



SlideHub

Structured communication in PowerPoint

Beyond the pyramid principles

Content

01	Introduction	07	The table of content
02	Why it matters	08	Structuring each section for impact
03	The basic principles	09	Structuring each section for impact
04	Dependencies to consider	10	Using visuals to increase impact of the slide
05	The overall deck structure	11	Next steps
06	The executive summary	12	Structural checklist

Introduction

Please add more insights and
increase the font size

MANAGEMENT CONSULTING
PARTNER TO CONSULTANT

01

Introduction: Why we believe this e-book is relevant

This eBook was entirely written by humans. Not AI.

It's the result of more than 200 hours of lectures, group sessions and 1-on-1 advice for our clients, as well as ~10,000 hours spent every month, helping clients with presentations.

And of course, our experience from our time as consultants.

The aim of this book is threefold:

- To create the practical guide that didn't exist. Barbara Minto and others established structured communication as a concept, but no one had shown how to apply it in day-to-day PowerPoint work. We wanted to change that.
- To touch on some of the many dependencies and complexities associated with implementing structured communication in practice - many of which get overlooked in simple examples.

- To present the topic with a narrow scope - focusing on helping business professionals who use PowerPoint as their main method of communication in both meetings and reports

In short, this e-book goes beyond the illustration of a pyramid.

It's a practical guide on how to use structured communication in business presentations.

We hope you find it as useful as our clients have.

Anders Haugbølle Thomsen

CEO & Founder of SlideHub

Why it matters

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT
EXPERIMENT

02

Why you should care about structured communication: Time and focus

There is a famous philosophical thought experiment that goes:

“If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

While that might be too theoretical for our line of business, it does serve as the basis for a question we can relate to:

“If nobody reads, uses or understands the work/analysis/report you as a business professional do, does it even matter?”

Our core argument: no, **it does not**. If we fail to structure and communicate the results of our work effectively, the work itself will not deliver the same impact.

The business life of most professionals today further fuels the need for well-structured communication:

- 1 There is an abundance of “things”. Apps, emails, notifications, pop-ups, reports, meetings, data fight for and grab our attention. Thus time is a scarcer resource than ever before.
- 2 Complexity is increasing – in technology, systems and large organizations. Thus complexity of work/results/solutions that is being communicated is also rising.
- 3 The average readers’/meeting participants’ attention span is systematically decreasing.

If used correctly, structured communication, and especially structured communication within PowerPoint presentations can partly remedy these trends by:

- Saving time for the reader
- Ensuring focus and a common point of departure
- Helping communicate complex topics more efficiently

The basic principles

That does not sound
MECE to me

ANY MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT

03

The basics: the concept at its core

1

Start all forms of communication by “setting the stage”. Use a combination of:

- **Situation** (the what). The situation establishes a common understanding and based on indisputable facts
- **Complication** (the however/reason for the communication).
- **Question** (the specific issue addressed) and/or
- **Resolution** (the main takeaway/conclusion).

2

This helps to create common ground and define the point of departure. It’s vital to reducing misunderstandings, lack of focus and unproductive discussions.

3

Start with the conclusion/key findings and continue by exploring the reasonings (the whys) of this conclusion. It’s faster, ensures focus on the right things and allows the reader to select which parts to explore in-depth.

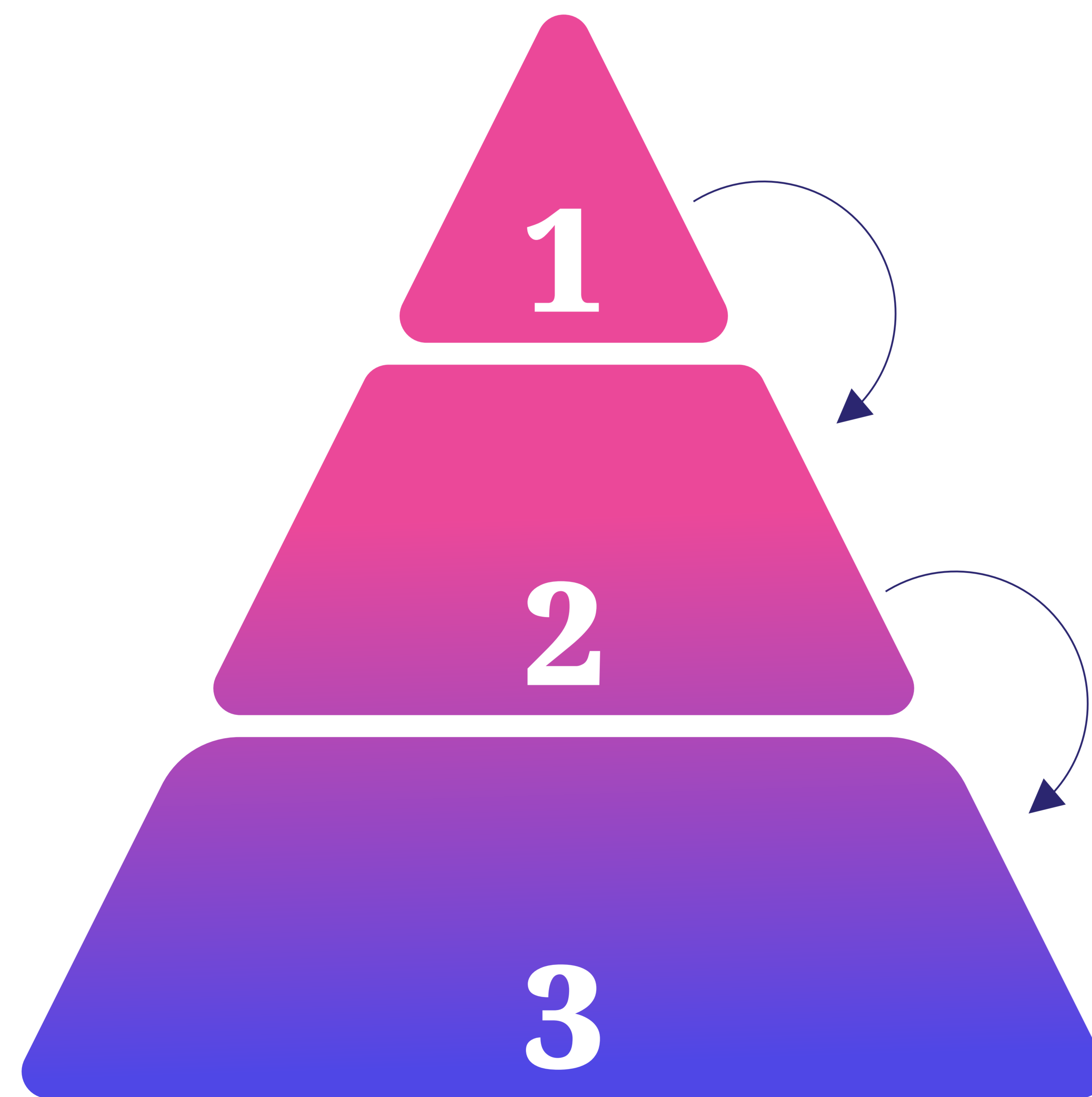
Structure your arguments so that they:

1. don’t overlap (mutually exclusive)
2. don’t leave out important aspects (collective exhaustive)
3. are on the same level of abstraction

4

Write as short and as simple as possible.

We are oversimplifying the concept as each point actually deserves its own e-book. For a deeper introduction, we recommend Barbara Minto's **"The Pyramid Principle"**



Dependencies to consider

I hate to say it... but it
all depends

UNKNOWN

04

Some of what follows may not apply perfectly to your line of work and that's expected. Here are the key dependencies to keep in mind.

Your audience's specifics

If your client or boss "likes to start with assumptions" or "doesn't like graphs", **working with their constraints is the most effective way of communicating with them.** The suggestions within the e-book are general best practices, not universal truths.

The context matters

Presenting to 100 people, writing a detailed report, and running an interactive meeting all required different approaches and the structure of your presentation should reflect that.

We've chosen to focus on what we know best: **presentations used in meetings** and reports. For verbal presentations in front of large audiences, there are other more specific guides on that out there.

The length

Whether you are giving a 30-minute project update or presenting a multi-year strategy in full-day workshop matters. **No matter how top-down you communicate, the latter tends to require more slides** to cover all topics sufficiently.

Naturally, the structure of the presentation should be adapted. Not all suggestions here are applicable to both very long and very short presentations.

Your style

Never forget what works best for you. If you can run an impactful 3-hour meeting with two slides and a whiteboard, go for it. Just remember, **sometimes the most important people can't attend the meeting.** The deck may be the only thing they see.

The overall deck structure

Innovation is great – but we don't need to innovate everything – innovate selectively

UNKNOWN

05

The deck structure: don't reinvent the wheel

To be true to the principles of structured communication the slide deck should follow some version of this:

- 1 Front-page
- 2 Executive summary
- 3 Table of content
- 4 One or multiple content sections
 - 4.1 Setting the stage
 - 4.2 Other sections
- 5 Next steps
- 6 Appendix

We will cover some of these more in-depth later, but there are a few important points to be made here.

Use the appendix to kill your darlings

Don't skip the appendix use it. As the people who created the slides, we naturally want to present everything. But **moving detailed analyses to the appendix keeps the main story focused** without throwing the work away. People can still explore the details if they want to.

First section: Setting the stage

Unless you have a good reason not to, the first content section should “set the stage”. When setting the stage, briefly cover: **“Situation”, “Complication”, “Question”** and/or **“Resolution”**. This can often be done in just 1-2 slides.

It’s key that this section directly or indirectly states:

- The background of the presentations
- How the presentation fits in – what is the purpose
- Important limitations or aspects that are out of scope

Sometimes ‘setting the stage’ is just the introduction and can be merged into the executive summary.

Should all PowerPoint presentations have all of these sections? Our take: almost always yes! The exception: presentations with less than 10 slides might not need them all. For everything else, the time it takes to add them is minimal compared to the impact they deliver.

Typical slide structure illustrated

The executive summary

Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you told them

CONSULTANT ON STRUCTURE

06

Getting the executive summary right

For any presentation used in a larger organization having an executive summary is a must. The reasons are simple:

- It gives senior, time-constrained people a chance to get the full picture in 1-2 minutes
- If well written, it ensures a coherent structure across the presentation
- It helps you present the content in the typical "elevator" style. A powerful tool to brief peers or senior colleagues.

