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The Guide to Pitch Deck Design

Win over investors with a more compelling deck

Avg. investor time spent on your deck

2:42

minutes   seconds

Introduction

As a busy founder, you take on many different roles in an average week while bringing your dream to life. By following the principles in this report, you can design your deck for maximum investor impact.

Data compiled from decks shared with VCs through DocSend indicates that a pitch deck will only get 2 minutes and 42 seconds of an investor's time. That's less than 3 minutes to make that vital first impression. Having a clean, organized, and consistent deck will help investors use that brief time wisely

Each section in this report covers the kind of design topics you should be considering when putting your deck together. And because you're probably on a tight budget, we have provided several free or cost-effective design options to help build your deck.

Pro tip: Start your deck with a captivating cover image, your company name and logo if you have one. To save space the cover can also be your Company Purpose slide.

Where do we get our data?

Where do we get our data? Throughout this report we have peppered in data points and commentary that is informed by our research reports. These are compiled from product data and surveys that DocSend users fill out to report on their fundraising experiences.

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Calculating the ROI of deck design

$$\text{weekly income} \times \underset{\text{weeks}}{12} = \underset{\text{of your deck}}{\text{ROI}}$$

The ROI of design

So how do you begin to define the ROI of having a well-designed deck?

Take a moment to consider how much time a founder spends fundraising. It can become all-consuming for up to 12 or more weeks according to our research. That's vital time a founder spends not growing their core business. A well-designed deck could cut that time in half or more.

Next, estimate how much you would charge per week for your expertise. Multiply that by 12 weeks. That is potentially how much a well designed deck is worth to your business. You might be shocked at how high that figure is. Yet that is how much not making a favorable first impression with investors could cost you.

Pro tip: Grab potential investors' attention early on with a compelling hook. This will set the tone for how they go through your deck.

Jonah Midanik, Partner, ForumVC

❝ The return on a $1000 deck design is likely in the $100,000 camp, or a 100X. The change in dilution and value of a successful fundraise is SO high relative to the input cost, that you don't need to be successful most of the time to justify the expense.

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Flow slides together in a narrative

Problem		Solution		Why now?
?	→	📊	→	'22

Create a narrative

It's tempting to want to tell potential investors everything about your business. Instead, keep in mind that investors are moving quickly and only want highlights.

Rather than dealing with each section separately, think about creating a story that brings all your slides together. It shouldn't be all-encompassing as the deck's purpose is to whet an investor's appetite for an in-person meeting.

Think of an overarching story that is easy to explain with only a few words and images. The key is to build FOMO in investors' minds. Make them feel like they are missing out on a great investment opportunity without saying it.

Pro tip: In his talk from Webrazzi 15, Brendan Baker of Greylock Partners suggests creating building blocks of a few slides each in order to build up story arcs.
- Pain & response (Problem, Solution)
- It's working (Product, Financials)
- It's growing (Traction, Business Model)

Vatsal Kanakiya
Principal & CTO, 100x.vc

❝ The flow makes or breaks the pitch. We spend 30+ hours with each of our portfolio companies to perfect their flow for future pitches. It is the narrative that should dictate the flow, not the deck. We work with founders on their story first (literally write it down in a doc) and then build the deck around it.

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3 options for design

self

designer in your network

online service

Getting design help

Now that you have your story sorted, what do you do next? Download our pitch deck template and start laying out your content just like a product wireframe. The titles can be loose for now and what goes in the gray boxes can be sorted out later.

Your deck does not have to be created by a design agency to look good. However, if you feel you need someone with an eye for these things to look it over, ask for help from a designer friend or relative in your extended network.

Even if there aren't any designers in your network, there are still lots of online services, templates, and tips that can help. We've outlined as many as we can in the next few pages to try to make this as painless a process as possible.

Pro tip: If you are asking for design help, expect to pay something for it or to return a favor some day unless it is a very close friend or relative doing the design work.

Deck design services

Business Plans

Design Pickle

Mercatur

Pitch Deck Services

Slidespeak

Slidebean

Upwork

Pitch Deck.io

Dropbox DocSend

Exporting Google Slides to DocSend

Format & templates

In our pitch deck templates, we recommend the 16x9 format as decks are most likely viewed on laptops (also 16:9 format). Remember, no one will print out your deck.

We recommend creating your deck in Google Slides so that it can be constantly updated without the help of a professional designer. Our Data Visualization section of this report outlines more great Google Slides features. Also, by having the deck in Google Slides it can be edited by other members of your team from any device.

