

the Power of Infographics

Using pictures to
communicate and
connect with
your audiences

Foreword by Guy Kawasaki, author of *Enchantment*
and former chief evangelist of Apple

que

Mark Smiciklas



the **Power** of **Infographics**

Using Pictures to Communicate
and Connect with Your Audiences

Mark Smiciklas

que[®]

800 East 96th Street, Indianapolis, Indiana 46240 USA



THE POWER OF INFOGRAPHICS

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Mark Smicklas is the president of Intersection Consulting, a Vancouver-based digital marketing and communications agency that teaches organizations how to leverage the dynamics of web 2.0 to achieve business goals. He is an established digital marketing and social media practitioner recognized for his visual thinking and strategic, no-nonsense approach. His service offering is framed by core beliefs in listening, stakeholder engagement, trust creation, and employee empowerment. An interest in the evolution of social business continues to motivate him, as does a passion for teaching. Smicklas has developed and taught social media strategy classes for undergraduates and adult learners at a number of Canadian universities. He also has spoken about a wide variety of digital marketing topics at corporate and public events and workshops. His genuine love of technology and people continues to ignite ongoing learning and new thinking that aim to help individuals and organizations connect with their audiences. Smicklas hangs out full time at intersectionconsulting.com/blog. He can be found on Twitter at [@Intersection1](https://twitter.com/Intersection1). He is also a regular contributor to socialmediaexplorer.com, the popular digital and social media marketing and online communications blog. He lives in North Vancouver, BC, Canada with his lovely wife, three kids, and Max the dog.

DEDICATION

For Jean, Alexander, Madeleine, and Emily. Your love and support make anything possible.

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I hope you enjoy *The Power of Infographics* and that it helps you learn more about how information design can help you communicate and connect with your audiences. I’d love to hear from you. If you’re interested in chatting about the ideas in this book, please join the conversation at facebook.com/powerofinfographics, or feel free to connect on Twitter at [@Intersection1](https://twitter.com/Intersection1).

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Infographic Foreword by Guy Kawasaki

35,000 BC

In the beginning, pictures ruled as a way to communicate ideas. They still do. 35,000 years ago, people drew remarkable pictures on rocks and walls to communicate with one another.



Fast-forward 1982. *USA Today* departed from the text-centric, black-and-white newspaper format and used color pictures and infographics to report the news.

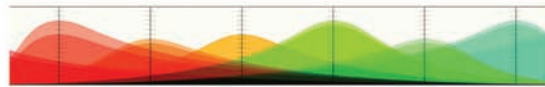
1982

Critics had their say.

Infographics are dumbing down America!

Infographics will never last!

People like to see the visualization of information in newspapers and books, on their e-reader, on the web, and especially in business presentations. For example, Facebook used infographics in its amendment to its S-1 SEC filing.



Main Street Republicans Libertarians Disaffecteds Post-Moderns New Coalition Democrats Hard-Pressed Democrats

They were wrong.

Cool Infographic!

Fortunately, Mark Smiciklas has written a book that helps you learn *how* to master infographics—to make it easier for you to enable people to understand your point, to make well-informed decisions, and to take action.

We're not cavemen and cavewomen anymore, but pictures still rule. Maybe 35,000 years from now, people will look at your infographics and consider them remarkable, too.

"Newspaper", "Bar Graph" by Scott Lewis, from TheNounProject.com

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Infographics 101

1



If you've read a newspaper or blog, flipped through a magazine, or used social media recently, you've likely come across infographics—those self-contained pictorials that tell you the gist of a story or concept at a glance.

But what is their purpose? Are infographics simply eye candy that publishers and brand journalists use to gloss up their content, or do they aim to fulfill a greater business communication objective?

WHAT ARE INFOGRAPHICS?