Writing a good executive summary is harder than it looks. Consider what follows a starting point, the skill develops with practice.

Keep it short: If you need to use more than 1 page, it is too long. And don't cheat by reducing font size – keep it above 12pt

Start with the conclusion. What's the main takeaway – summarize it in 1-2 lines and start with it

- Link it to your overall structure. The content of the executive summary should reflect overall document structure and represent each section.
- Use short, precise language. Leave out anything that isn't directly tied to the conclusion.

Executive summary – visuals to consider

When it comes to visuals and the layout of an executive summary, do consider:

- Using bullets to visually support the structure
- Bolding **key words** or numbers.
- Use numbering or colors to link messages and sections
- Create a “table” simple structure reflecting the structure



Table of content

Show me some low hanging
fruits... quick wins – no need to
boil the ocean here

UNKNOWN

07

Don't waste the table of content page

A table of contents is the easiest structural improvement you can make to a deck.

Don't leave it out

A simple agenda slide should always be included.

Mention topics

Unlike the executive summary, the agenda slide simply states the topics covered in the presentation. The purpose is to give the reader an overview of what's included (and what's not).

Add the appendix

List what's in the appendix. This way the reader knows that it exists, and not to look for that content in the main presentation.

Start here

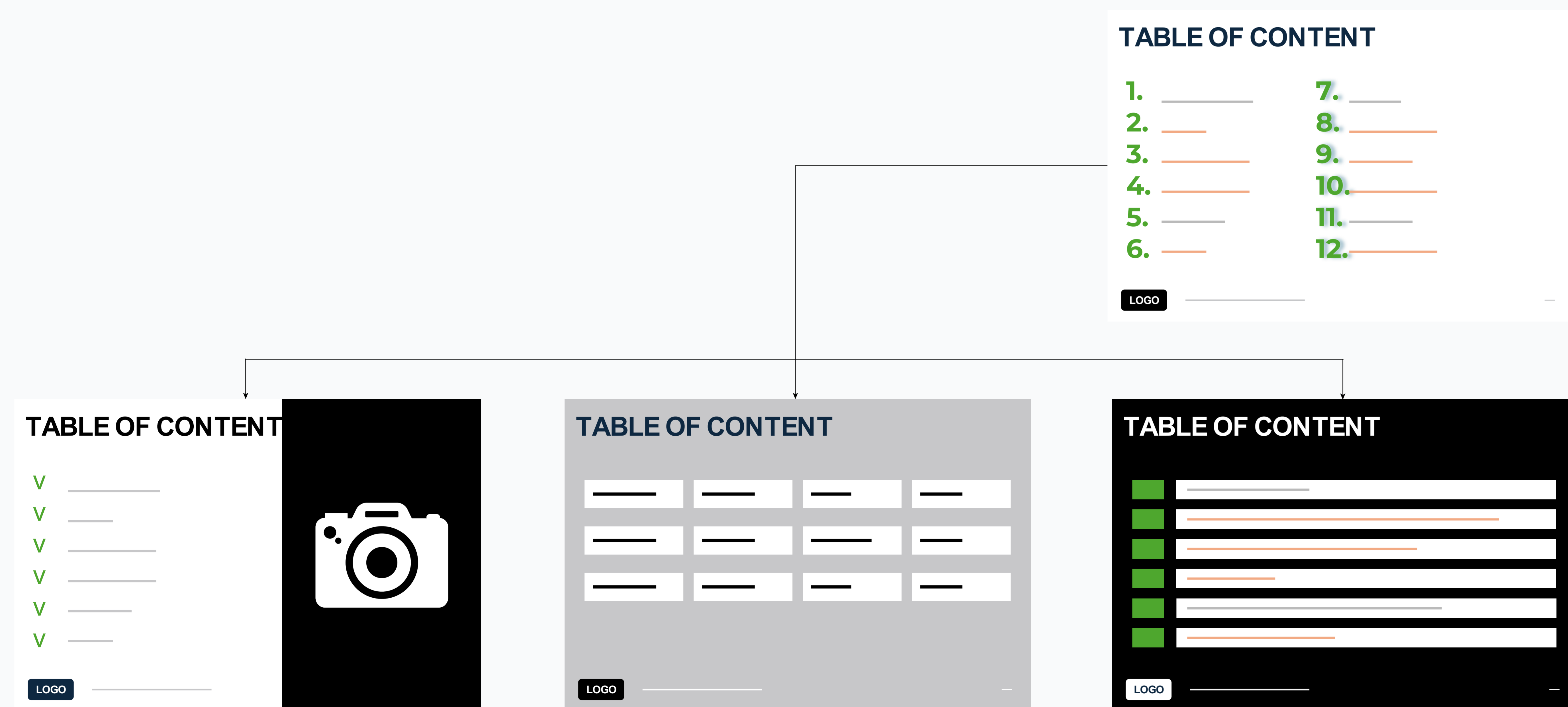
A trick to boost your productivity and ensuring better structure in your presentation is to start by writing the table of content.

Doing so provides an initial starting point and an overview of things you might have missed. Afterwards, try writing the executive summary to see if it makes sense, if something is missing or if it's in the wrong order.

... And make it visually stand out

The content page is a good page to apply an alternative visual layout instead of simply a few bullet points.

Below are some of the approaches we see people use successfully:



Structuring each section for impact

What's the so-what?
THINGS CONSULTANTS SAY

08

Structuring each section for impact (1/4)

During our time as management consultants and Private Equity professionals, many people provided interesting suggestions about how to best structure PowerPoint slides.

Here are the ones that are both high impact and easy to implement:

Titles need to align for a unified structure

For a content section of a presentation to work well, an impactful technique is to ensure that the **titles of the section align**. Done right, the titles in each section should form a coherent story without needing any other content.

This allows the reader to:

- 1 Skim the titles for the big picture
- 2 Dive into the slides they find most relevant

Structuring each section for impact (2/4)

Aim for one message per slide – splitting slides

A natural extension of the advice above is to strive for a content section with **one key message per slide**.

This way, your audience doesn't miss critical information, if they "just" skim through the presentation – as it is often the case. Having only one message per slide also gives you more room to support each of the messages.

If you have a hard time determining the message of a slide, consider splitting the slide (or move them to the appendix).

Structuring each section for impact (3/4)