Once your deck is ready to send out to investors, you can either export it from Google Slides as a PDF to upload or add the link directly into DocSend. You can then upload it to DocSend in order to manage and capture the document's various interactions by potential investors.

Pro tip: Put all your fundraising documents in a DocSend Data Room and customize it with your brand to make it look more professional. Find out how here.

Looking for a template?

Download DocSend's templates for both the pre-seed and seed rounds in Google Slides to put all these learnings into action:

Download PreSeed deck

Download Seed deck

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Don't overload your slides

Brevity: 1 point per page

Remember your pitch deck is the trailer for your business not the full movie. At 2 minutes and 42 seconds you have about the same amount of time to convince investors to have an in-person meeting (the "full-length movie" of your story).

This means you shouldn't overload your slides. In fact, ideally stick to one page per main point. Although you need to be brief overall, you also should know where to expand (e.g., your business model or product sections). Leave room for an in-person deeper dive on each topic–don't forget, you're selling the sizzle, not the steak.

Once you have your deck finished, go through it again with the goal of reducing some of the text. It's natural to over-explain in the first draft. Good editing makes for greater impact in the investor's mind.

Pro tip: Ask a friend to go through your deck and time them. Ask them where they slowed down and why

List of common sections

Team
Problem
Market size
Product
Business model
Solution
Company purpose
Competition
Traction
Why now?
The ask
Transition
Financials
Other

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How to make your own simple brand

logo + Abc + colors
           font

Create a simple brand

Building a simple brand can help investors know that you are taking your business seriously. Branding's main purpose is to build trust through recognition. As a result, simply creating a logo and choosing a font/colors go a long way toward developing this trust in the minds of investors. The distinctive brand should then be applied across all your communications (including your pitch deck).

Your logo should distill what your company is or does. Luckily there are many sites that offer these services at a low cost (see side bar). This is where a bit of money and effort can pay off.

Once your logo is created, you can use its font and colors to define your fledgling brand.

Pro tip: If you don't have access to a professional designer, Venngage has a product called MyBrandKit that will take you through the steps of making a simple brand.
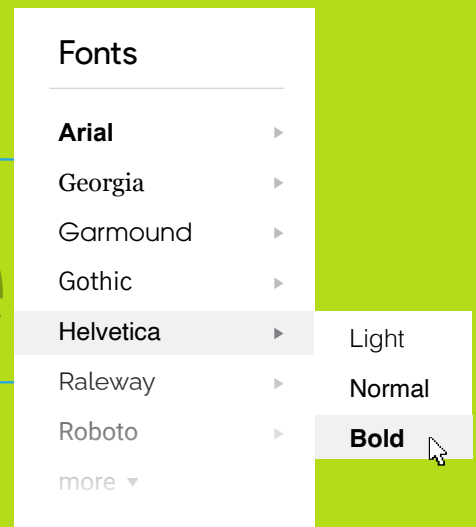
List of logo sites

Wix logo maker

Design Crowd

99designs

Fiverr

Upwork

LogoGarden

Logura

Free logo Design

Tailor brands

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Keep fonts simple

Headline

Fonts

Arial	▶
Georgia	▶
Garmound	▶
Gothic	▶
Helvetica	▶
Raleway	▶
Roboto	▶
more ▾	

Light
Normal
Bold

How to handle text

Remember, you're looking for the best legibility as investors race through your deck, so make it easy for them. Here are some simple steps to tell your story easily in text.

First, use simple fonts rather than decorative ones. The latter can be good for logos but may make other text harder for investors to read (or more likely "skim"). If you're searching for a font, Google Slides has a great selection.

When choosing your font you should avoid thin fonts and only use bold text sparingly (if everything is special then nothing is special). Likewise, don't place text over images as it can make your deck hard to read (and hard to fund).

Once you have chosen a font, consider the size next. Although most decks will be viewed on a laptop, some will be seen on mobile devices so err on the side of making your text larger. Only use small text for data citations.

Pro tip: Guy Kawasaki, in his TED Talk advocates using 30 point type to stop you from adding too much text.

Christin Powell, CEO, Kindship Skincare

❝ Text should be minimal; investors don't like to read paragraphs of copy. It should read like a series of headlines and below the headline, the supporting data. Keeping it simple shows that you are confident enough in the data that is provided, without having to "oversell" it.