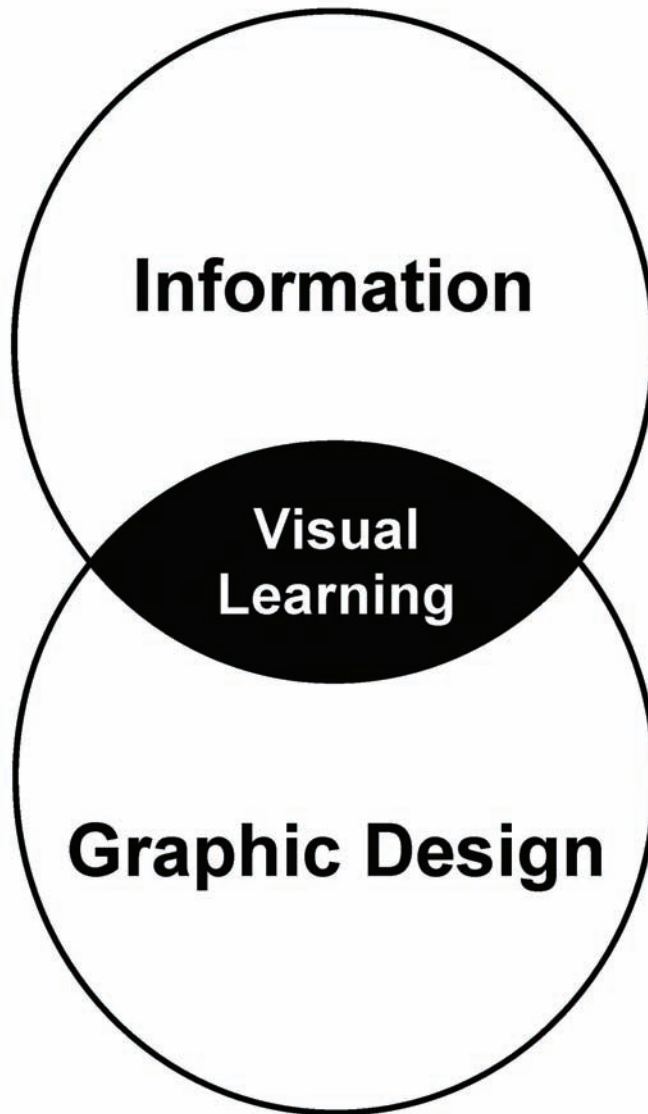
You've probably heard the phrase "A picture is worth a thousand words," a manifesto that speaks to the value and efficiency of visual communication.

An infographic (short for information graphic) is a type of picture that blends data with design, helping individuals and organizations concisely communicate messages to their audience (see Figure 1.1).

INFOGRAPHICS DEFINED

More formally, an infographic is defined as *a visualization of data or ideas that tries to convey complex information to an audience in a manner that can be quickly consumed and easily understood.*

The process of developing and publishing infographics is called data visualization, information design, or information architecture.



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FIGURE 1.1 Anatomy of an infographic.

Infographics combine data with design to enable visual learning. This communication process helps deliver complex information in a way that is more quickly and easily understood.

From a business perspective, one definition of infographics resonates above the rest. British graphic designer, author, and information design theorist Nigel Holmes simply refers to them as “explanation graphics.”

As a marketer, business owner, or manager, you can boil down your communication goals to explaining things to your audience. Infographics can help you communicate the following:

- Thought leadership and product features and benefits to your prospects
- Business process and service options to your customers
- Ideas and policies to your staff
- Corporate philosophy and strategy to your investors

Infographics can help your organization more effectively explain important information to your internal and external stakeholders.

Business Uses

Now that you have a basic understanding of what infographics are, what are some ways you can implement them into your business communication mix?

First, it's important to understand that infographics are not used solely for external communication. They are a great medium for delivering marketing messages or insights to consumers and prospects, but they are equally effective when used to enhance internal communication.

Before you figure out how you can start using infographics, it helps to understand the nature of the information you are trying to communicate.

Business information can be divided into the following groups:

- **Statistics**—metrics such as sales, revenue, market research, surveys
- **Process**—manufacturing, customer service, sales funnel, lead generation, supply chain
- **Ideas**—concepts, theories, thought leadership, ideology
- **Chronology**—history, order of events, timelines, schedules
- **Geography**—locations, metrics by region
- **Anatomy**—ingredients, components, lists
- **Hierarchy**—organizational structure, needs assessment
- **Relationships**—internal, external, people, products/services
- **Personality**—brand humanization, organizational culture

Many people are familiar with statistics being represented as infographics because of the popularity of data visualization and its use in traditional media. However, business owners, marketers, and managers tend to overlook the use of infographics to communicate other types of information.

The next section delves into information categories in more detail. You will begin to see how infographics can effectively represent different types of business data and how they can become a powerful part of your organization's communication strategy.

