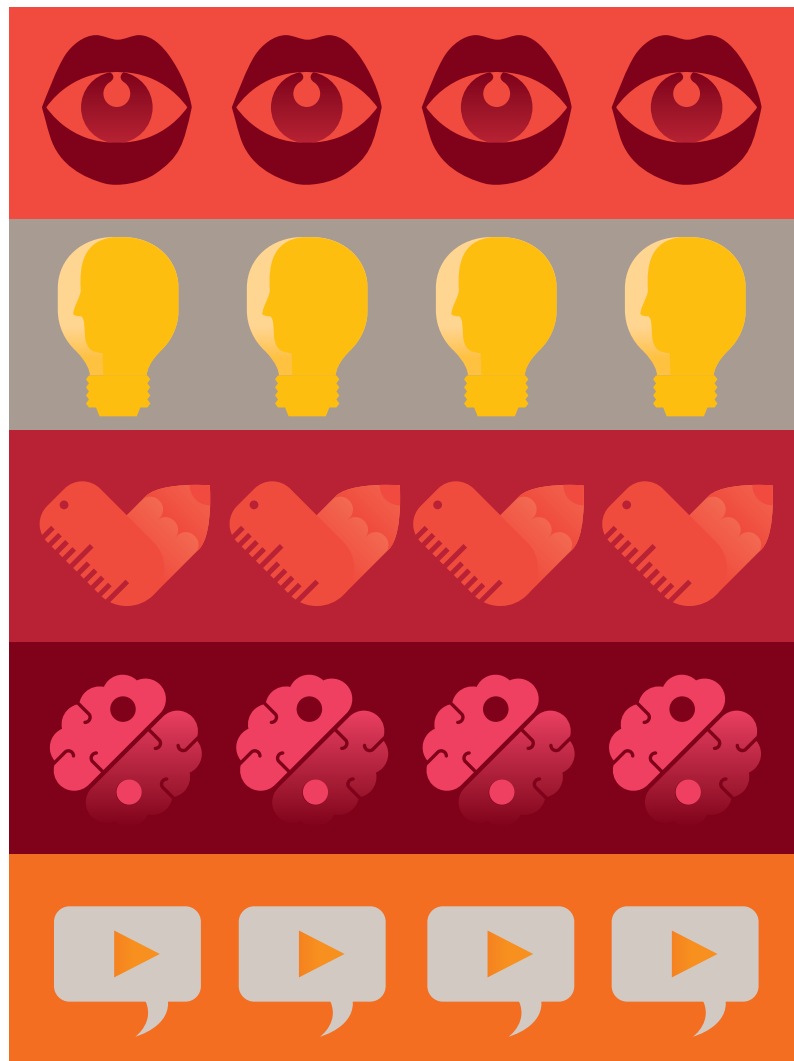# *The Power of Visual Communication*

Showing your story to land the message

Comms Lab

In a world where attention spans are short and time constrained, are we missing an opportunity to engage our audiences more quickly, effectively and emotionally?

April 2017

pwc

Introduction

A written tribute to … imagery.

Without imagery, bathrooms, street signs and public transport would be plastered with words; instructions overwhelming a message so simply delivered with a stick figure or arrow.

Both evolution and science sit behind the power of visual communications. Human beings remember and learn from images more successfully than text. Yet so often business communications remain solely and stubbornly text-based. There is no doubt that words have a place – including in this paper (yes, we appreciate the irony) – because they help us explore concepts more deeply and understand layers of complexity.

But in a world where attention spans are short and time-constrained, are we missing an opportunity to engage our audiences more quickly, effectively and emotionally? By working harder to express a complex idea, strategy or concept as a fixed or moving image, can we capture the essence of the content in a way our people can connect with more successfully?

PwC's Creative Comms specialises in cutting through the noise in busy work environments – ensuring important messages are heard and acted upon. This paper builds on our 2016 white paper "The Chemistry of Communication: Framing your communication to cut through the noise[1]" by exploring the important role of visual communications in securing buy-in to your message.

We hope that by understanding why and how visuals communicate ideas and information so effectively, leaders and communications professionals will be inspired to expand their repertoire with images (both static and moving) that simplify and connect. (Proving the point, we've just employed an in-house artist at PwC – she's the busiest person in our building!)

