing — the more likely you'll be able to influence the audience. That's something many attorneys working so diligently on their cases forget."

She started a design business 30 years ago in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

In 1981, she and her husband, Jim, both in their 30s then, fled the Rust Belt and chose Dallas as their next frontier. But when Texas' oil and real estate economy went bust in the late 1980s,

of her clients filed for bankruptcy, collectively owing her nearly \$100,000.

"I couldn't sleep for two years trying to figure out how to pay my staff and satisfy my bank loans," says Ms. Drebelbis, who still has a general graphic design studio.

"Then I realized an increasing portion of my client base was attorneys waking up to the idea that visual aids could help relay a complex story to the jury."

A fair shot

She uses the outside expertise of a half-dozen illustrators, designers, animators, videographers, photographers and graphic geeks — all trained in legal evidence.

Have her attorney clients ever asked her to muddy the water?

"No one ever puts it that way," she says. "But there are times when there are facts they'd rather set aside. But that's selectivity and being smart."

Has she ever turned down work because she doubted the client? "No," she says flatly. "Truly, both sides deserve representation, even if it's a drug dealer."

Ms. Drebelbis prepared a visual for one such case that showed fish being netted by an FBI boat above. Her client was a

SHOW AND TELL

Marsha Drebelbis suggests that executives apply her courtroom techniques to make their presentations more effective. Here are a few tips:

- Start with a timeline, which forces you to prioritize, then logically present the events and topics you want to discuss.
- Engage as many senses as possible. Bring in a 3-D model to pass around.
- Know when to use technology. Using a low-tech flip chart, for example, allows you to flip over the overlays. "The more interactive you are with your presentation materials, the more you appear to be in control," she says.
- Use PowerPoint skillfully. Never ask the audience to sit and read along. "The most powerful button of a PowerPoint presentation is the 'b' on the keyboard," she says. "Press it, and your projection screen suddenly turns black. That puts the focus immediately back on you, where it needs to be."

different color fish from the rest, the idea being that he was hauled in with the bad company he was keeping.

The jury didn't buy it.

As much as she tries to keep things professional, some cases become personal.

She prepared evidence for three trials of a banker legally entangled by the government in the savings and loan debacle.

"He was bright and intelligent, and I grew to like him," she says.

The evening before the third trial, he delivered a box of materials for a timeline he needed the next morning. She stayed up all night making a board.

"About 10:30 that morning, I got a call," she says. "The judge dismissed the case based on the board."