INFOGRAPHIC HISTORY

Today, infographics can be used by a wide variety of individuals and organizations to enhance their communication. "Solopreneurs," small businesses, nonprofits, and large corporations can all find ways to use infographics to make their information more interesting and accessible to their target audiences.

You can find infographics published in traditional media such as newspapers and magazines and across digital channels, where social media has helped fuel an explosion in their popularity.

To the casual observer, it would appear that infographics are a recent phenomenon that has been growing in conjunction with the growth of the Internet. The reality is that we have been using icons, graphics, and pictures throughout history to tell stories, share information, and build knowledge, as shown in Figure 1.2.

As we entered the new millennium the publishing of infographics became more democratized, and their use began to extend beyond academia and traditional media channels.

Today, in an era of information overload and shortened attention spans, organizations of all sizes are using infographics to quickly deliver information and understanding to internal and external audiences. Add the fact that social media fuels "shareability," and everything points to infographics becoming one of the most effective forms of content for communicating information in the digital age. (Shareability is explained in greater detail later in this chapter.)

THE SCIENCE OF VISUALIZATION

Brain research related to the physiology of sight and the ways in which we process information using our eyes presents compelling rationale for considering the use of infographics in your business communication mix.

HARDWIRING

Vision is a huge part of the physical brain. Approximately 50% of the brain is dedicated (directly or indirectly) to visual functions.¹

The network of cells, neurons, and fibers that hosts all this activity is truly expansive. Within the eye, the retina alone is made up of more than 150 million cells and is actually a physical extension of the brain. In addition, neurons that are responsible for visual activity take up a large portion of the brain's real estate, representing approximately 30% of our total gray matter. To put this in perspective, neurons for touch and hearing make up only 8% and 3%, respectively.²

EASY ON THE MIND

With all this visual “hardwiring” in place, it makes sense that it would be less complicated for the brain to process infographics than pure text.

Each letter in a word is essentially a symbol. To read text, the brain needs to act as a decoder first, matching those letters with shapes stored in memory. From there the brain must figure out how all the letters fit together to form words, how words form sentences, and how sentences form paragraphs. Although all this comprehension takes place in only a split second, relatively speaking, when compared to how the brain deals with images, the process requires considerably more mental effort.³

One of the reasons we can process images faster than text is because of how the brain handles information. It processes data from pictures all at once but processes text in a linear manner, as shown in Figure 1.3.

So, in a way, by using infographics to communicate, you make it physically easier for your audience to relate and connect to your information.

In a TED talk about the beauty of data visualization, writer and designer David McCandless expands on the idea that infographics provide a sense of relief in a landscape filled with a mind-numbing amount of information:

“There’s something almost quite magical about visual information. It’s effortless. It literally pours in. If you’re navigating a dense information jungle, coming across a beautiful graphic or lovely data visualization is a relief. It’s like coming across a clearing in the jungle.”⁴

3,000 BC

Good examples of early infographics are **Egyptian hieroglyphics** which formed language through the use of graphic symbols and icons.



1510

Leonardo da Vinci blended written instruction with illustrations to create a comprehensive guide on human anatomy.



30,000 BC

The first examples of infographics date back to the **Late Stone Age** when our ancestors began painting animal portraits on cave walls in the south of France.



1350

Medieval French philosopher **Nicole d'Orseme** created one of the first graphs in order to help explain how to measure a moving object.



1786

Scottish engineer **William Playfair** pioneered data visualization. His book "The Commercial and Political Atlas and Statistical Breviary" was the first to explain numeric data through the use of linear graphs, pie charts and bar graphs.

Source: Wikipedia.com

FIGURE 1.2

A brief history of infographics.

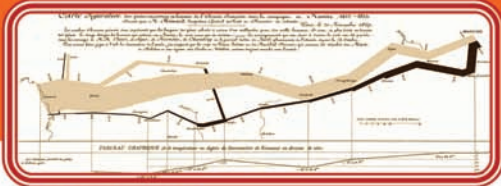
1857

English nurse **Florence Nightingale** combined stacked bar/ pie charts (Coxcomb chart) to illustrate the monthly number of casualties and causes of death explain during the Crimean War. She used these infographics to help convince Queen Victoria to improve conditions in military hospitals.