Show, don't tell

Let's start at the beginning. Visual Communications dates back around 40,000 years, when the earliest civilisations used cave walls as canvasses to share their knowledge, beliefs and stories. Although modern life now offers an overwhelming number of 'canvas' options; it's clear that visual storytelling has never lost its currency or impact.

Strong visuals can connect with an audience faster, and with more emotion, than words alone.

OPEN AT NIGHT

Storytelling remains at the heart of good communication.

Human beings have evolved to remember stories more effectively than any other content structure. Character-driven stories with emotional content result in a better understanding of the key points a speaker wishes to make and enable better recall of these points weeks later. In terms of making impact, this blows the standard PowerPoint presentation to bits[2].

# The Case for Visual Communications: why it works

The power of images in modern communication is irrefutable. In the world of social media, visual content is 40 times more likely to get shared, and articles that feature an image every 75-100 words receive double the social media shares than those with text alone[3].

Beyond obvious benefits such as clarity, approachability and efficiency, imagery can also transcend language or socio-economic barriers.

In South Africa, citrus farming operation Clemengold engaged lawyer Robert de Rooy to prepare a comic contract to capture an employee agreement with its fruit pickers. An accomplished commercial attorney with 20 years' experience in the developing local market, De Rooy identified the fruit pickers as seasonal workers, low income and generally 'vulnerable employees with low levels of literacy'. Building on the work of some academics exploring the use of visualisation to explain complex agreements, De Rooy worked with Clemengold to design an entirely picture-based contract. Replacing a traditional text agreement, the comic contract was issued to every fruit picker and significantly decreased comprehension time.

The new process took 40 minutes, was found to be far more accessible and solicited very few questions[4].

Clemengold used visual tools to simplify their contract process, ensuring workers understood their rights and obligations.
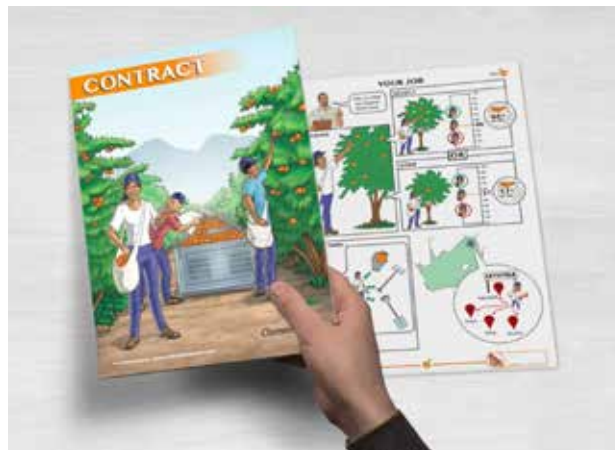
But why does it work?

Research suggests that we are far better at learning and remembering content we've seen in pictures than as text, a phenomenon known as the Picture Superiority Effect[5]. There are several reasons why this occurs. One is that 'picture stimuli' embeds into memory twice, as both verbal code and as an image. Words only generate a verbal code[6].

Evolutionary theory confirms that over the course of human existence, our visual system has evolved to process multiple images in parallel. Text, which appeared much more recently in human history, must be scanned one character at a time. Those characters must be recognised and pieced together into words, then sentences – all before being processed for meaning[7].

Quite simply, our verbal processing is less evolved than our visual.

The Picture Superiority Effect is most apparent in memory tasks, where pictures are better remembered than words. Happily for the complex world of communications, visual formats have been found to improve comprehension of detailed information. This is particularly true for financial decision-making and risk management[8].

There are other advantages, too. While behavioural economics tells us that the human brain is prone to taking cognitive shortcuts, using rules-of-thumb or 'heuristics' to make decisions[9], visual formats provide

a means to avoid such shortcuts. One study in 2013 showed that doctors and patients interpreted data from medical test results more accurately when the information was presented visually, rather than numerically. This led to more accurate conclusions about test results and reduced the risk of false-positives[10].

Get the picture?

So with an abundance of visual communication channels and tools at our disposal, not to mention compelling scientific research to prove its impact, we just need to add a little more imagery to our words, right? Not quite.

Though exceptionally powerful, the use of visual elements in communications is easy to get wrong. This is especially true of corporate communications, where complex, high volume or sensitive information needs to be shared.

Poorly conceived visualisation can distract your audience from core messaging, and at times even constitute 'misinformation'[11]. Content that is poorly presented not only has the potential to corrupt your narrative, but threatens the effectiveness of your entire communications strategy.