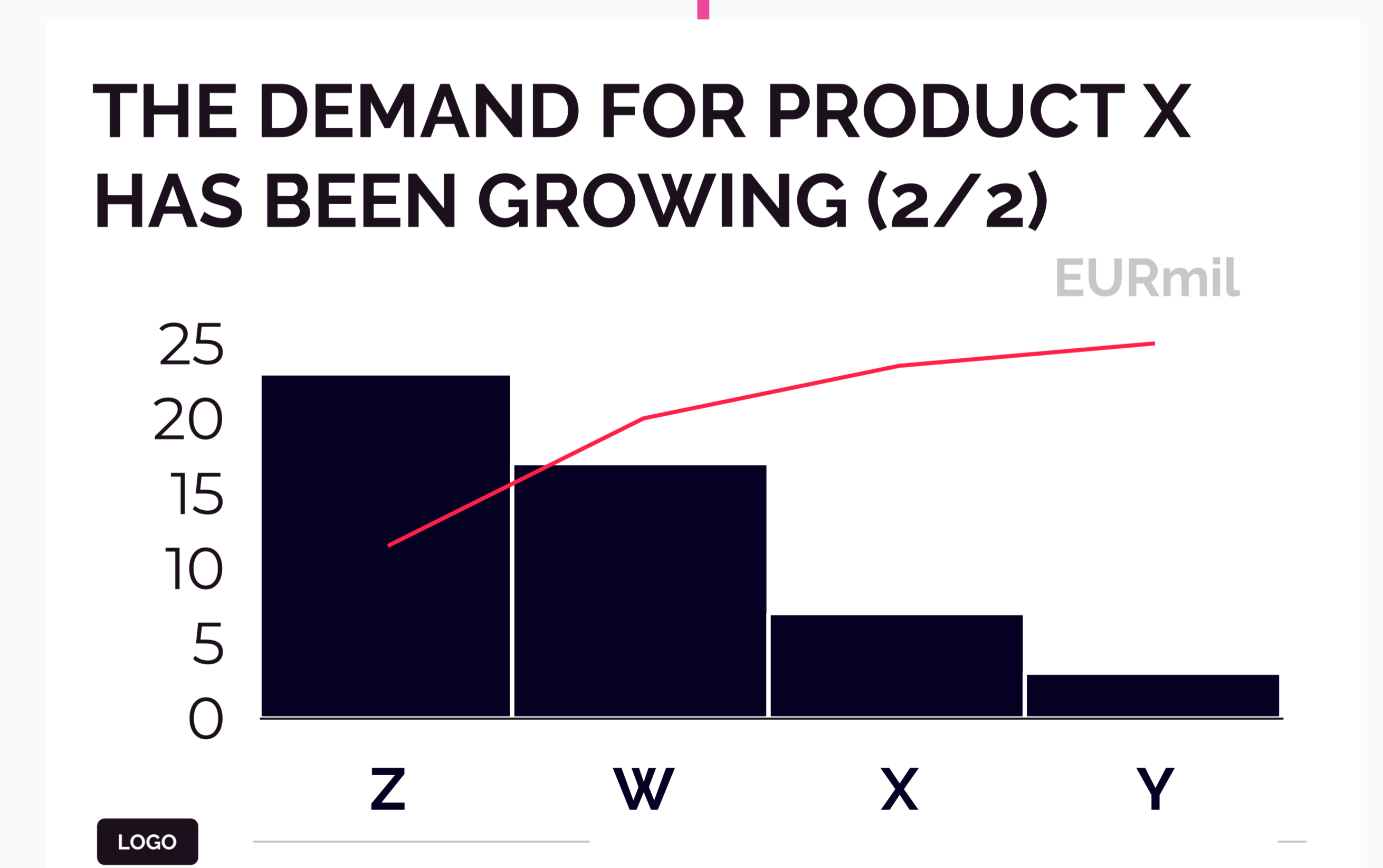
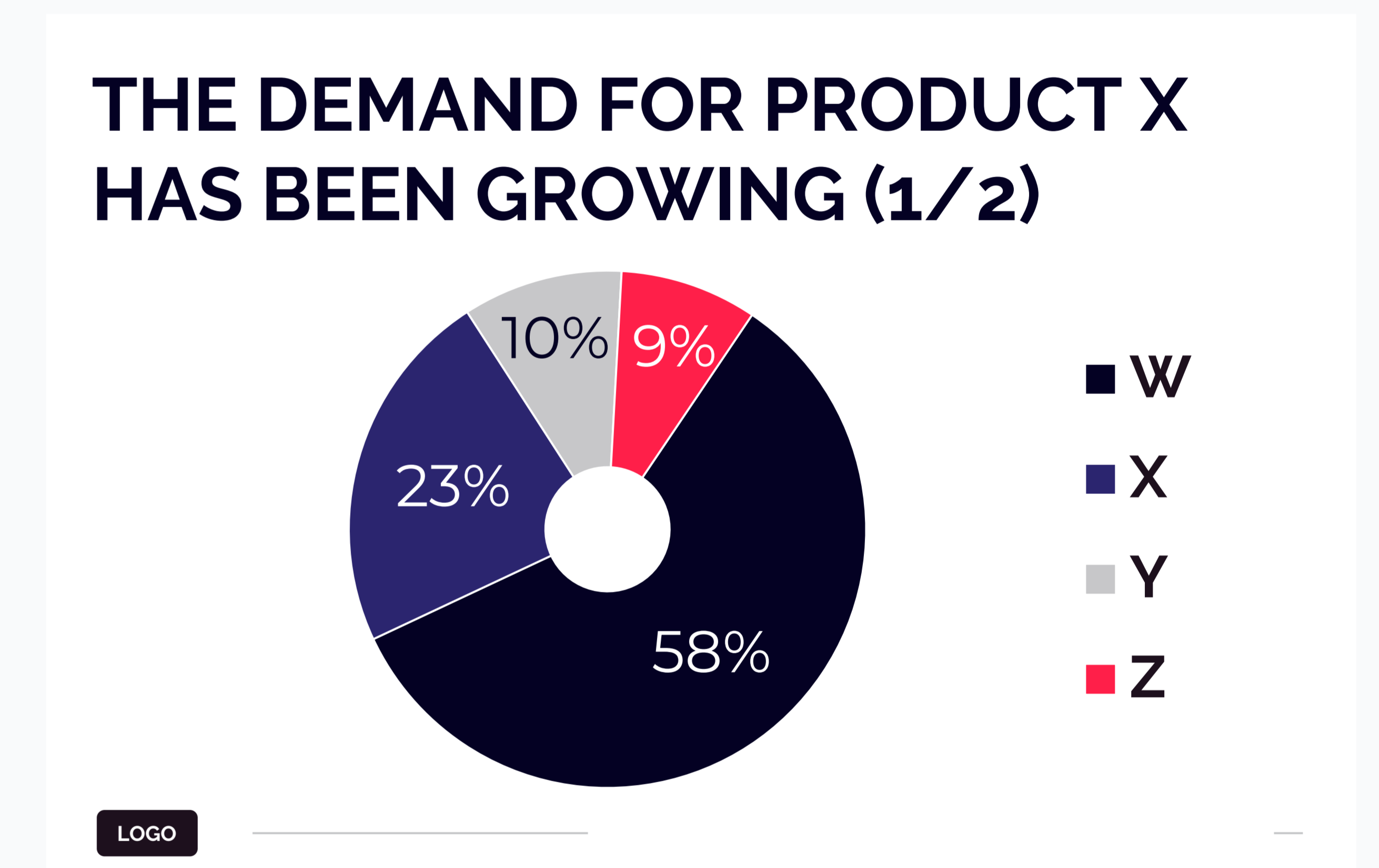
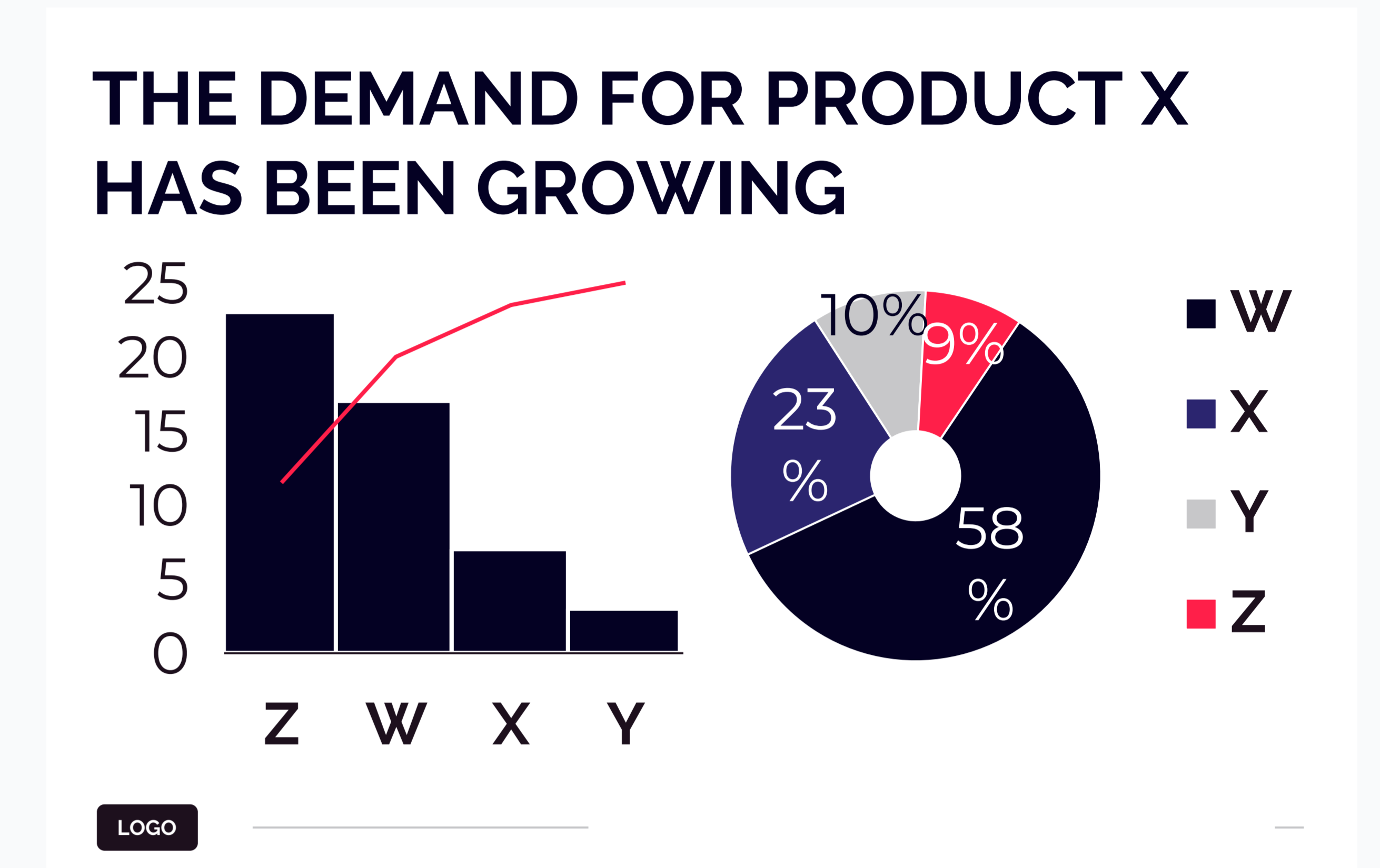
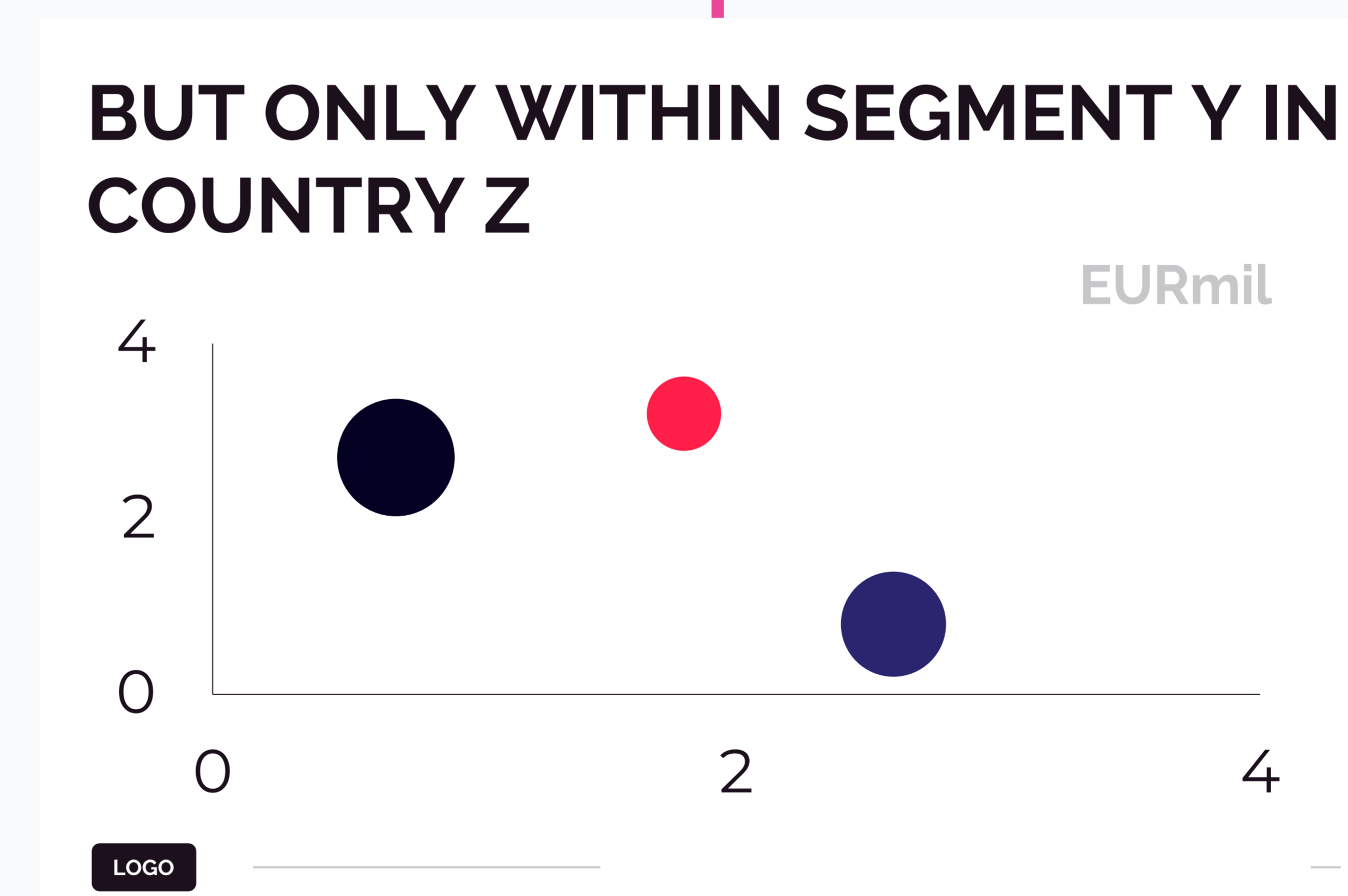
