

Effective Communication Through Visual Storytelling

BY JONATHAN BABCOCK AND REBECCA PARKER

Communication is an ever-evolving art. From the earliest cave paintings and sagas passed on by word of mouth, to printed media, computing, and social media, the way we communicate has been in a constant state of flux, tightly intertwined with breakthroughs in communication technology.

What has remained constant is the goal of communicating a message — be it an idea, a feeling, a warning, or a proposal — to an audience in such a way that they fully understand it. In business, we rely on effective communication to enable us to solve problems and achieve goals, both in small groups and as organizations.

Today's mass storage, data analytics, and processing power have given us access to reams of data and details that can be retained, recalled, and transmitted at the push of a button. While these have undoubtedly influenced the way we communicate, it hasn't always been for the best. Sir Harold Evans said, "It is easier to transmit information than to create understanding." With the advent of "the information age," many have come to rely on "transmitting" data points, bullets, and specifications to the exclusion of other tried and true forms of communication.

We find ourselves in the era of the big, thick document and the endless slide deck. While providing information in detail and volume, we often fail to fully engage and move an audience to serious reflection and action. Presentations and business documents are in danger of becoming fodder for cartoons and comic sketches because of their dull nature and overall ineffectiveness.

How can we change this trend? By applying a few simple principles, we believe communicators can maximize the effectiveness of their message and appeal to the audience's need for a compelling narrative, detailed information, and "big-picture" perspective. It's called "Visual Story Telling," and the principles are:

1. Have a clear purpose in mind.
2. Know the audience and tailor the message.
3. Provide a compelling narrative.
4. Use visuals to enhance understanding and retention.



“Communication is about getting others to adopt your point of view, to help them understand why you’re excited (or sad, or optimistic, or whatever else you are). If all you want to do is create a file of facts and figures, then cancel the meeting and send in a report.”

Seth Godin from “Really Bad Powerpoint”

COMMUNICATE WITH PURPOSE

We have all attended presentations or reviewed documents lacking a clear, focused message. While elements may be loosely associated, the flow is disjointed and the audience struggles to stay engaged. While this could be due to lack of competence on the part of the communicator, it is often the result of not having a clearly defined purpose.

An effective message always begins with a purpose or vision in mind. The purpose pertains to the communicator’s desired result, or the “why,” of the message. Is it to inform the audience or move them to action? Is it to warn the audience of a risk or to gain adherents to a cause?

The vision pertains to the mental image the communicator would like to portray of how things could be if the purpose is realized. It is the central idea the communicator wants to convey — with as little loss of fidelity as possible — to the audience.

Having a clear purpose and vision helps the communicator pare out information that doesn’t clearly support them, yielding a more focused and coherent message. To define a purpose and vision, a communicator might consider the following questions:

1. What is my message and why is it important?
2. What is the desired next step and eventual end state for what I am proposing?
3. Is my intent to inform or persuade?
4. How will I define success for the message? What will have changed in the minds of the audience as a result of having received it? Use visuals to enhance understanding and retention.

KNOW THE AUDIENCE: THE MIND AND HEART OF THE MATTER

Once a communicator has a clear purpose and vision, focus turns to tailoring the message to the audience.

Knowing the audience’s generalities, roles, personalities, and needs is an important aspect of communicating; however, it is at least equally important to understand the broader cognitive and emotional aspects of how humans process messaging.

Dan Roam said, “Our ability to think has evolved along two different paths. One path specialized in seeing the world as lots of little pieces, while the other path specialized in looking at the world as a whole. The piece-by-piece path provided the words that became spoken language. The all-at-once path gave us the pictures that showed how it all fit together.”

While our modern documents and presentations tend to appeal to the detail-oriented mind, they don’t do as well at conveying the vision, or big-picture view. For example, think of the bullets in slide presentations and numbered elements of a business document as individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Each one is critical to assembling the final picture, but there are often so many of them, that without an image of how the completed product should look, it is difficult to imagine how the individual pieces fit together to form the desired whole.

Of equal importance to our ability to think, is our ability to feel or connect emotionally. An effective communicator will understand how to inspire and engage others. According to Illumine Training, people absorb information best when it is linked to emotion. One of the elements typically lacking from business messaging is a compelling narrative. While a



presenter may do an adequate job of creating a logical, linear flow from data point to data point, data points alone don't create a compelling vision in the minds of the audience. Stories and anecdotes help people see themselves in the vision being described, and become engaged on an emotional level.

With visual storytelling, instead of leaving the audience the hard work of imaging the purpose and vision from details alone, the communicator lowers the barrier to understanding by combining details with imagery, while satisfying the need for an emotional connection by providing a compelling narrative.