No organisation would consider launching a product to market by guessing which media formats or promotional channels to use, or by simply doing what they did last time. Yet all too often this is exactly how internal communications are handled: 'one size fits all' – where the same tools are employed for every message or campaign.
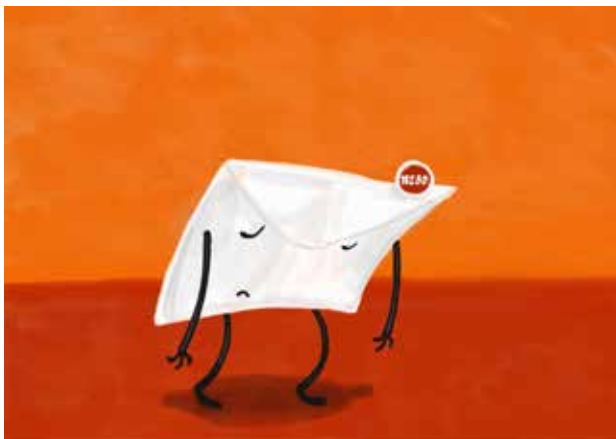
When seeking to change behaviour, internal communications should evolve and build a series of touchpoints that address the audience with ongoing consideration and care.

So what do successful visual communications actually look like?

From infographics to videos, strategy maps to storybooks, and scribed animations to quirky GIFs, visual communication toolkits are now richer than ever. However it's critical not to jeopardise the message integrity with ill-considered design.

In his simple yet powerful article Creativity – for Strategy's Sake, Steve Crescenzo reminds us of the dangers of empty creativity[12]. Your visual communications efforts may be creative, striking, engaging and memorable, but if they're not effectively conveying key messages linked to specific organisational outcomes, they're only adding to the noise.

While the most suitable visual approach will vary dependant on your organisation and challenge, the best solutions are always underpinned by high quality communication strategies. Our 2016 white paper, *The Chemistry of Communication*, recapped the golden rules: storytelling remains at the heart of great communications and experience is much more effective than explanation. Know your audience. Make your communications simple, honest, timely, contextual, personal and fair.

Navigating the creative options on offer is never a simple step, but if done with strategic consideration, can make all the difference on your communications success.

Our focus in this paper is to support practitioners to incorporate effective visual design in their communications, and to understand the power of imagery goes well beyond 'the pretty packaging'.

While every communication challenge is unique in terms of its context, some core design considerations just make sense.

Here's our top ten tips for visual communications.

Contents

Tip #1. Consider your content

Is the content you have suitable for visual expression?

Not every piece of content will be, although you'll be surprised what a clever designer can do with dense text-based content given the challenge. The objective of your communication is often a valuable guide.

What do you want your audience to know, feel and do? Are you trying to explain, explore or even persuade?

Explanatory visuals direct viewers along a defined path.

Explanatory visuals can be useful for:

- answering questions – what was our profit last year?

- supporting a decision – we need to elevate our staff retention efforts

- communicating 'moment in time' updates – revenue is on track year-to-date, or

- increasing efficiency and informing other activity – identifying the most frequented spaces in a building as prime real estate for future marketing-communications efforts.

Exploratory visuals, on the other hand, offer the viewer many dimensions to a data set, or compare multiple data sets with each other[13]. They invite greater engagement from the viewer by exploring the visual, encouraging questions and discovery. Exploratory visualisation is best used to guide audience insights and encourage interaction, rather than deliver a specific decision or action.

Once you know whether your content and channel lend themselves to visual expression, consider if removing superfluous content or rephrasing and reordering elements will tell a more powerful story. Ask yourself – does the audience need to know all that detail? Be ruthless! In the pursuit of effectiveness, a review of all hierarchies within the information is pivotal. Understanding the layers and connections within the inputs will not only help establish important context, but ensure the full story is shared and easily understood.

When overloaded with information, individuals rarely process everything available and therefore often don't choose the best option or solution. Instead, they opt for the first available solution, or the one that satisfies their minimum requirements. Behavioural economists put this down to a process known as Satisficing[14]. This step is about ensuring your visual design caters to this human tendency in the most efficient way.
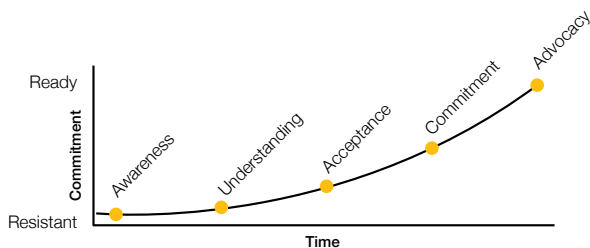
Tip #2. Know your audience

This rule is golden for all communications, not just visual design.