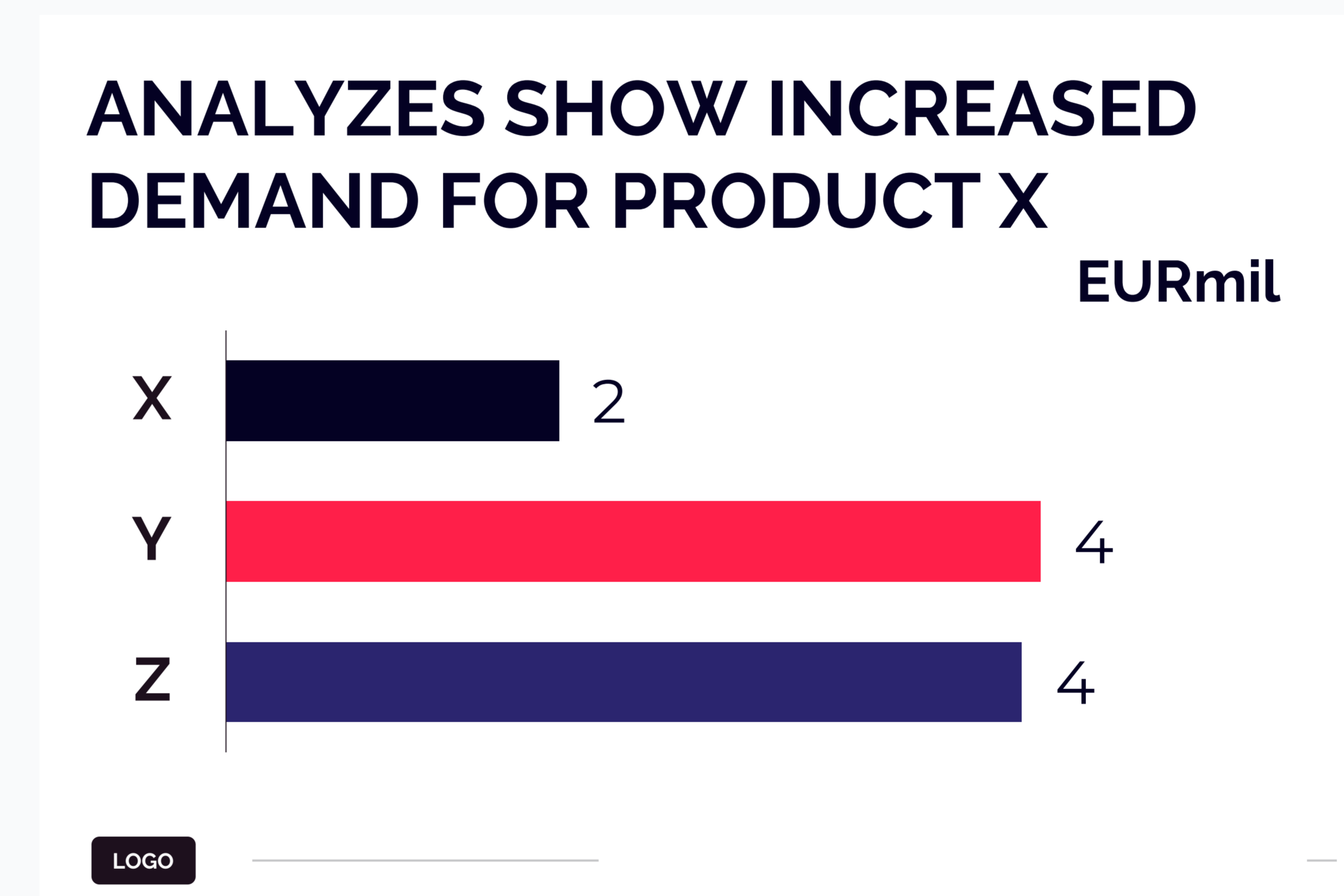
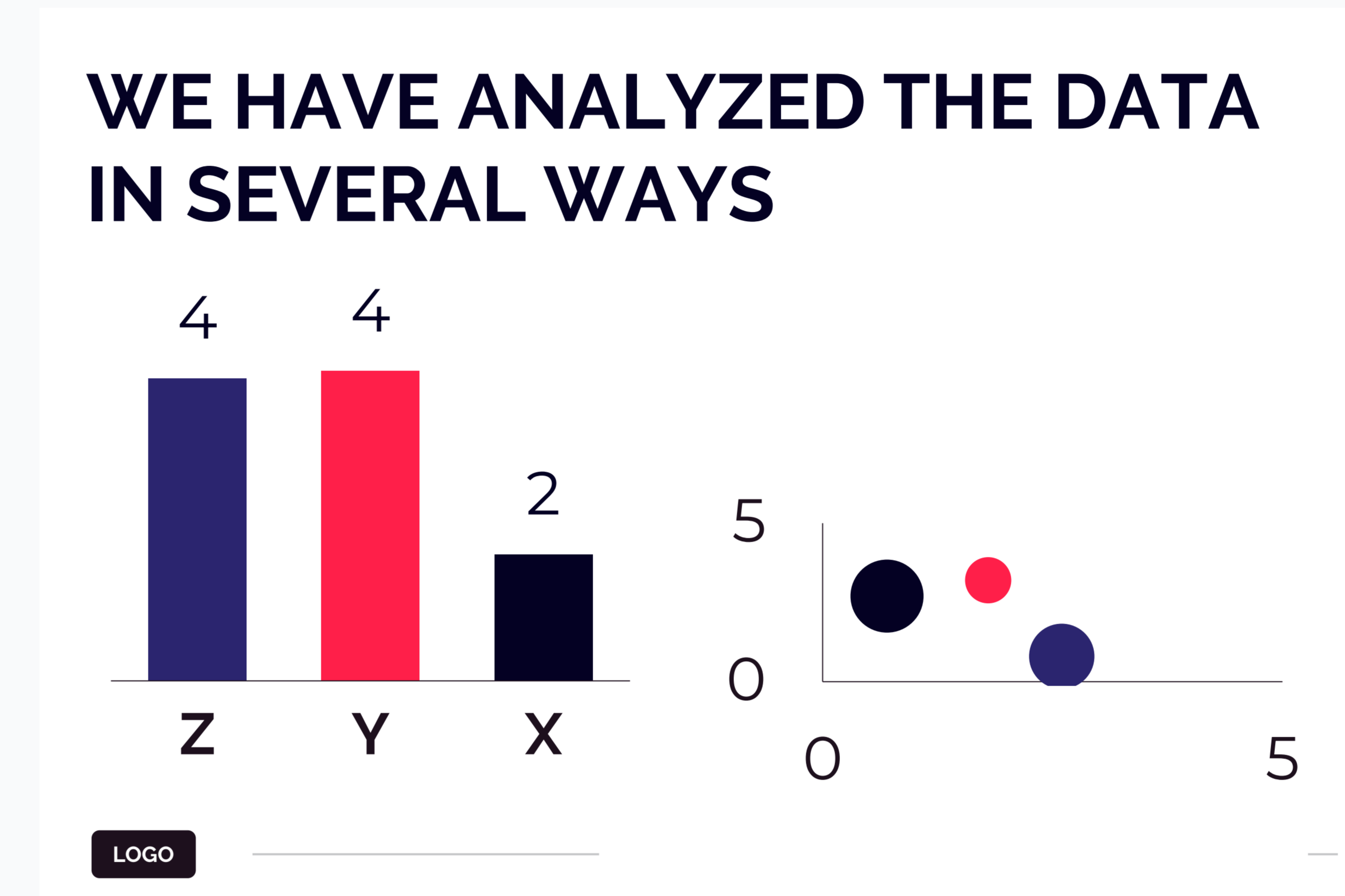
Using multiple slides to support one message.