TELL THE STORY

Walt Disney is known around the world for being a great storyteller. His strength as a storyteller comes from an innate ability to immerse the audience in his story. He once explained it in this way: "You don't build it for yourself. You know what the people want, and you build it for them." What if this was how we approached communication?

What is the story you want to tell? Do you want to tell the story of a company's future state vision you see? Or tell the story of the quest to fix a company's problems? Maybe you want to tell the story of how your company fought the competition in the marketplace and won. Knowing your purpose, knowing your audience, and being able to craft a good story go hand-in-hand. In order to truly accomplish a purpose, we have to get our audience engaged by connecting them to the story we are telling.

Incorporating stories and anecdotes in your communication style is not just beneficial to the

audience. For communicators, message delivery tends to flow more naturally while recounting a story than reading bullets. This helps the audience pick up on the flow, begin to see the vision, and connect with some aspect of the story. The audience is drawn to follow the character on his journey and see where he ends up. Before they know it, they feel as though they are a part of the story itself.

How should we tell a story? Imagine you are hoping to get buy-in from executive leadership on a new direction for the organization. The proposed change is daunting, but necessary. Instead of overwhelming leadership with the details, focus on drawing the audience into the narrative. Work them in as a character or create a plot where they, as leadership, want to achieve the described future-state vision. The moment they connect with the story, they are more likely to be engaged.

When introducing elements of storytelling into your next business message or presentation, consider the following questions:

1. What types of stories or anecdotes would resonate with the audience?
2. Does the story I want to tell clearly support the purpose of the message?
3. How can I introduce storytelling elements such as a character, plot, or theme into my message?
4. How can I help the audience feel as if the story involves or pertains to them?
5. Would a real-life example or a portrayal of an imagined — but credible — future state vision be effective?
6. How could I interweave the factual elements and data of my presentation with a compelling narrative?





VISUALS FACILITATE UNDERSTANDING

Visuals have value beyond satisfying both thinking paths of the brain. They are also critical to help calibrate understanding and enhance retention. George Orwell once said, “There are no reliable words.” The inherent ambiguity of verbal communication calls for the use of images and other visual elements as tools to improve comprehension and retention.

We could read the same words of the same book, be inspired by the story, and yet come away with very different mental images of the characters and scene. The problem is, we cannot see the images in one another’s heads to know how we interpreted the words. When the book includes pictures or is interpreted as a movie, our mental images are

calibrated to match that of the artist or interpreter. In like manner, by supplementing a narrative with visual elements, we provide a baseline for discussing the differences in our own interpretations of the details.

In addition to providing a baseline for calibrating understanding, visuals enhance retention. According to John Medina, “if information is presented orally, people remember about 10 percent, tested 72 hours after exposure. That figure goes up to 65 percent if you add a picture.”

What types of visuals are most effective? Depending on the audience and type of message, a communicator might supplement or substitute bullets and data with visuals in the form of charts, diagrams, process flows, or a simple image.

Common Symptoms Addressed by the Four Principles of Effective Communication

Principle	Common Symptoms Addressed
1. HAVE A CLEAR PURPOSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty staying on track in a meeting or document - Unsure if a message was delivered successfully
2. KNOW THE AUDIENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty capturing the audience’s attention - Lack of productive dialogue in a meeting
3. TELL A STORY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low retention of communicated message - Choppy delivery with information that doesn’t flow
4. USE VISUALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audience doesn’t understand the message - Difficulty catering to a mixed audience of detailed and big-picture people

" Navigating between fact, then story, then fact, then story creates interest and a pulse. Mixing report material with story material makes information more digestible. It's the sugar that helps the medicine go down."

Nancy Duarte from "Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences"

Here are a few questions to consider as you attempt to enhance understanding and retention through use of visuals:

1. What imagery would align well with the information I am presenting and the story I am attempting to tell?
2. What images or visual elements will be the simplest and most memorable? Consider elements that might provoke a thoughtful or emotional response whether it be humor, elation, introspection, sadness, etc.
3. How can I add visuals in such a way that they enhance dialog and help the discussion flow? How can I repeat visuals to be consistent throughout?

Visual storytelling does not introduce any new or revolutionary concepts, rather it reminds us not to overlook storytelling and simple imagery as effective communication tools even as new technologies emerge. As important and accessible as they are, quantity and detail alone are not sufficient to effectively convey a message. Visual storytelling can maximize a message's communicative value by catering to the cognitive and

emotional needs of the audience. By supplementing details and data with a compelling narrative and visual imagery, communicators can more effectively draw the audience into their vision and facilitate the shared understanding needed to bring about meaningful change.

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