1970-1990

Infographics became more popular as **mainstream news publications** like The Sunday Times (UK), Time Magazine and USA Today began using them to simplify information and enhance comprehension of complicated issues and news stories.



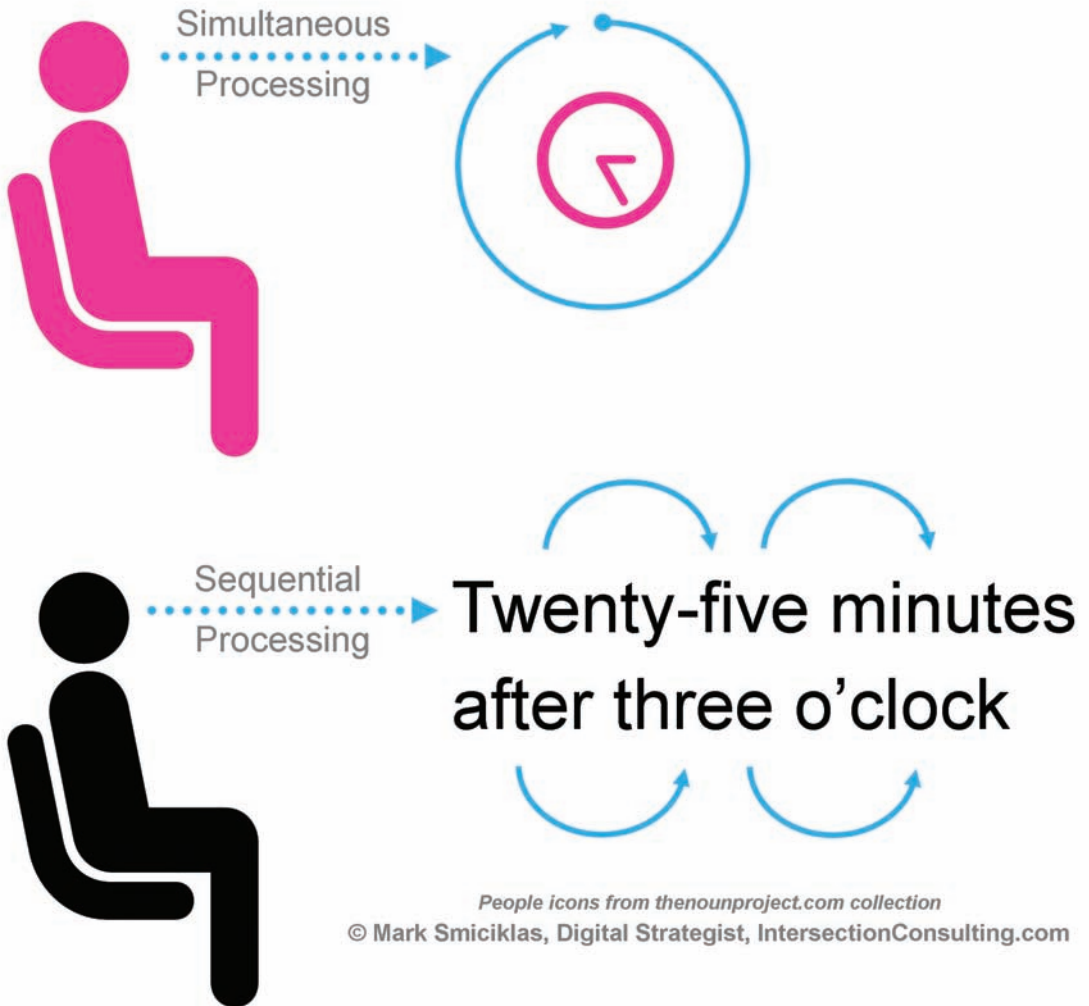
1850-1870

Charles Joseph Minard, a Civil Engineer from France, began combining maps with flow charts in order to explain geographical statistics. One of his most famous data visualizations illustrated the causes of Napoleon's failed attempt to invade Russia. He captured a complex data set for the period (map location, direction travelled, decline in troops and temperature) in a single infographic.



1930-1940

The modern era ushered in Isotype, a visual communication model developed by **Otto Neurath** to teach ideas and concepts through the use of icons and pictures.

**FIGURE 1.3**

Visual learning.

Novelty

The brain is designed to seek out things that are different.