Unlike cases where a slide needs to be split into multiple slides to support several messages, sometimes a single message requires multiple slides to land.

There are two ways to handle this:

1 Split the message across two slides, with each carrying part of the narrative. *For example:*
 Slide 1: "The demand for product X has been growing..."
 Slide 2: "...But only within segment Y in country Z"

2 Repeat the title on both and number them. *For example:*
 Slide 1: "The demand for product X has been growing (1/2)"
 Slide 2: "The demand for product X has been growing (2/2)"



Structuring each section for impact (4/4)

Consider splitting a section – using breakers

Content sections can grow long. **The longer they get**, the more focus they demand from the reader, and **the more impact they lose**.

We suggest reducing the length of larger segments by removing slides or splitting them into multiple sections.

A **visually distinct slide** signals to the reader that something new is starting. These are called breaker slides; the next page has some examples.

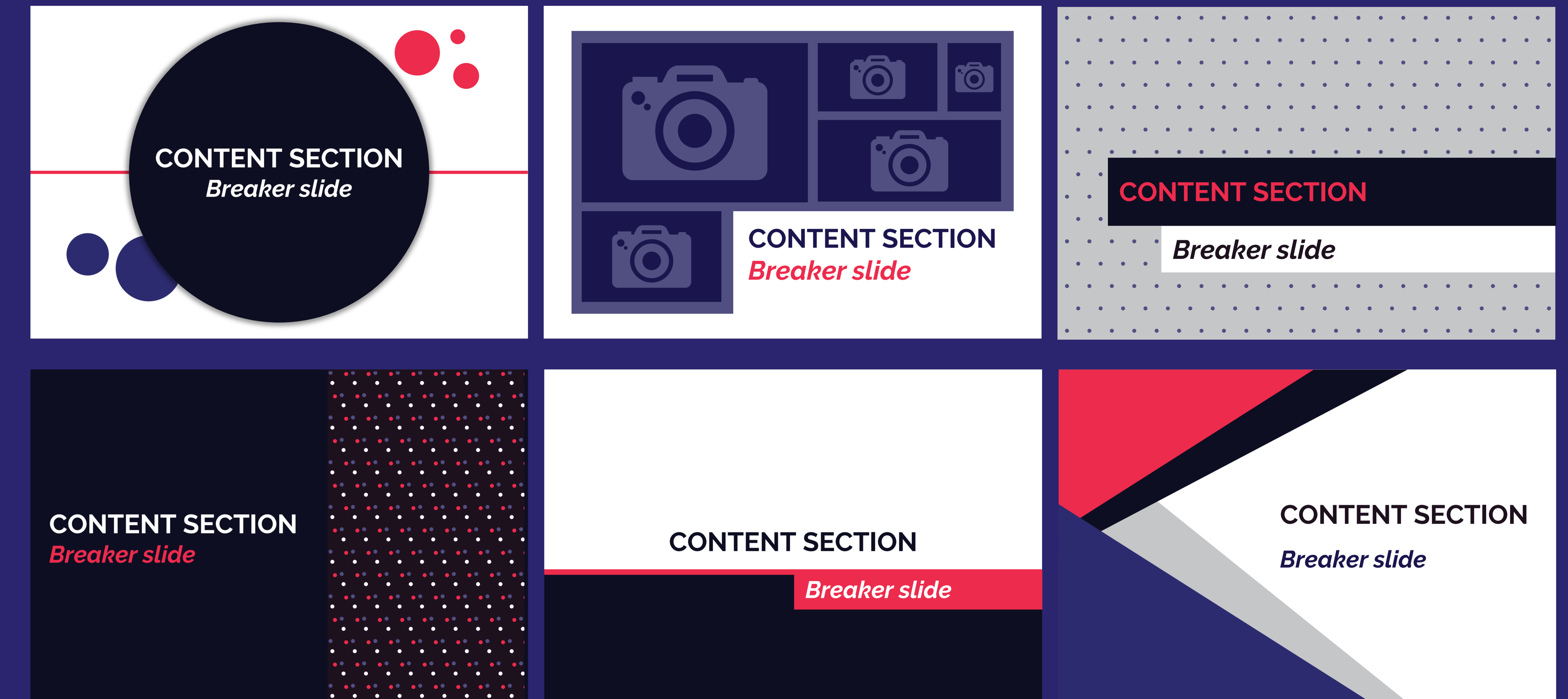
Consider making an executive summary for large sections

When splitting isn't an option, you can open the section with a mini executive summary to increase readability.

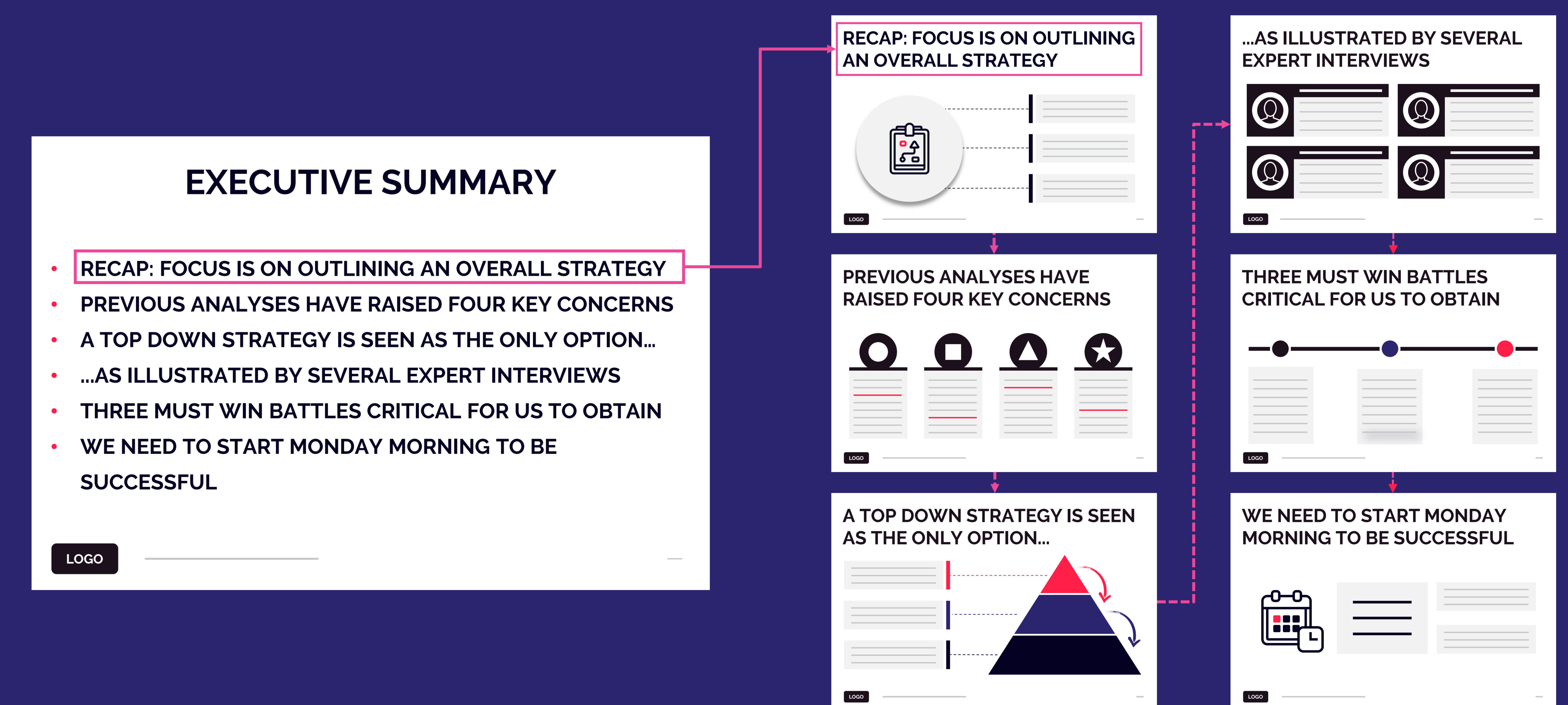
If you followed our title advice from earlier, writing such a summary can be done by simply copying the titles of each page into a single page.

Note that this only makes sense if the presentation contains multiple content sections and the segment in question is at least 5-10 slides long.

Examples of creative, visual breakers



Example of an executive summary



Structuring each slide for impact

If it is not on slides it does not exist

UNKNOWN PARTNER

09

Structuring each slide to be top down (1/3)

In this section we zoom in on individual slides and suggest different ways to improve structure for increased impact.

The titles should synthesize the content of the slide – the key message

This is the most well-known piece of advice, but also the **most essential for ensuring effective communication in PowerPoint.**

The title of a slide should synthesize the key message or takeaway, **NOT the topic.**

This is the core of structured communication in PowerPoint. By using **"action titles"** you let the reader **save substantial time** by letting them determine if they want to invest additional time by exploring the slide further or move on.

Introducing action titles is one of the highest impact changes you can make to a slide, and one of the most frequently neglected.

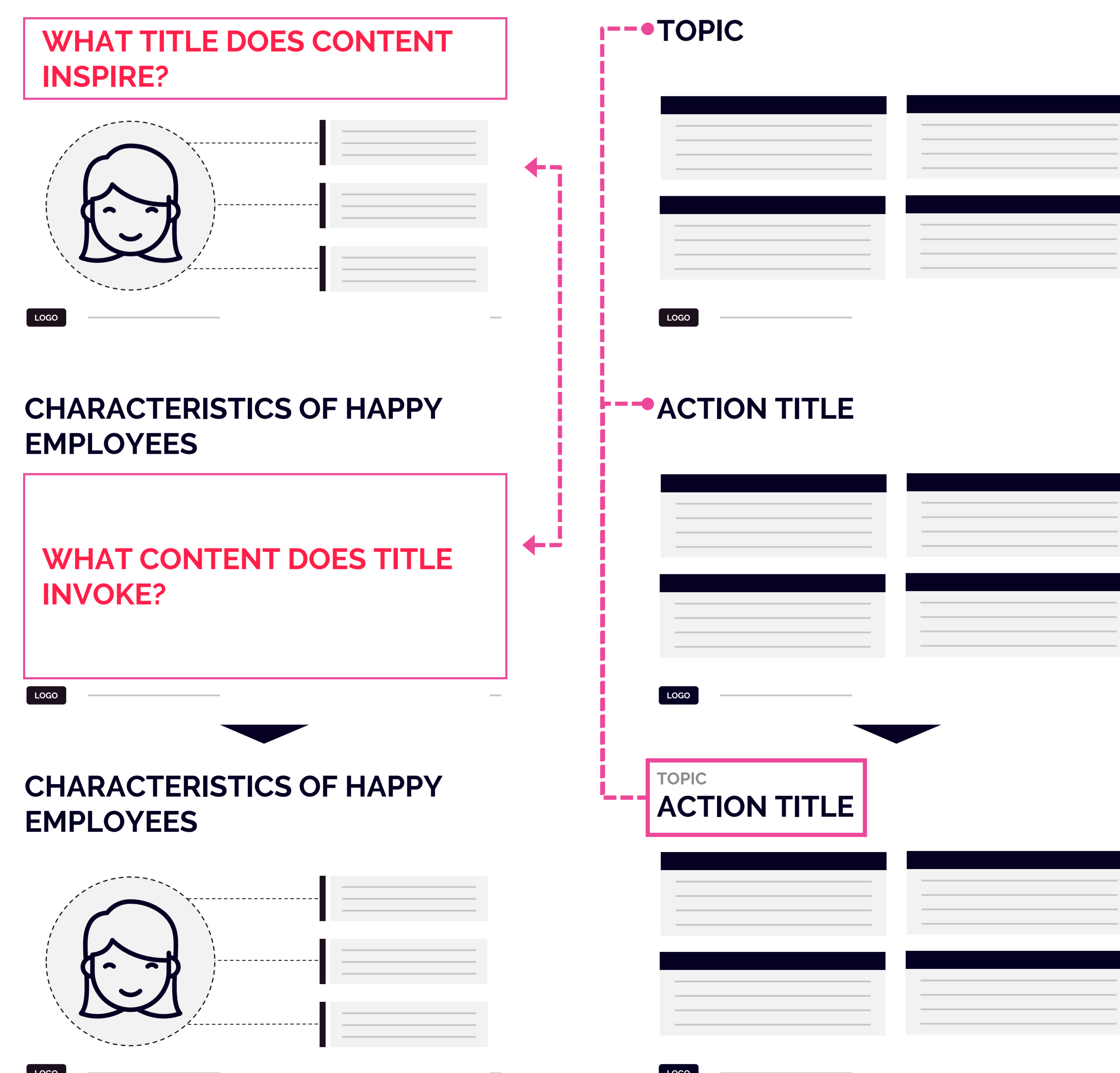


Structuring each slide to be top down (2/3)

