

creative techniques

Creating a product-development timeline in PowerPoint is well worth the effort



by geetesh bajaj

What exactly is a product-development timeline? Simply put, it visually portrays the development process of a product from concept to release — with all types of research, tests and prototypes somewhere in the middle.

Most of these terms — *concept*, *prototype*, *launch* — are classified as *tasks*. Each task has to be represented within a timeline. Not surprisingly, many tasks can be repetitive, consecutive or simultaneous in nature. Beyond the perspective of a task point of view, real-world considerations also need to be taken into account for product development. Time schedules and the grouping of responsibilities are all prone to continual change. A slide based on such a product-development timeline has to have qualities that make it easy to evolve, edit and expand at any moment.

For designers, the basic timeline visual can be classified as an “infographic.” And while creating an effective timeline for a presentation can be daunting, it is not impossible.

For this article, we’ll walk through the steps of creating a product-development timeline for Comitu Inc., a fictional pharmaceutical company planning the development and launch of

its new drug, SunZome. (To follow the techniques explained here, you can download the sample PowerPoint presentation from www.powerpointed.com/files/timeline.zip. You will need an unzipping utility such as WinZip or Stuffit to extract the archive file.)

The time bar

We begin our creation with a simple, uncluttered PowerPoint template that uses the company’s corporate color scheme of green. The company logo is also incorporated into the slide (see **EXAMPLE 1**).

The first thing you need to create is a sense of time. This can be achieved by placing a time bar on the top portion of the slide. To create the time bar, draw a narrow, ruler-style rectangle from edge to edge on the slide. Within this rectangle, draw four vertical lines to create five equal sections — then type a number, centered, in each of these sections (see **Example 2**).

If you want to use a nice graduated color fill within the time bar, select the rectangle and from the **FORMAT** menu, choose **AUTOSHAP**. In the Format AutoShape dialog box, go to the **Colors and Lines** tab, click the drop-down menu next to the **Color** choices

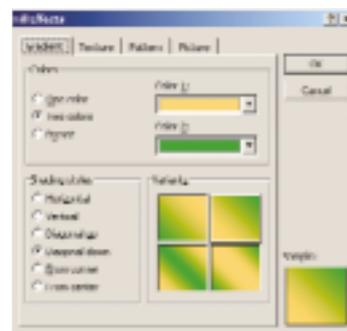
and select **Fill Effects**.

In the **Fill Effects** dialog box, choose the **Gradient** tab and opt for a two-color fill. Choose your colors (our sample has chrome yellow with sap green) and select a diagonal shading style (see **EXAMPLE 3**). Click **OK** when you are satisfied.

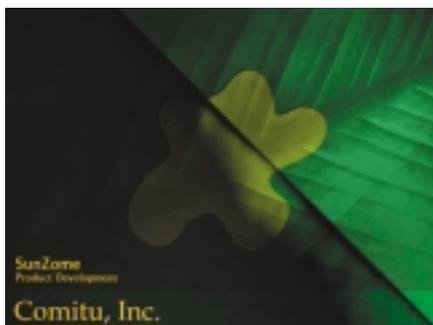
From within the **Format AutoShapes** window, return to the **Colors and Lines** tab, and from the **Lines** submenu, click the **Color** drop-down menu. Choose the **No Line** option for the outlines and click **OK**.

The lines

Just below the time bar and perpendicular to it, create four dashed lines



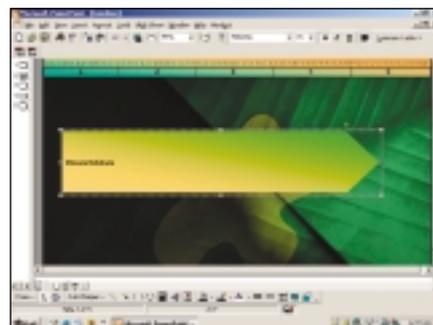
EXAMPLE 3 The **Fill Effects** window offers a number of shading styles and gradients for AutoShapes.



EXAMPLE 1 Starting with a clean background is important because a timeline will require a full-width view.