Understanding where your audience is coming from, in order to influence where you would like to take them, is critical to selecting which visual device will be most effective.

Reviewing the audience's proximity on the change curve is one way of doing so.

The Change Curve

Often attributed to psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' work on personal transition in grief and bereavement[15], the change curve[16] is widely used in business and change management.

In the early stages of a change program, you need to connect with the audience and excite interest. Showing what's to come is a powerful way to do so. The behavioural concept of showing is so powerful in making the future more vivid, it's no surprise to see it surface frequently in the world of business. This is especially true in finance and insurance, where consumers find it hard to forego small immediate rewards for larger delayed ones.

What if we could make the future more vivid?

Allianz tried this by introducing people to their future self. They allowed individuals to upload a portrait of themselves into a portal, and using very inexpensive software, were able to 'age' the individual. The aged individual then exhibited different facial expressions based on their retirement income, e.g. upset if low retirement income. This simple visual communications tool developed by Allianz saw superannuation savings amounts double.

Seeing our future selves boosts savings
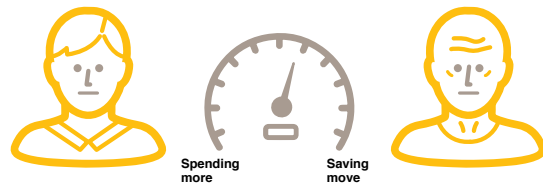
**Seeing a happy future self further boosts savings**
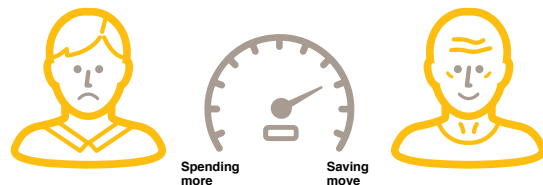
Video is often an effective tool for early campaign messaging – to 'plant an early seed' or raise awareness at a time when cognitive overload must be avoided. Known as signalling or cueing[17], early awareness-style videos often involve on-screen text, symbols or iconography to highlight important information with simplicity and speed.

As an audience moves along the change curve, content familiarity grows. As your campaign progresses, information density can increase and distribution formats diversify. For instance, you might shift from verbal and digital – to a broader suite of tools encompassing verbal, print and digital. At such times, team conversations can be a good way to foster internal alignment and the comprehension of new or complex principles. Visual communication formats to support these conversations may include poster-style strategy maps, infographics or conversation tools, whilst using behavioural economics can influence mindset and change[18].

Tip #3. Expand your options

Visual design extends from the simplest static graphic, through to moving pictures and full immersion in an experience. Consider possible traditional, and emerging, visual design options. When employing visual tools to communicate there's no single solution.
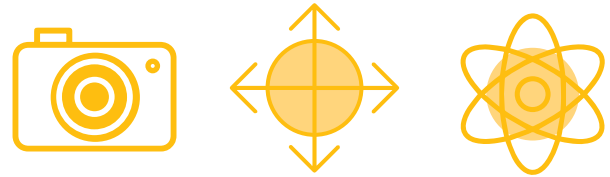
A strategic visual approach, or suite of tools, must be tailored to the communication challenge, audience and content at hand.

Landing the optimal solution should reflect a review of all visual styles and formats now available – traditional and emerging, physical and digital, experiential, virtual and augmented.

Have you considered;

- every option along the full visual communication menu?
- the challenge, audience and content before selecting a visual style or format?
- have you tried a fresh approach?

Tip #4. Be clever with colour

The power of colour psychology in persuasion is one of the most popular – and controversial – facets of marketing and communications.

While the breadth of published content on the topic is extensive – particularly when it comes to classifying colours by emotional response – most colour assumptions stem from unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence. Challenge assumptions! To your audience – yellow may not mean optimism, so – does blue mean trust, red excitement and green health? The vast majority stem from unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence.

Reputable studies, in fact, point to the immense subjectivity of colour interpretation. Elements such as personal preference, upbringing, cultural differences and context affect the impact colours have on us as individuals[19].

When it comes to colour, generalised pre-conceived ideas should be approached with caution; but for communicators, it's not all bad news. Hubsoft's 2016 roundup of infographics shows that visuals with colour increase a person's willingness to read a piece of content by 80%[20].