Think of the mind as a computer hard drive. For the brain to remain nimble and operate efficiently, its memory can't get filled up. To maintain an optimal processing speed, the brain filters incoming data and ends up discarding 99% of all sensory information almost immediately after perceiving it. One key component of this filtering process is assessing whether the incoming information is different from what the brain is accustomed to seeing. Information that is in some way novel or unusual attracts the brain's attention.⁵

Infographics provide an opportunity for your organization to add that element of novelty or uniqueness to your information and make it more noticeable to your audience.

VISUAL LEARNING

Based on the VARK⁶ model, people use four primary learning styles to process information:

- **Visual**—People learn by viewing graphic formats such as charts, maps, and diagrams instead of words.
- **Auditory**—People learn by listening to spoken words.
- **Read/write**—People learn by reading or writing words.
- **Kinesthetic**—People learn through experience (by doing).

Organizations using infographics to communicate their ideas and information have an opportunity to bridge the knowledge gap with their audiences. Infographics can improve the level at which customers and prospects engage with their marketing content. In addition, visualizing information can improve learning among employees and other internal stakeholders.

Some of the learning benefits associated with infographics include the following:

- Improved comprehension of information, ideas, and concepts
- Enhanced ability to think critically and develop and organize ideas
- Improved retention and recall of information⁷

Because it's estimated that visual learners represent approximately 65% of the population,⁸ it makes practical business sense to begin incorporating infographics into your organization's content strategy.

WHY INFOGRAPHICS WORK FOR BUSINESS

It is evident from the preceding section that our brains are “wired” for visual communication. But how does the scientific rationale for using infographics translate to the world of business?

There is no doubt that our attention spans are becoming more compressed as technology and digital media become more prevalent in our personal and professional lives. In the age of information overload, data crashes over us like a tidal wave (see Figure 1.4). There are a number of dynamics at play that help make a business case for the use of infographics in your marketing, content strategy, or communication mix.

EASY TO DIGEST

Your audiences are consuming more and more of their information online, so it’s important to understand how the process of interacting with digital data differs from that of print.

In general, we tend to read much slower off a screen than we do from more tactile media such as books and magazines. The reality is we have become scanners and skimmers of content.

Over the last two decades, renowned web usability expert Jakob Nielsen has been researching how users interact with the web. One thing he discovered is just how little we actually like to read online, establishing that the average person will read about 20% of the words on a regular web page.⁹

The information age has also sparked a change in how your audience processes information and navigates the web. One behavior pattern that has developed is Continuous Partial Attention,¹⁰ in which web users are simultaneously connected to multiple digital channels in order to maximize their access to information. The end result is increased exposure to content but at a more superficial level, creating slivers of attention (see Figure 1.5).

One of the by-products of this new online reality is the “attention economy,” the idea that a consumer’s attention to information has become a form of currency. A user becomes aware of your content, invests an amount of mental energy consuming that information, and then decides whether to engage further.¹¹

Social media strategy consultant, speaker, and author Jay Baer believes that technology is shaping the evolution of communication in this era of fractured attention spans.

“To a large degree, technology dictates how we communicate,” says Baer. “Time wasn’t an issue in the days when we used scrolls and long-form writing to share information.”