It should be easy to recreate the title from the slide content

Action titles only work if they're consistent with the **actual content of the slide**. A common mistake is writing action titles that sound good but aren't directly derived from what's on the slide.

A well-structured slide compels different people to write relatively similar action titles, independently of each other. If that's not the case, consider restructuring the content of your slide.



Supporting the action title with a topic headline

As actions titles may be confusing to some readers, a combination of an action title and explicitly mentioning the "topic" at the top of the slide is good middle ground.

When doing so, make sure that the action title remains the largest and most dominant element.

Structuring each slide to be top down (3/3)

Looking beyond the title there are several other things to do to improve the structure of individual slides.

Low content slides – two levels of communication will do

For slides with limited content, a few bullet points or a single simple graph, structure is relatively straightforward.

You're working with two levels of communication:

- 1 the title that contains the main message, and
- 2 the slide content that is synthesized as the message in the title.

We can do plenty to make such slides stand out visually. The structure of most of these works well if they have a good action title.

Medium/high content slides – aim for three or more layers

It's more complicated for content heavy slides with substantial amounts of text, detailed or multiple graphs and several pictures.

For slides like these we recommend at least three layers of communication:

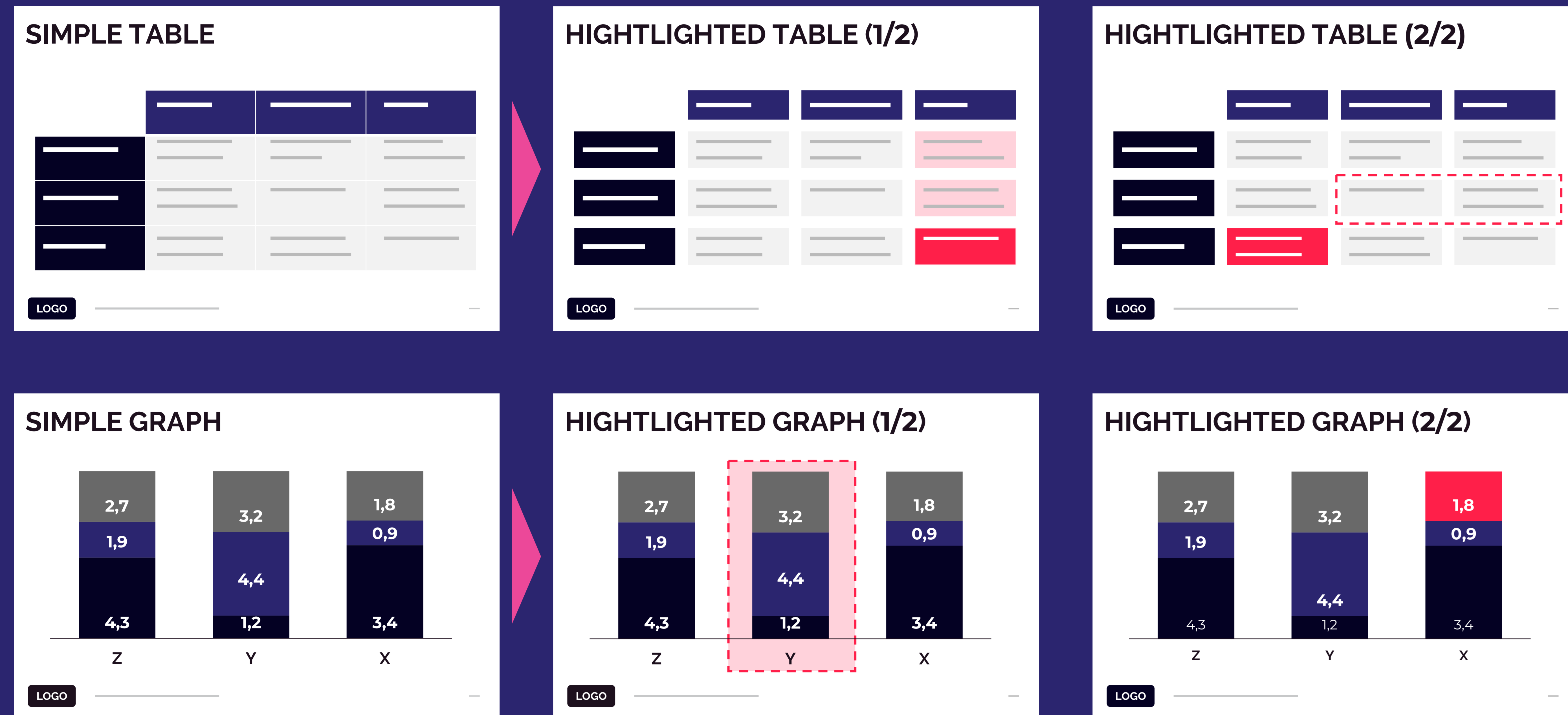
- The title – the highest level
- The data/detailed text – the lowest level
- A summary/comment/takeaway level which is derived from the lowest level and then presented within the slide

In practice the third layer can be shown in different ways:

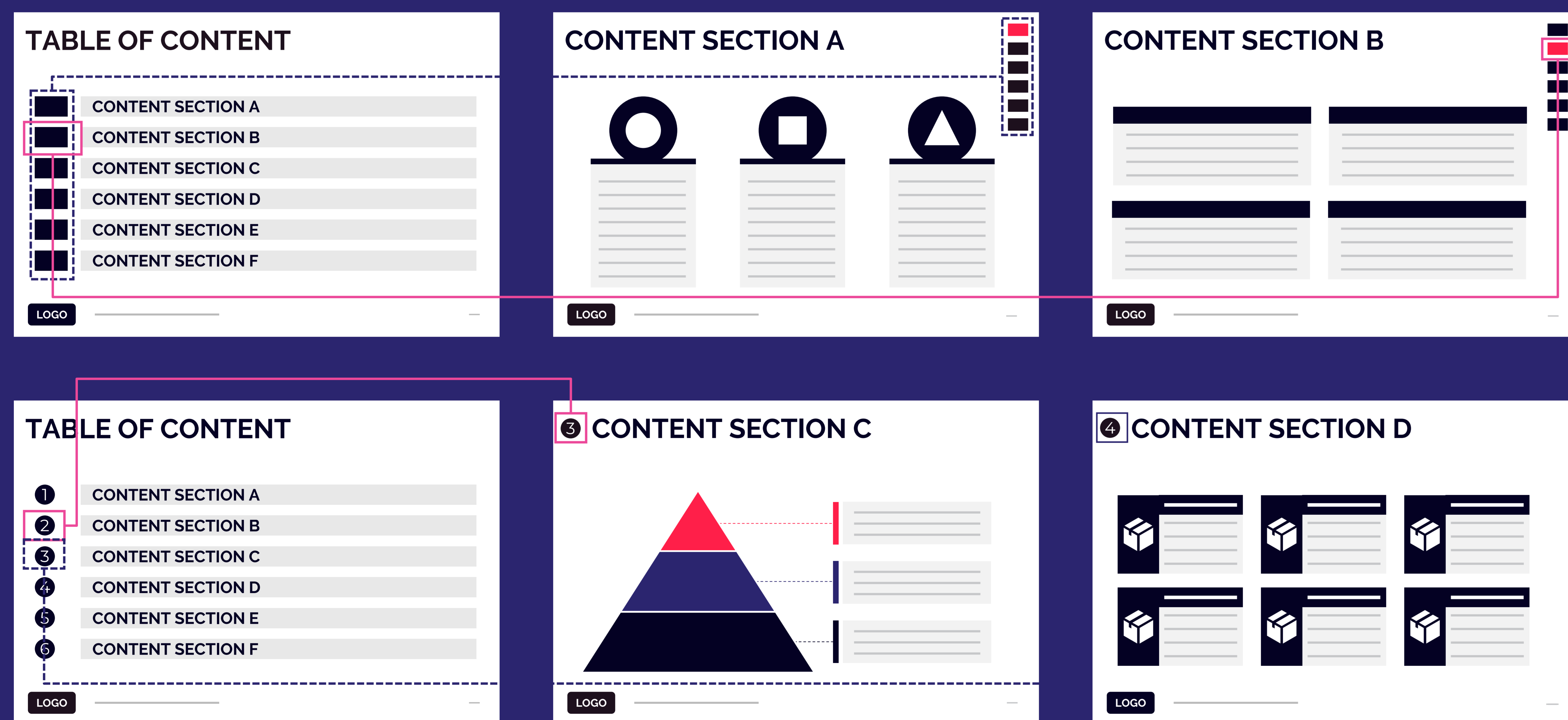
- 1 as comments laid out in a separate part of the slide,
- 2 as sub-headlines for each text section,
- 3 as the first column in table-structured slide,
- 4 as a combination of the above.

Some of the most frequent ways of applying these three layers of communication are demonstrated on the following page.