TIFFANY & CO. Studies have shown colour can play a powerful role in branding and identity. One study[21] showed the relationship between brand and colour to hinge on the perceived appropriateness of a colour (i.e. does it fit with the message or ethos). Another study pointed to the impact colour has on purchasing intent by way of brand personality (i.e. whether the colour aligns with expectations of a brand)[22].

When it comes to crafting visual communication tools, the overall feeling, mood or personality reflected by an artefact's colour scheme is more important than any supposed emotional associations of the colours themselves.

Is your palette in line with expectations around mood and tone? Does it reference a pre-existing corporate personality, positioning or values set?

Aim to break multi-year change programs into clearly defined stages that are tangible for the audience. This can help build commitment over time. Once people form an opinion and commit to something small, they're more likely to keep saying 'yes' and committing, even if the ask becomes larger or more difficult. This is why the notorious 30-day free trial is so successful. Intentionally shape opinions and over invest in early stages/ positioning of change to get the first 'yes' and buy-in – you'll be much more likely to get people on board for the long haul.

Tip #5. Make it stand out ... but not apart

In a cognitive process known as the Distinctiveness Effect[23], humans are more likely to recall unique or unusual information.

This means a new visual approach has greater chance of being remembered down the track than a more familiar one.

BUT this presents a challenge for the vast majority of our clients determined to stick close to brand guidelines – us included! While consistency has been linked to brand strength time and again, the standardisation of every communications isn't always ideal for engaging an internal audience. Relentless repetition of the status quo can result in fatigue and compromise engagement.

Fatigue can result from a communication's poor strategic approach or flow. Unfortunately a 'business as usual' visual style can unintentionally signal something isn't important or new.

There is value in consistency; however, attention grabbing visuals shouldn't contravene convention entirely. Consider giving the design team a challenge to create a distinct identity or style within brand guidelines.

Tip #6. Be clever with contrast

### *An item is more likely to be remembered when it stands out.*

This is a psychological phenomenon known as the Isolation Effect[24].

In the world of eCommerce, the use of bold design has been proven to deliver superior conversion rates[25]. In a well-documented Button Colour A/B Test of a 'download now' button, its impressive performance (21% improved conversion) was originally attributed to its vibrant red hue. Instead, subsequent analysis indicated its stark contrast to the surrounding environment to be the determining factor[26].

One of the most vital, yet neglected, elements of corporate design is the use of white or negative space. This is the space found inside and surrounding other design elements.

As powerful as the silence between musical notes or the almighty unspoken word, white space is like a canvas. The background that holds the elements together in a design, enables them to stand out[27].

With its power to influence action, the Isolation Effect is relevant to any visual communication, whether digital, physical or virtual.
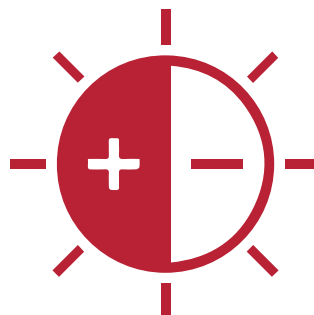
Tip #7. Own it

Where possible, use imagery unique to your organisation.

Whether it's photography, a sketch or a digitally-designed icon, investing in the production of something new will not only reinforce the authenticity and professionalism of your communication, but cut through the clutter of 'stock' visuals that are too easy to ignore.

Self-commissioned visuals will also display sharper strategic intent, have greater scope for usage across multiple platforms and allow infinite exclusivity.

We've seen a powerful reaction from an employee focus group given the opportunity to review 'draft' visual collateral promoting the organisations new values. While they loved the icons and feel, they were disappointed that photography wasn't recognisable as their personnel. The appreciation for the CEO who listened to the feedback and commissioned new, authentic photography was immense. The story has become part of the folklore of the organisation, reflecting the value they place on employee feedback and the efforts they are willing to make to respond.

Tip #8. Involve the audience

Our 2016 white paper *The Chemistry of Communication* highlighted the power of making the audience part of it[28]. Visual elements can be a valuable way to do so.

Taking the IKEA effect[29] into consideration, allowing your audience to co-create a visual or visual style will make it theirs.

Rather than serving up a visual approach, allow the audience some ownership and creative direction. Could they vote on their favourite corporate images? Perhaps there's a contest to find the next artist-in-residence to direct the next campaign? Get creative and think differently!