EXAMPLE 2 The segmented bar at the top of the slide represents time. Dashed lines emanate from this time bar to visually divide the onscreen area.



EXAMPLE 4 Once you draw a basic AutoShape, you can use its resize handles to adjust its shape and size as needed.

creative techniques

that span most of the slide from top to bottom. From the Draw toolbar, under AutoShapes, choose Lines, then draw your first line. Then under the FORMAT menu choose AUTOSHAPE. This returns you to the Format AutoShapes window. Go to the line area to adjust color, dash, style and weight to your liking. Be sure to choose a color that's visible on top of the background, yet not too bright. Once satisfied, click OK.

Tip: Once you have formatted your first line, select it with your mouse and then press CTRL + D to duplicate it for as many other lines as you need.

Adding shapes

Now you need to create shapes that will represent the actual tasks within the timeline. Use a regular AutoShape for this purpose. For our example, we'll use the pentagon shape within the Block Arrows section of the AutoShapes menu. Simply choose it and draw a long arrow onscreen. Next use the arrow's resize handles to size and shape it (look for the white dots). Change the tapered end of the arrow by locating and adjusting the image's diamond-shape handle (see EXAMPLE 4).

Once the arrow is properly sized, choose a graduated shaded fill that complements the slide's colors. Use the same techniques and menus you used to create color in your time bar, even repeating the color options. Be sure to choose the No Line option

from the Colors and Lines submenu before clicking OK.

To save time creating and coloring individual AutoShapes, duplicate this first arrow (CTRL + D) as often as necessary and place the copies where they're needed (see EXAMPLE 5).

Tip: To ensure all the AutoShapes are aligned, you can create guides on your slides as necessary. (For tips on using guides, see the March 2003 Creative Techniques column, "Precision layout creates clear and professional design," page 19.)

Use the Text tool to label each AutoShape. Keep in mind while labeling the shapes that some may require additional scaling. Be sure to scale width-wise, and never height-wise, to maintain design consistency.

Another layer of groups

As you create the AutoShapes (and their text labels) for the timeline, you may wish to identify several as a group using a larger block. This can be accomplished by adding another AutoShape. In our example, a long, narrow bar visually groups the task arrows above it. (see EXAMPLE 6).

These rectangles are created the same way you made the pentagon-shape arrows. To save time, create and format the shape you need, then duplicate it, placing each copy so that it roughly creates other groupings.

Once all the elements have been put into place, you can rearrange them to achieve their relative position under the time bar according to the

product's development schedule. (see EXAMPLE 7)

Adding animation

The final steps will create and place custom animation on the slide. Usually, it is a good idea to use a simple wipe animation that moves from left to right (the direction of the arrows) in sequence. Using a complex animation (in PowerPoint 97, 98, 2000 and 2001) or an entry-exit animation (in PowerPoint 2002/XP) may spoil the simplicity of the timeline as well as distract your audience. For this example, I have used wipes only — each AutoShape appears, animated, in sequence. The time bar is animated to appear first, followed by the vertical dashed lines. Finally, all the tasks and their grouping rectangles complete the animation sequence.

And remember, this isn't the only way to use a timeline. It is possible to adapt this method for historical timelines, progressive project status, event planning, training and any other concept that can evolve within a timeline frame. ■

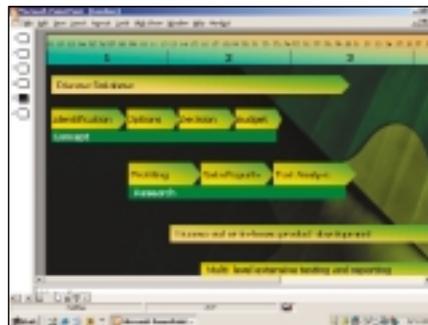
Software and system used:

PowerPoint 2000; Windows 2000.

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EXAMPLE 5 By duplicating the original AutoShape multiple times, it's easy to create various parts of the timeline quickly. You may need to rescale some shapes after placing them.



EXAMPLE 6 The rectangles provide another layer of grouping, by task, within the timeline.



EXAMPLE 7 All task elements are in place within the finished timeline.