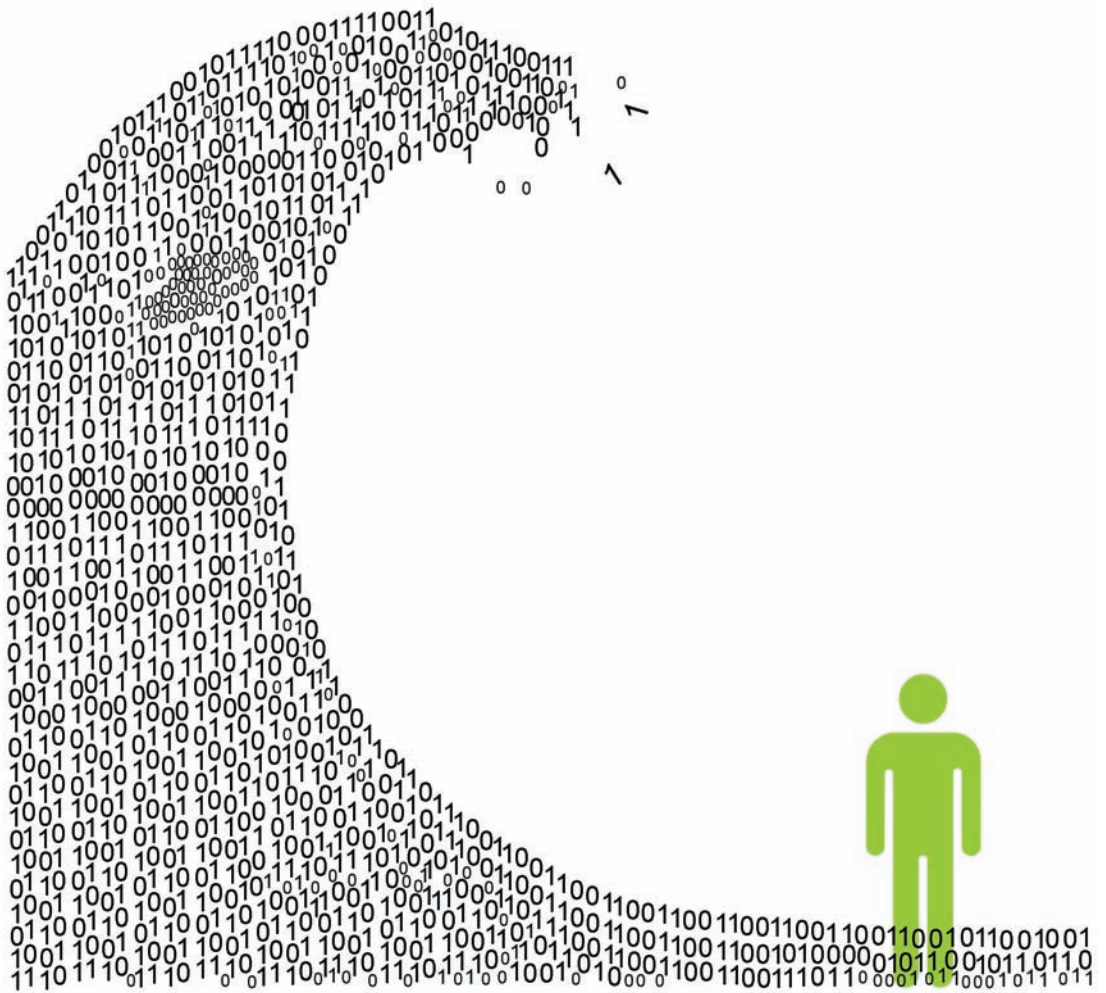
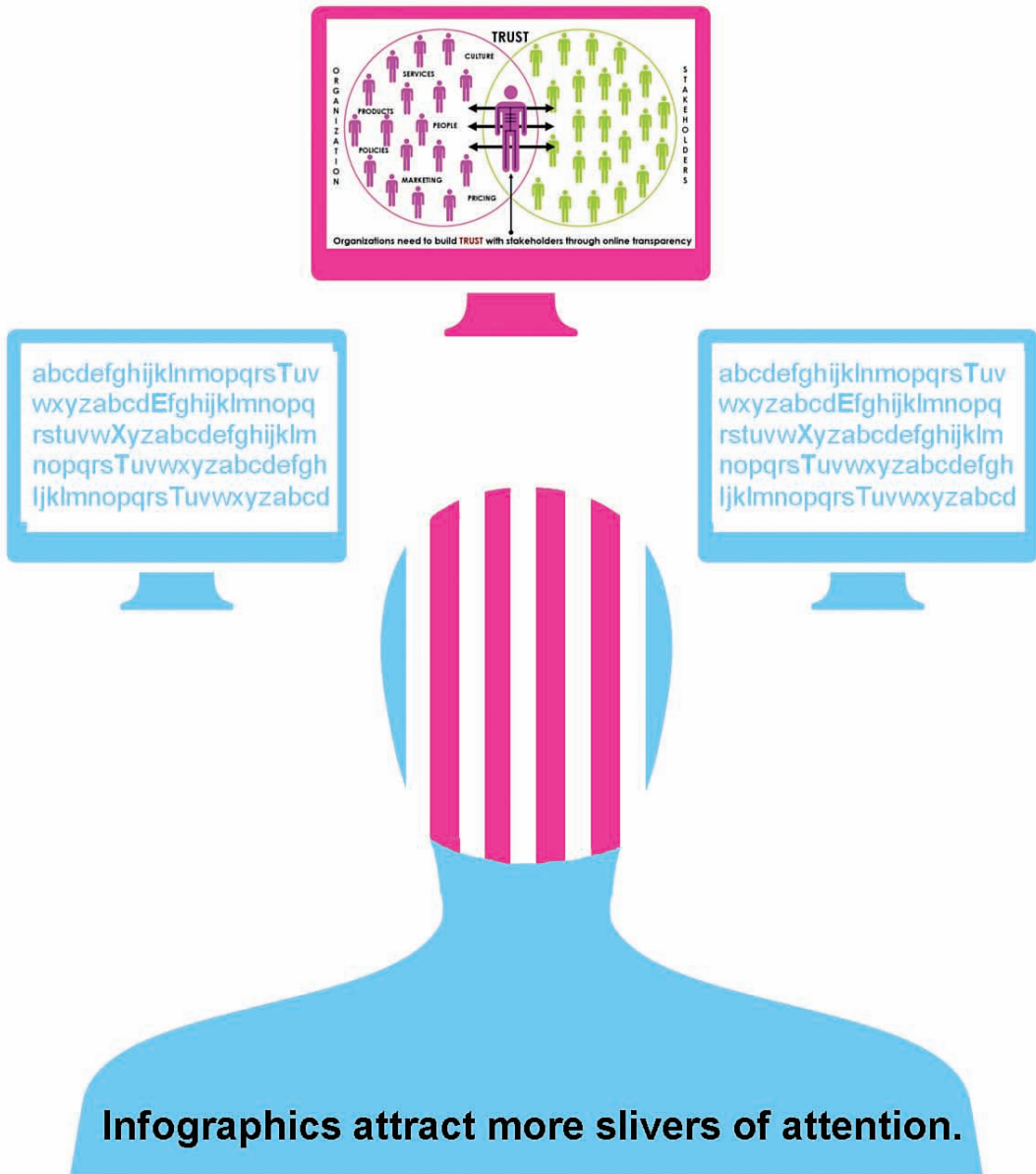