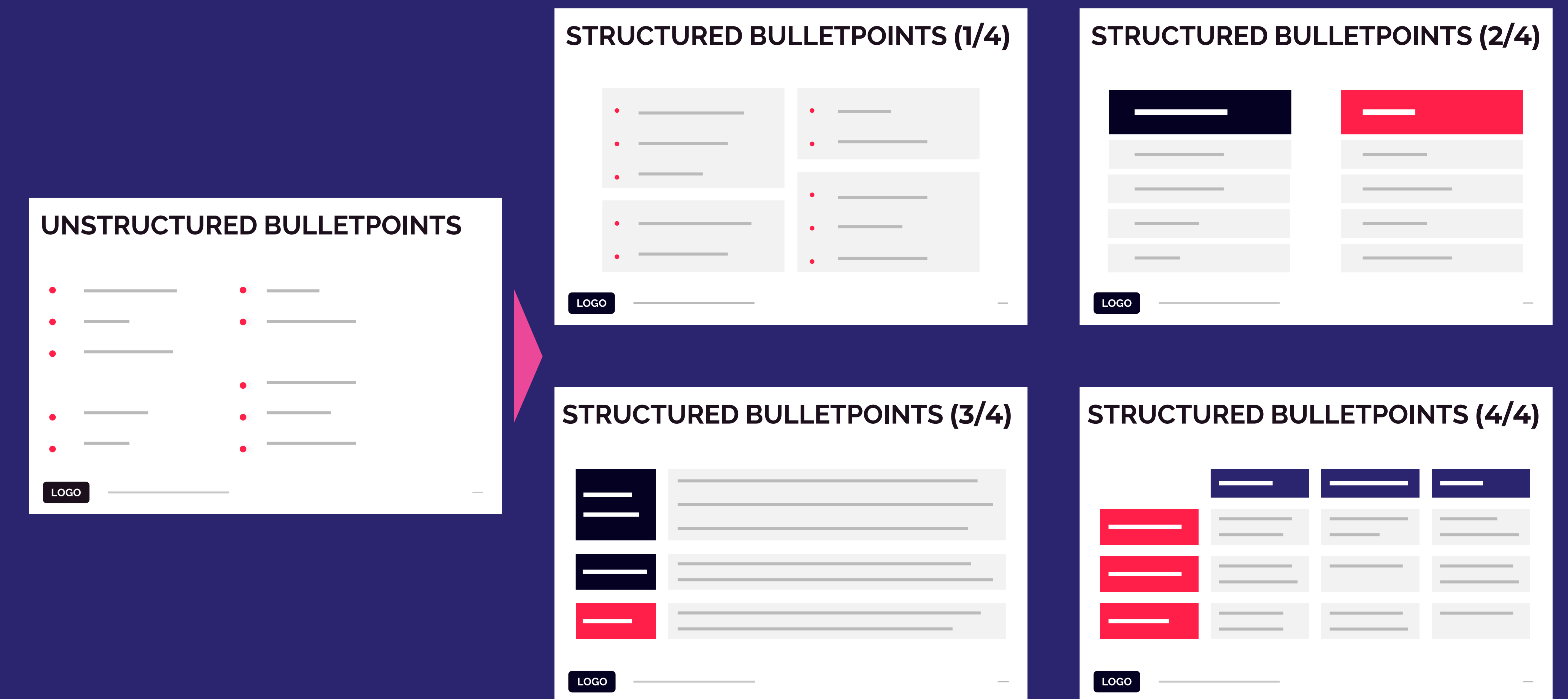
1 Highlighting specific data points in graphs or tables



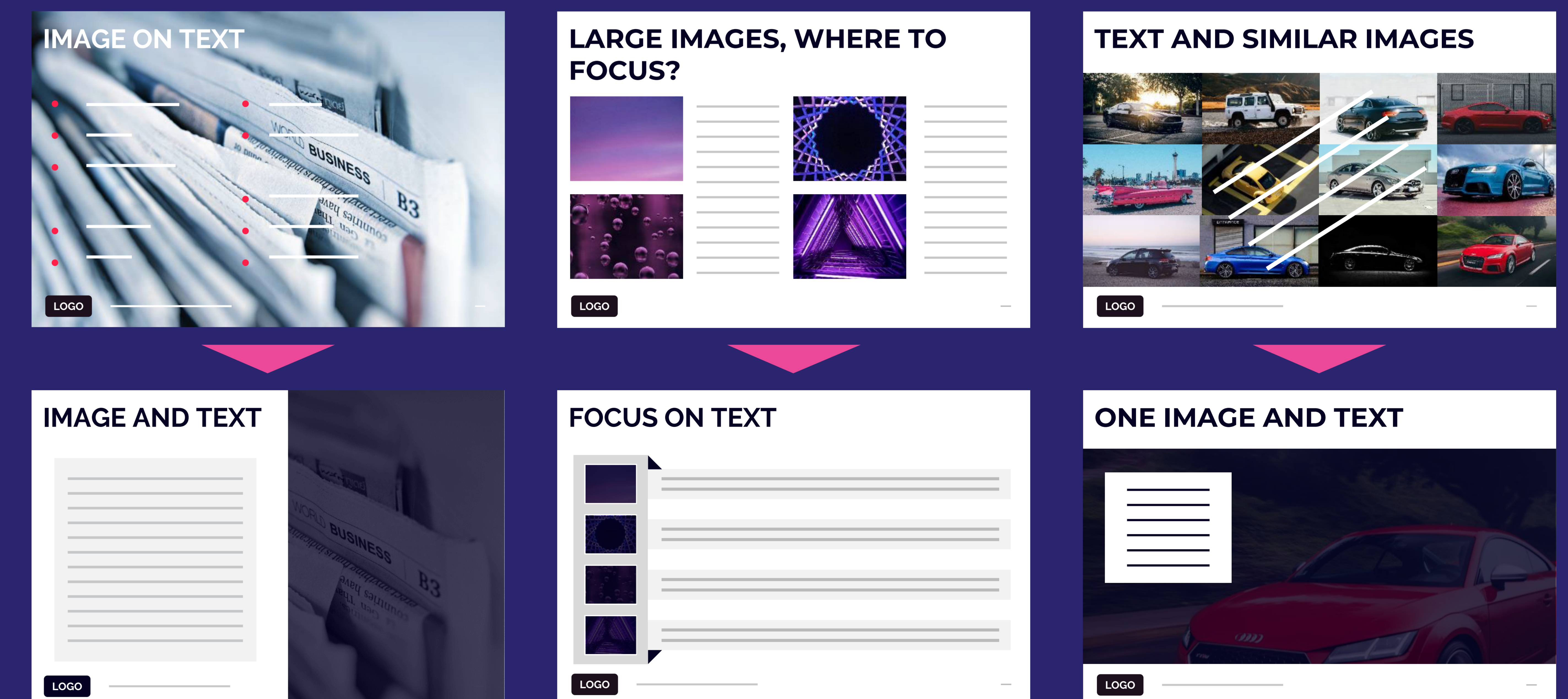
2 Using visuals next to the title to reference the index