Driving ownership through co-creation also gives your audience the power of choice. Choice architecture[30] is the design of different ways choices can be presented and the impact of that presentation on decision-making. For instance, the number of choices presented[31], the manner in which attributes are described[32] and the presence of a default[33] can all influence choice.

While traditional economics predicts that more options will generally improve consumer utility or leave it unchanged[34], offering too many can be equally dangerous. Known as choice overload[35], presenting a group with too many choices can lead to reduced motivation, and decreased satisfaction with choices once made. Mitigate choice overload by either limiting alternatives, or more strategically, including decision support tools alongside them. This can include design rationale and pros and cons associated with each visual style.

At PwC's Creative Comms, we typically create three options – one disruptive, one conservative or brand-bound, and one middle of the road. The clients who have insisted they want 'out of the box' often revisit their motivation when they see how challenging it might be. At the same time, sometimes our most conservative clients have surprised us and chosen an option that uses humour, pushes the envelope or represents a completely new direction.
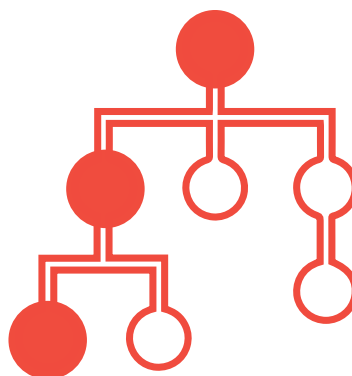
Tip #9. Get emotional

The value of appealing to your viewer's personal needs, goals and overall care factor cannot be overstated.

If you want your audience to think, feel or do something, design visuals accordingly. In the age of the #selfie, people are craving something that speaks to them personally. They want real, candid moments from everyday life – moments that speak to their human experience. Authentic imagery taps into the passions and emotions of your audience by letting them see something of themselves, turning them into advocates of the story you're trying to tell[36].

But how will you know if you've hit the mark? Test it!

Testing enables you to determine the effectiveness of a visual set or style. Specifically, testing using Randomised Control Trials[37] is often the preferred method of behavioural economists, where individuals are allocated randomly to treatment and control groups. These groups are then compared to determine whether an intervention has worked as intended.

Tip #10. Move it for meaning

Just as visuals can add new layers of meaning to text, motion brings new depth to visuals.

Temporality, tempo and character, can aid the comprehension of, and engagement with, visual content[38]. Motion tends to heighten our emotional responses to images. In a study comparing the responses of participants to moving and still versions of 27 different images, researchers found that picture motion significantly increased arousal. Picture motion also tended to prompt more heart-rate deceleration, most likely reflecting a greater allocation of attention to the more arousing images. Positive images were experienced as more positive and negative images as more negative when the image contained motion[39].

Temporality
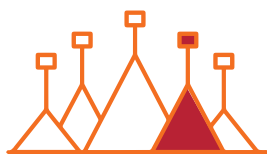
Motion can offer context and comparison to data. Showing a shift in graphs, images or data over time can bring trends to life through visuals that are engaging, easy to understand and more memorable than static comparisons.

Tempo
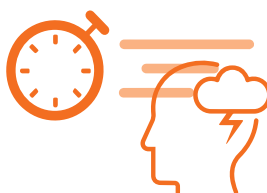
Adding movement to content enables the controlled timing of information. Known as Predictive Coding[40], our brains actively predict what inputs are ahead, rather than passively processing information as it arrives. Controlling the sequence and tempo of visual information therefore heightens curiosity and engagement.

When elements of the moving visual are building, the audience will look to fill any information gaps that surface. Using the moving components presented, viewers can connect the dots to land a conclusion themselves; feeling far more involved in the unfolding narrative.

Character

Movement is a simple and elegant way to convey character. One of the strongest examples of this is Warner Bros.' Roadrunner and Wile E Coyote – two of the most memorable characters of their era. Despite the absence of dialogue, the cartoon captures the characters' rivalry through movement with irrefutable brilliance. Roadrunner's stiff, purposeful and precise motion conveys a no-nonsense character always in control; while Wile E Coyote's slow, lumbering motions interjected with long pauses, present a reactionary personality. These same principles of animation can be transferred to strategic visual communications – applying smooth, organic motion for a human, empathic effect, while harsher, more direct motion conveys a sense of finality, security and control.

Talk to us if you want to cut through the noise in your organisation.

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