FIGURE 1.4 Information tidal wave.

In an era of data overload, infographics offer your audience information in a format that is easy to consume and share.



Computer icon from thenounproject.com collection

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FIGURE 1.5 Slivers of attention.

As we continue to gain access to vast volumes of information, our attention spans are becoming more fractured. Because the brain seeks out and notices things that are different, it can be easier to attract more slivers of your audience's attention by communicating your information visually.

Baer goes on to say that infographics fit very well into the “140-character” world: “As we become more pressed for time, concise, crystallized communication has become more important.”

In an era where time is at a premium and attention is becoming a precious commodity, your audience is looking for nuggets of information. Infographics serve that need by presenting knowledge in an easy-to-digest format.

SHAREABILITY

Another important online communication dynamic is “word of mouse”—the ability of your information to spread digitally from person to person.

You don’t need to be a programmer to embed sharing functionality on digital channels. Sharing toolbars and widgets are very accessible to content creators and are becoming commonplace on websites, blogs, and social networks.

When it comes to sharing content, the challenge is less technological than it is behavioral.

Many people are not comfortable sharing a link to an article, blog post, or web page unless they’ve had the chance to read it. A lot of content is shared across business networks, and many professionals want to make sure that information is relevant to their audience and congruent with their opinions and beliefs before they share it. Being pressed for time, many people don’t necessarily have the luxury of reading lengthy amounts of text. As a result, they are less likely to share certain types of content.

Jason Falls, CEO of Social Media Explorer LLC, thinks that infographics have an inherently low barrier when it comes to sharing. “With infographics, you’re not asking people to spend ten minutes reading eight hundred words of text,” says Falls. “If you’ve got the key point of your message summed up in an attractive infographic, your audience can glance at it and get it... that’s faster.” He goes on to say that infographics are shared because “they are easy to comprehend and don’t take up much of people’s time. If infographics communicate something useful, there is a strong likelihood that people will share them with their networks.”

Falls also feels that there is a reluctance to share long-form content. “These days, I think people are more hesitant when it comes to sharing lengthy blog posts or videos,” he says. “If you’ve got an infographic that literally takes 20 seconds or so to scroll and scan, it becomes quick and easy to study and makes it much more shareable.”¹²

A well-placed, self-contained infographic addresses our need to be confident about the content we’re sharing. Infographics relay the gist of your information quickly, increasing the chance for it to be shared and fueling its spread across a wide variety of digital channels.

