COMMUNICATING IDEAS USING VISUAL AIDS

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Summary

Effective communication can mean the difference between a good idea and a failed plan. The information needs to have a long-lasting impact on its audience. Studies have demonstrated the power of the human brain to interpret visual information faster than listening or reading. Visual aids are an important tool for helping people grasp information quickly and effectively.[1]

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What Are Visual Aids?

Visual aids represent an idea, concept or information through two-dimensional visual means. Some examples of visual aids are objects or models, photographs, diagrams, sketches, video or infographics like maps, tables, charts or graphs.

> For more information on videos, see the *Using Videos for Plan Implementation* fact sheet.

Examples of visual aids
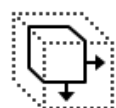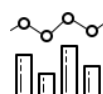

Models	Sketches
Pictures	Maps
Graphs	Charts

Figure 1 | Visual Aids
Adapted from (Icons8 LLC. 2020. Free Design Resources and Software. 2020. Accessed January 16, 2020 from https://icons8.com.)

How Do Visual Aids Help Communicate Ideas?

Visual communication can play a powerful role in sharing information or concepts. Visual aids can enhance presentation, aid in memorization, concentrate the audience on an idea and avoid distraction, and provide a form of repetition that provides clarity.[2]

Visual aids can be a photograph of the subject matter or even a diagram or sketch. When discussing complicated information, visual aids can explain the concept in smaller parts that gradually build the bigger picture.

The use of visual aids will make the information being presented more interesting and aatractive to the audience which helps focus their attention.

How Do Visual Aids Relay Information to the Audience?

Humans are attracted to physical representations of ideas like pictures, shapes or colourful imagery. The use of visual aids will make the information being presented more interesting and attractive to the audience which helps focus their attention. Visual aids can also reinforce the text or information to help the audience remember. You can think of them as a form of repetition that solidifies the information into the minds of the audience.[3]

Which Audiences Should Be Included?

When communicating information to the community it is important to consider a wide range of audiences. Members of any community are diverse in age, gender, familial & societal roles and learning preferences. For this reason, choosing multiple visual aids to demonstrate the same idea may be beneficial. Continual feedback during community events and presentations will ensure that appropriate visual aids are being used.

How Do You Use Colours and Fonts?

The design of any visual communication affects how we perceive its value. Advertisers have known this for a long time. Consider the power of packaging, labelling, logos and general marketing. The choice of font and colour is part of the communications strategy.[4]

Colour psychology is a part of daily life. Just think of traffic lights. Green means go! In Disney films black is a colour associated with villains whereas blue or green was worn by heroines and heroes, creating positive associations.[5]

There are many trends in colour selection which can be difficult to keep up with. The colour wheel can help to understand primary, secondary and tertiary colours. This then informs how colours can work together.

The Colour Wheel

Understanding the colour wheel is helpful for understanding how to harness the power of colour in communication. Specifically, colour can be useful to:

1. Create contrast by making an object stand out against its surroundings.

2. Complement information with a similar colour.

3. Group 2 things by using different colours.

4. Create a sense of amounts by contrasting colour with size differences.[7]
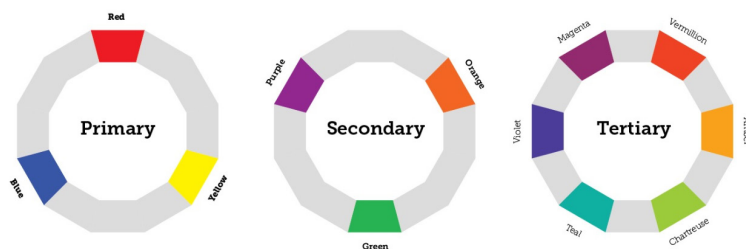

Figure 2 | *Primary, secondary and tertiary colours of the colour wheel.*
Source (Nediger, Midori. "Colour Wheel". Digital Image. *Vennage.com.* How to Pick Colors to Captivate Readers and Communicate Effectively. February 1, 2018. Accessed November 15, 2019 from https://venngage.com/blog/how-to-pick-colors/)

Fonts

Fonts can have a similar impact as they carry visual messages. Some are meant for easy reading whereas others may be intentionally strange for specific purposes like Halloween. There are decorative fonts and ones intended to emphasize a headline.[8]

Choosing the right font is important. Fonts should be legible and readable which means that the letters need to be easily identified and the words spaced properly. This makes it easier to read the text. The size and type of font, including boldness, can help make headings and main points stick out. This creates a visual hierarchy through choice of font and its size or relative thickness.[9]
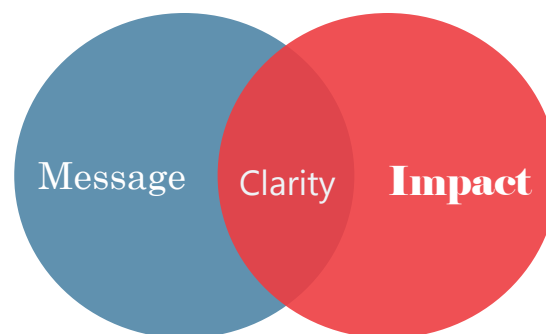
Figure 3 | *Striking the balance.*

Here are five steps to selecting the right font for your message:

1. **Think About Your Content**
   a. What is the purpose of the material?
   b. What is the length and structure of the text?
   c. Where will the information be presented? Report? Poster? Presentation?