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Narrow down your color palette

VS

How to handle color

Why is color important? On an average day, investors look at somewhere between 50 and 75 decks. Most of those decks will have black type on a white background. Which one of those monochrome decks will they remember a day or a week later? Use color to give your deck an extra chance of standing out.

When deciding on your brand's look and feel, narrow down colors to just two or three. Think about famous brands such as Coca-Cola whose color palette is mainly red and white with a bit of green–it's recognizable worldwide. This narrowing down of colors not only makes your deck look more distinct but also more like a professional brand.

Adding lots of colors everywhere distracts from your main message. Use your brightest color sparingly so that it pops for emphasis when you want it to. If you use bright colors everywhere, then nothing will pop.

Pro tip: Always aim to use contrast for type, e.g. use a dark color on a light background and vice versa.

Color blindness

Note: 8% of the male population (and 0.5% of the female population) have color blindness. 99% of those affected by color blindness are affected in the   red/green spectrum, meaning they see a much more muted version of those colors. Include additional information beyond color to convey meaning.

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Avoid bad stock photos in your deck

How to handle photos

Add stock photos for better quality images in your deck. Try to make the style of the photos you pick generally similar to look more professional. Avoid overly 'stocky' photos of over-the-top smiles, men in business suits shaking hands, or jigsaw puzzles. These are very dated now, so keep the 80's in the 80's.

Don't steal photos online for many reasons: watermarking, wildly differing styles and quality, and the fact that other founders may be using the same images.

For team members, take professional photos if you can afford them. The same applies to your product if it is a physical object. If you can't afford a professional photographer, use your LinkedIn profile photos as these are likely to be the best photos of the team members.

Pro tip: Save money by getting professional individual headshots, a founders' group shot, and office/full team photos all in the same session

Stock photo sites

Low cost photos
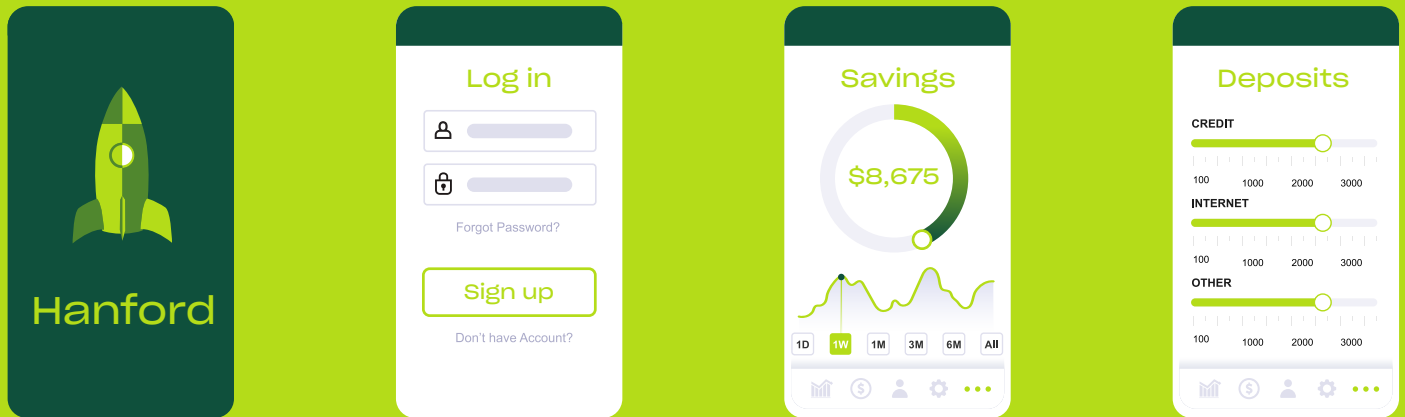
iStock

Shutterstock

Adobe Stock

Free photos

Freepik

Stockvault

Pexels

Rawpixel

Dropbox DocSend

Tell your narrative in just 4 screens

Product screenshots

Screenshots of your product help potential investors visualize your business as a financially viable entity. Investors understand that these screenshots are speculative as the product will probably go through many iterations even after launching.

If you can afford it, get a professional designer involved for these screenshots. If you can't get a designer involved, create simple mock-ups yourself in Google Slides or Canva. These should give a general idea of what the future product will look like. Make sure you have some kind of simple narrative, but avoid describing the entire user flow of the product.

Keep screenshots minimal and make sure they communicate features without much explanation. Avoid too much text and make logos and buttons stand out.