3 Introducing simple "table" structures instead of just relying on bullet points



4 Limiting the use of pictures



5 Using icons and other visuals to support your messages

UNFORMATTED CONTENT

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

NUMBERS AND ICONS

ICONS AND SHAPES

ICONS AND BOXES

ICON AND IMAGE

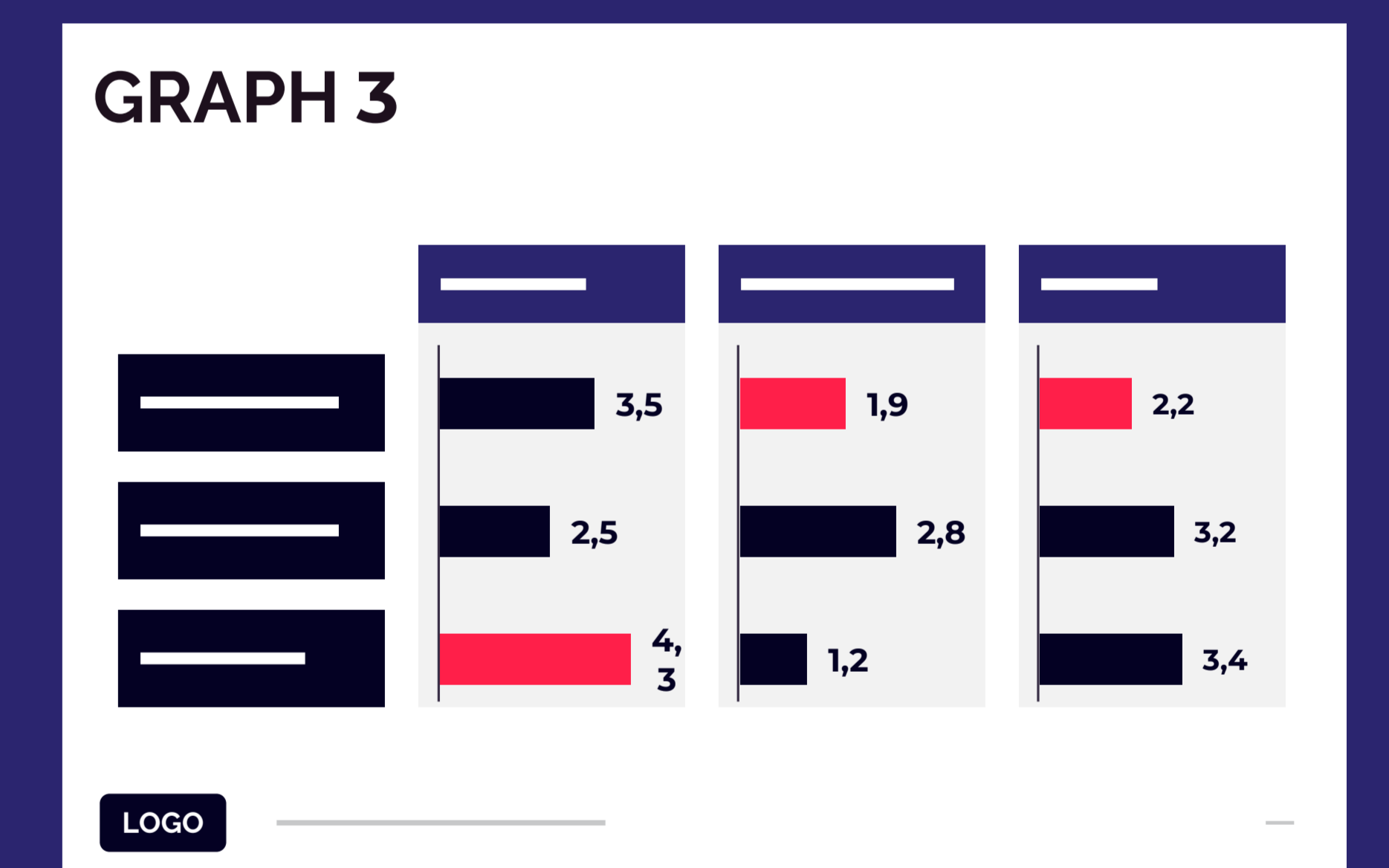
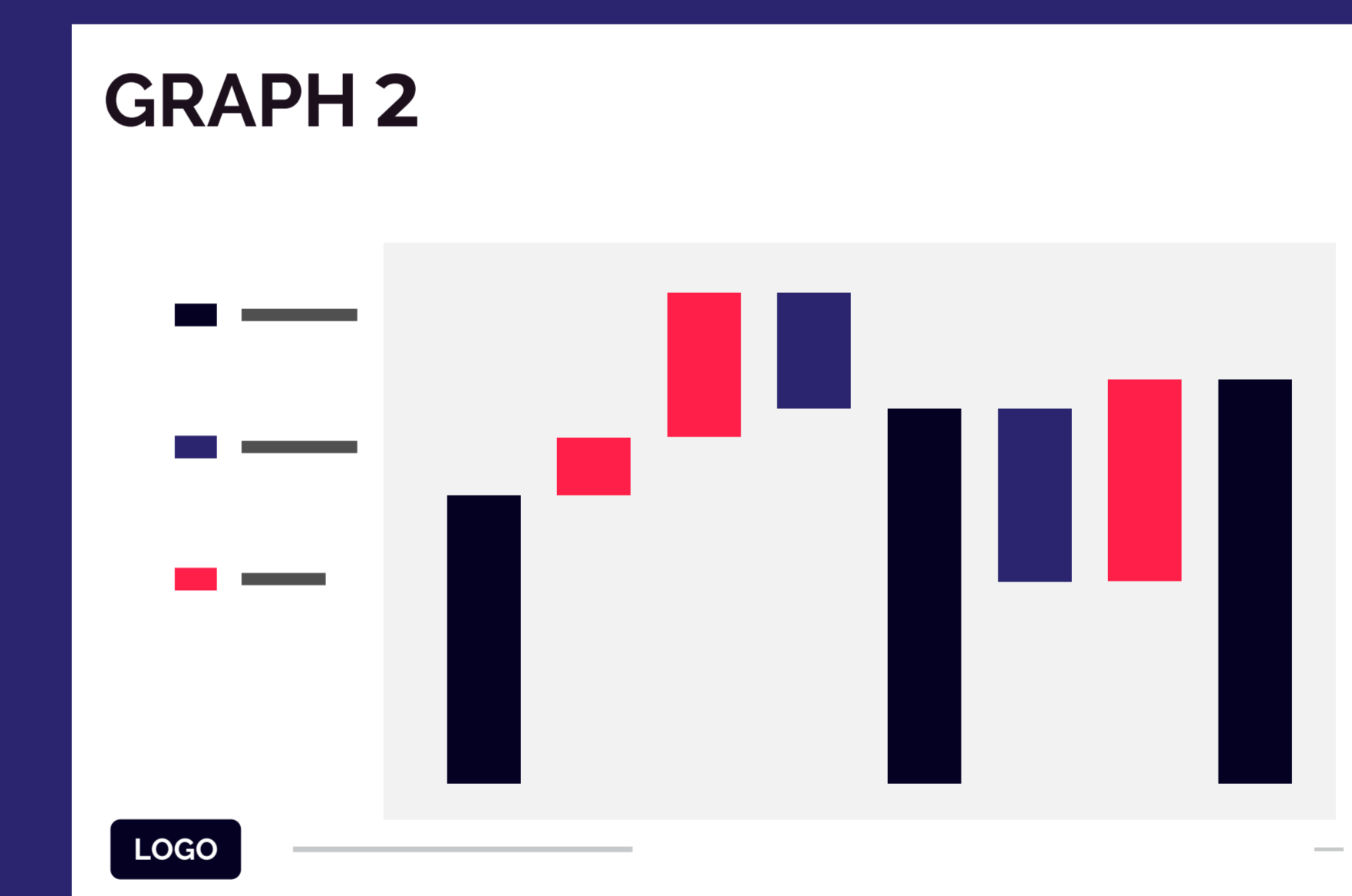
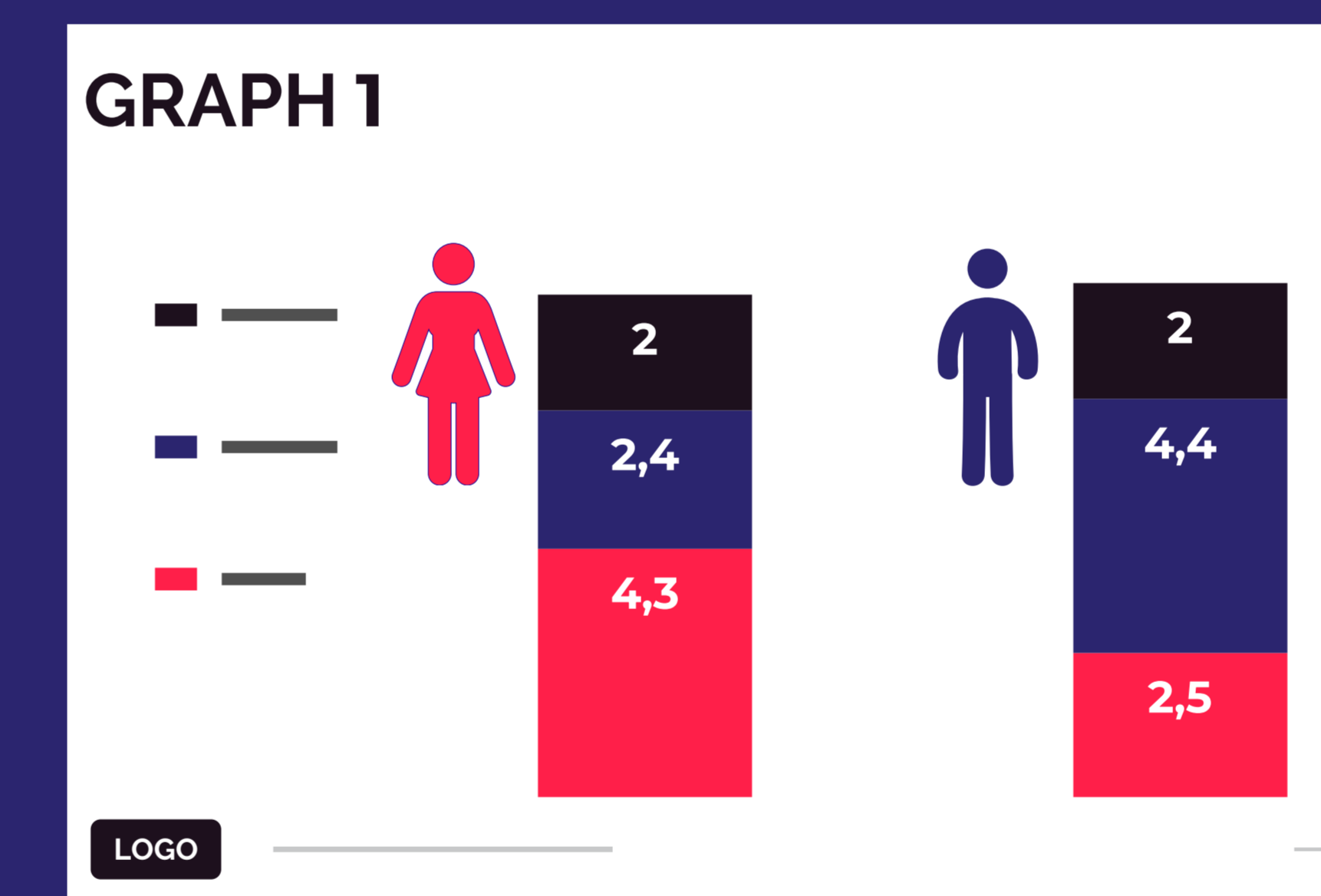
6 Using graphs instead of tables

TABLE 1

TABLE 2

	+	+	-
	-	-	+
	+	-	-

TABLE 3



Next steps

Great workshop guys, but
what are the next steps?

TEAM MEMBER

10

Never forgetting the next steps

All presentations come to an end. When it comes to business meetings, how these end heavily influences their impact.

Investing time to summarize decisions, outline next steps and delegate responsibilities pays dividends.

Though doing so is often a matter of habit and organizational culture, your deck structure can help to foster the practice.

Including a single slide and having it on the agenda is a good start.

Three simple questions are all you need:

- What did we agree on and which actions?
- Who is responsible for what?
- What's the timeline/deadline?

Structural checklist

- Is the front-page meaningful and including the date and topic covered?
- Do you have a one page executive summary?
- Do you have a table of content?
- Does the table of content include the appendix?
- Have you moved unnecessary content to the appendix?
- Are sections clearly separated by breaker slides?
- Are the breaker slides visually different than the normal slides?
- Can you follow the story of each section by reading the titles alone?
- Do you have one message per slide?
- If a section exceeds 10 slides, does it open with a short summary?
- Do all your slides have action titles?
- Is it possible to "recreate" these action titles when studying the content of the slide?
- Are your slides structured for impact?
- Have you used visuals to strengthen the impact of your slides?
- Did you remove unnecessary pictures?
- Did you use visuals to strengthen the readability of tables and graphs?
- Did you consider replacing bullets with a simple table structure?
- Do you have a next steps page?



AI-Powered Presentation Management Platform.

Find your best slides in seconds, or create new ones with AI - always up-to-date, always on-brand.