2. **Choose a Body Font That Is Readable**

3. **Choose a Few Header Fonts That Add Some Style**
   a. How can the header add more character and draw the reader's attention?

4. **Find a Header Font That Pairs With Your Body Font**
   a. Are the fonts similar enough to remain consistent?
   b. Are the fonts different enough to create an appropriate contrast?

5. **Create Visual Hierarchy By Varying Size and Weight**
   a. Is your font large enough to read at arm's length?
   b. Does your font overwhelm the page?
   c. Could the use of bold or italics add some pizzazz?[10]

What Are Infographics?

An infographic is a combination of information supported by graphics. That simple, or is it? The main concept is rather easy: written or numerical information is presented and supported with visual elements that support the information. There are many different types that can be used, and each will depend on the information that is being presented.

The eight most popular types of infographics are:

1. Statistical infographics present numerical values using fonts, icons or charts.

2. Informational infographics present written information but within sections for easy reading.

3. Timeline infographics highlight important dates with emphasizing icons, photos or labels.

4. Process infographics highlight steps that illustrate how a process works.

5. Geographic infographics use maps to represent location-based data or compare regions.

6. Comparison infographics provide unbiased information about two or more things to compare.

7. Hierarchical infographics use space, flows or sections to show order of importance or command.

8. List infographics use numbers, icons, bullets or flows to display generally related information.[11]

What Is a Pictogram?

Pictograms repeat icons in a single line or grid. Each icon will have a numerical value that can be determined as needed and should be communicated on the pictogram. The main purpose is to make data more exciting and easier to remember. Some examples of using pictograms are when visually showing ratings or scores, a project status update, tallied information or instead of a bar chart.[12]

Pictograms are great to use when the information is text or number heavy because they break up the information with easier to digest icons that leave a lasting visual impact.

General Rules for Selecting Pictograms

1. Use simple yet meaningful icons that are easily recognizable.

2. Use shades of the same colour rather than different colours to show proportions or percentages.

3. Maintain rows with commonly used numbers like five or ten for easy reading.[13]

What Are Charts?

When communicating information visually, charts are often used to separate information into parts that are easier to read and understand. Charts can be a form of infographic when they combine data, text and visuals to help explain complex concepts, strengthen the information and make it memorable.[14]

Selecting the Right Chart

The first step is to determine what the information is trying to visually suggest. Will it inform, compare, show change, organize or show a relationship between information?[15]

The following are examples of how to communicate various information using different charts:

1. *Inform:* Icon charts use large and bold font to display information.

2. *Compare:* Bar/column or bubble charts use length or size to show differences and pie charts compare individual parts to a whole.

3. *Change:* Line or area charts show change over time.

4. *Organize:* Table charts use sections to organize information in columns or rows.

5. *Relationships:* Scatter plot charts show the distribution and relationship between data sets.[16]

INFORM   COMPARE   CHANGE   ORGANIZE   RELATIONSHIP

Figure 4 | *Selecting the right chart.*
Source (Nediger, Midori. "Chart Selection." *Vennage*. How to Choose the Right Charts for Your Infographic. May 15, 2019. Accessed November 15, 2019 from https://venngage.com/blog/how-to-choose-the-best-charts-for-your-infographic/)

Final Thoughts

These are just some of the many ways to use visual aids to display information. Visual aids help simplify information through hierarchy and separation while making it interesting for the audience to engage with. These simple approaches help to communicate ideas effectively and make them more memorable. There are many more options out there. See the reference list for additional resources. Also, be creative and invent ones that works best for your situation.

Further Reading

How to Use Visual Communication and Why it Matters by Allison Boatman

The article explains the effectiveness of using visual aids to improve comprehension and retention, in plain langauge. There are practical examples included which show how these tactics are effective.

https://www.techsmith.com/blog/why-visual-communication-matters/

15+ Beginner-Friendly List Infographics Templates by Sara McGuire

These are great resources that are free to use and will either provide useful templates or offer some ideas. In addition, the website is user friendly and has other links to even more resources.

https://venngage.com/blog/infographic-templates-free/

Comprehensive Community Planning Training Program Materials by Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources

As part of the training program materials there are numerous other resources for communicating information effectively. Some examples are the use of word clouds or the sustainability wheel. There is also a communication strategy template that could be applied to multiple situations.

Endnotes

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