Pro tip: Showing the product on mobile as 4 vertical rectangles on one slide can be a very simple user journey.

Sites for mockup

Canva

Balsamiq

InVision

Mockplus

Moqups

Origami

Dropbox DocSend

Consistently apply your brand

Traction

Market

Team

Consistency & polish

A consistent and professional-looking deck is an important way to make investors take you seriously. As well as creating greater impact, using design elements (logo, colors, font, text, photos) consistently across your deck makes it much easier for investors to understand the message of your pitch.

Here are some quick tips on consistency:
- Label your sections with headers
- Keep section headers in the same place on each slide
- Use the auto-align features to align all elements.
- Apply your branding lightly so that it doesn't distract
- Font and text sizes should be consistent in your deck
- Graphs and images should have similar size and placement across the deck

Pro tip: Get a friend to read and spell check your deck as they will always find typos or things that you overlooked. If English isn't your native language, ask a native speaker to proofread your grammar and syntax.

Jonah Midanik, Partner, ForumVC

" Deck Design absolutely affects our opinion of the content; the first thing it does is make sure that the founders message is clearly communicated, with emphasis where it's intended.

Unfortunately, at Forum (like many VCs) we don't have as much time as we would like for each deck review; a well designed deck lets us pick out the important points quickly.

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Export data from Sheets to Slides
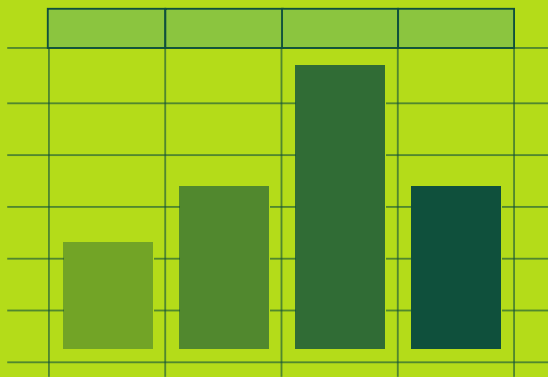
Data visualization

At some point you'll need to show some data, whether it's existing metrics (traction, market size, etc.) or future projections. Rather than making your own graphs from scratch, we recommend using Google Slides' built-in process for accurate and professional-looking graphs.

Graphs are available as bar, column, line, or pie charts (although you can always change the format). You can even import an existing Google Sheets doc. If you have a Microsoft Excel sheet you can easily convert it to a Google Sheet doc and take it from there.

Once you have uploaded your doc or entered your data you get an accurate and polished graph instantly. The graph can be edited later on as new data emerges. You can also customize it with your brand's colors and fonts.

Pro tip: In one of Heini Zachariassen's (founder and CEO of Vivino) many videos on YouTube he recommends that graphs be made tall and not wide to emphasize growth.

Google Slides graph types

Dropbox DocSend
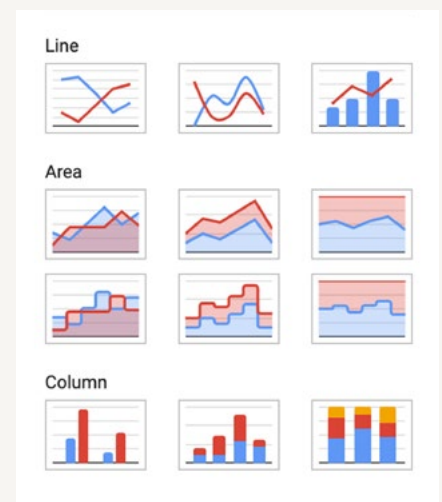
Conclusion

Having a well-designed deck is not about creating art. It's about guiding an investor through your pitch with the least amount of friction. This can reduce the time you spend fundraising and the number of meetings you need.

Once you've finished your deck, you need to get constructive feedback from peers and investors. Ideally submit your presentation to a pitch deck teardown. Keep iterating on the deck and take meaningful feedback seriously. This will hone your pitch and narrative.

Next, add your deck to DocSend where page-by-page analytics show where investors are spending their time. Use analytics to edit your deck and customize VC outreach. You can even manage multiple links to the same deck.

Pro tip: If you're a founder looking for data-driven feedback on your pitch deck, simply start a free trial of DocSend and send a DocSend link to your pitch deck to pitchdeck@docsend.com. Within 48 hours, you'll receive your results (which are all human-checked for consistency).

Startup Fundraising Playbook

Contribute to our research by taking our startup fundraising survey.

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