THE “COOL” FACTOR

Aesthetics are another reason that well-designed infographics are an effective communication tool. Simply put, infographics are different—and cool to look at, as in Figure 1.6!

Competition for your audience’s attention is fierce. The average person is exposed to the equivalent of 174 newspapers full of information every day.¹³ As a result, the person your brand is trying to connect with probably spends only a few seconds on your content before deciding whether to move on to the next post, site, or network. Differentiating your organization, brand, or ideas is critical.

That fact that infographics are unique allows organizations an opportunity to make the content they are publishing stand out and get noticed.

ENDNOTES

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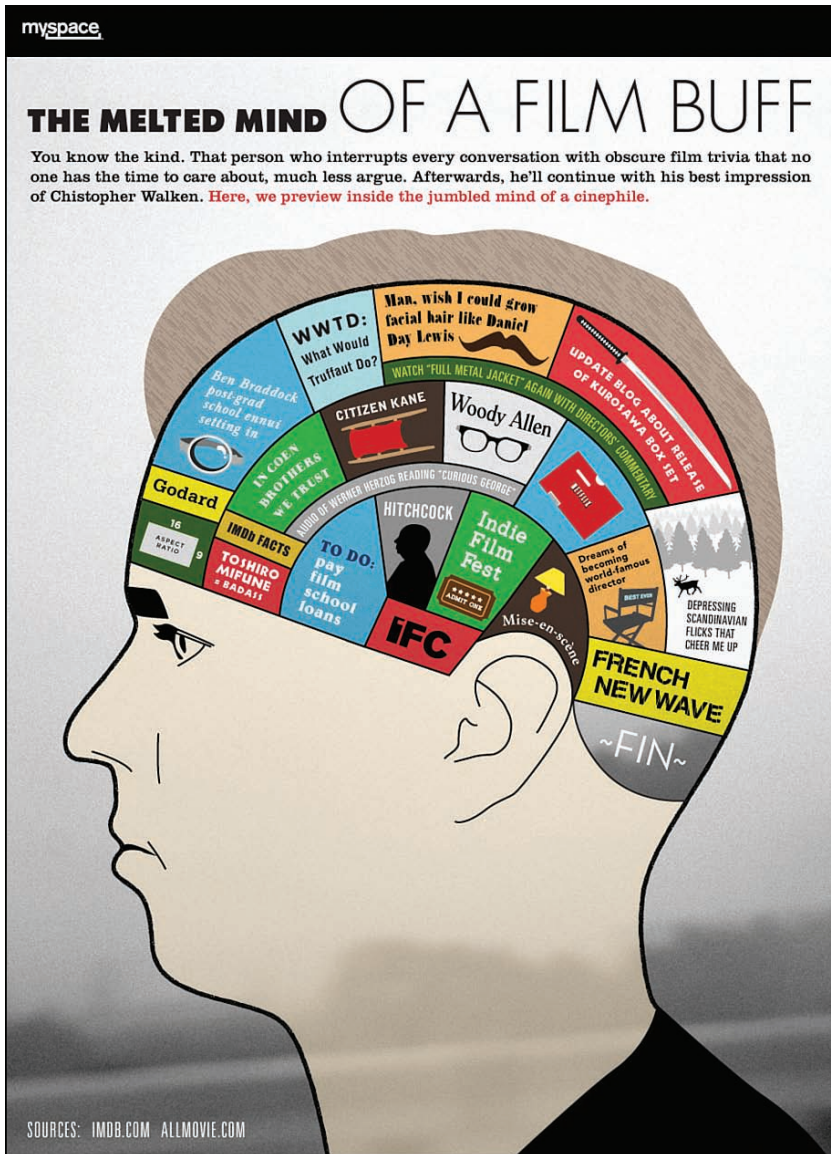


FIGURE 1.6 The Cool Factor.

Infographics serve practical business communication goals, but also work because they are cool and aesthetically pleasing. This fun infographic, created by Column Five for MySpace, shows the quirky inner-workings of the mind of a film buff. (Source: Column Five for MySpace. You can view the full version of this infographic at <http://bitly.com/yHhoN9>)

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