

The Visual Revolution:

"I See What You Mean!"

Join the **visual Revolution**

RSAnimate videos, depicting a disembodied hand rapidly illustrating a voice-over presentation, have gone viral. Best-selling business books include titles like *Back of the Napkin* and *Visual Teams*. Conference room walls across the nation are sprouting flocks of multicolored sticky notes; tables are cluttered with kraft paper, markers and PlayDoh; and the smell of dry erase markers fills the air. Are we collectively regressing to kindergarten?

Welcome to the Visual Revolution! Driving this movement is the realization that an exclusive focus on text-based communication methods fails to fully utilize all of our potential. Eighty percent of our brain's sensory processing power is devoted to vision. Images, colors, patterns, and the kinesthetic experience of moving a pen across paper activate the right side of our brain; connecting this with words and text generated by our left brain gives us fuller access to our creativity.

Visual practices can be used to improve the way we communicate our ideas, enhance the written record of our meeting and decisions, and spark creativity and collaboration as we solve problems and plan strategies.

Communicate

We're all familiar with the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words," and most of us try to incorporate images into our presentations. Why then do so many dread the dimming of the lights and the loading of the PowerPoint? Marketing guru Garr Reynolds, author of the blog and book *Presentation Zen*, says that we try to use PowerPoint and other presentation software to do three things when it is really

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optimized for only one. These products are best used to project images to illustrate the concepts that we are talking about. Instead, we also rely upon the slides to act as a prompt for our key talking points, and too often end up reading the bulleted lists to our increasingly bored audience. We then print out the slides as a handout. Better, Reynolds advises, to project simple images and use other products for these other two purposes. Use a word processor to print handouts that include more detailed data than is easily read on a slide, and put your speaking notes on index cards or your iPad rather than display them to the audience.

Consultant and best-selling author Dan Roam encourages us to forget stock photos and clip art and pick up the pencil ourselves. Using simple stick figures, circles and arrows, we can walk our listeners through our thinking process in a manner that is more captivating and engaging and leads to greater understanding. The person who is best able to describe and explain a problem simply and succinctly is most likely to receive the funding to solve it. If you can communicate your analysis quickly with a five-minute back-of-the-napkin sketch while your competitor is still loading PowerPoint, you are ahead of the game!

instead of translating one spoken language to another, they translate spoken words into visual symbols. As an observant outsider, they also are able to discern patterns and themes of which the participants may be unaware until they see them emerge visually.

The resulting charts can be posted on a wall to keep the energy going – this is particularly effective with strategic plans or vision statements. They can also be scanned or photographed and the digital images included in reports or distributed as minutes.

Graphic facilitators take this a step further, engaging participants themselves in ideation and image creation. They work with your meeting planners to design processes that will achieve your objectives, including participatory visual activities.

Create and Collaborate

There is a variety of simple visual tools that groups can use to spur creativity and generate new ideas. Drawing skill is not necessary! Plans and processes can be mapped using squares, circles, arrows, stick figures and text labels. Sticky notes have the advantage of being movable; individual actions and events can be written on separate notes and moved around until the proper sequence is achieved. Ideas can be clustered by theme. (See Figure 2 next page).

How To Get Started

To get started as an individual, get an inexpensive unlined sketchbook and a pen or pencil that you like. Doodle while you're thinking or listening – research indicates that doodlers actually retain more information than non-doodlers listening to the same presentation! Try your hand at mind mapping – turn the



Figure 1. Nonprofit board meeting (Name removed for client confidentiality)

Record

We all attend a lot of meetings documented in pages and pages of minutes. Honestly, how frequently do you read and refer to these documents? Most of them are filed away, never to be seen again. But what if your minutes looked like those in Figure 1 above?

There is a growing profession of graphic recorders, consultants who capture meetings and conversations visually using words, color and images. This is usually done on a large sheet of paper with markers and chalk, although some practitioners specialize in digital drawing tools to better serve groups meeting virtually. Participants can see their ideas emerge on the wall and often find themselves more engaged with the information. The recorder is like a simultaneous translator at the United Nations – but

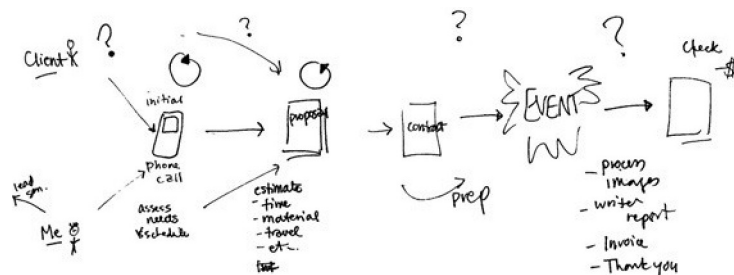


Figure 2. Process map

page into landscape mode, and start in the middle rather than the upper left corner. (This breaks the pattern to which our left brains are accustomed.) Write your initial question, title or idea in the center. As you ponder the subject, add your new ideas with lines branching off from the starting place, and continue to add branches as new ideas connect to existing themes. Add doodles, color code sections if you like – this is drawing FOR YOU, as a thinking aid, not as a work of art to display! Graphic facilitator and author Brandy Agerbeck differentiates between drawing for internal purposes – for individual thinking and group communication – versus drawing for external viewing, the realm of fine art and graphic design.

Make visual tools and toys available in your office. Get more whiteboards and stock up on sticky notes. Browse through books like *Rapid Problem Solving with Post-It Notes* or *Gamestorming* for ideas to use in your next staff meeting. Try some warm-up doodles on index cards – the small size can be reassuring, reminding participants that this is a process and not a product! Ask everyone to draw a simple self-portrait, a diagram explaining how to make toast, or a map of how they get from their home to the office. Leave materials out so folks can play on their own.

Hire a graphic recorder or facilitator for one of your meetings or conferences. Trust me, once folks see this in action they will want more! Then send an enthusiastic staffer or two to a visual practice training, or purchase some of the Grove's do-it-yourself Graphic Guides Templates.

However you begin, adding visual tools to your work environment will increase your team's creativity, engagement and social cohesion. Welcome to the revolution!



Figure 3. Student mind map

Resources

Books

The Back of the Napkin and Blah Blah Blah: What To Do When Words Don't Work by Dan Roam

The Graphic Facilitator's Guide: How to Use Your Listening, Thinking and Drawing Skills to Make Meaning by Brandy Agerbeck

Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Changemakers by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanufo

Rapid Problem-solving with Post-it Notes by David Straker

Visual Meetings: How Graphics, Sticky Notes and Idea Mapping Can Transform Group Productivity and Visual Teams: Graphic Tools for Commitment, Innovation, and High Performance by David Sibbet

Presentation Zen by Garr Reynolds

Websites & Organizations

The International Forum of Visual Practitioners includes a directory of graphic recorders & facilitators and background information on the profession. www.ifvp.org

Dan Roam's Napkin Academy is a do-it-yourself curriculum for visual thinking. www.napkinacademy.com

The Grove Consultants International provides books, training, and products for visual practice. www.grove.com

Garr Reynolds blogs on presentation design under the title *Presentation Zen*. www.presentationzen.com

Eris Weaver is a graphic facilitator, consultant and trainer based in the San Francisco Bay area. Past clients include the Special Library Association, the Association of Corporate Travel Executives, and the American Medical Student Association. Possessing zero tolerance for boring meetings or wasted time, her motto is "Don't work at it, play with it!" She can be reached at eris@erisweaver.info.

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