The Elevator Pitch: Graphics That Connect with Your Audience

By Kat Downs

My colleague Samuel Granados once gave me some advice for simplifying infographics: "Let's say you live in a high-rise building. Each morning, you're in the elevator with the person you love, who lives one floor below you. You have just one short elevator ride—30 seconds a day—to make that person love you back. What do you say to them?"

We must ask ourselves this question each time we set out to create an infographic. What are we saying to our readers? How can we make that message clear, concise, and compelling? With more things competing for readers' (limited) attention than ever before, what can we do to get them to see the value of what we're offering in the brief moments when our stories pass through their feeds or flash across their screens? The elevator pitch is a helpful way to begin to understand the urgency and simplicity with which we must approach our work as visual journalists.

Aside from being clear and well-designed, visuals must also forge an emotional connection with readers. They must reach out, capture readers' attention, and make them care. Once the connection has been made, it's more likely that a viewer will read and retain the information you're presenting.

Infographics are exceptionally good—and generally much better than text—at forging emotional connections. Concepts like distance and quantity are easier to comprehend in visuals: it is more intuitive for people to see those concepts than read descriptions of them encoded in text.

One strong example is the graphic about President Donald J. Trump's announcement of his plans to withdraw from the Paris Accord. Readers see immediately that the United States is separating itself from the rest of the world with the exception of just two other nations—and when readers see the company the United States will be keeping, they can draw their own conclusions. The striking simplicity of the graphic made it hugely effective, generating thousands of retweets and likes.

Infographics are not only powerful because they communicate information quickly and clearly, but also because research has shown that people are more likely to remember pictures than words, a phenomenon known as the picture superiority effect.

There are a number of techniques we use to make readers feel excitement and empathy, and to facilitate their understanding of a subject, whether or not it was something that had already interested them.

One of my favorite examples is "The depth of the problem," a graphic that showed how far down the black box of a missing plane might be located under the ocean's surface. The graphic set out to demonstrate the futility of searching for it. Readers scrolled further and further down the page, down through the ocean, wondering when they would ever get to the bottom. When they finally did, they had an aha moment: they finally got just how deep that part of the ocean was.

I call this understanding the moment of recognition. It's the moment in the elevator when your neighbor begins to love you back; the moment when the light bulb turns on over your head. It's when you see or interact with a visual and understand: how large, how deep, how different. This experience helps readers grasp abstract concepts and, as an added bonus, it is the type of experience people often share on social media.

An important step in conceptualizing an infographic is to try to anticipate the aha moment. We use an iterative process that involves multiple rounds of feedback, and working and reworking the infographic until it resonates.

We are always asking ourselves: "What do we want readers to take away from this?" Asking this question helps us to figure out the most interesting and important aspects of the infographic. There's often a temptation to decorate, but graphics are their most effective when the information in them is easier to understand when you see it rather than read it.

It's important to know who will be looking at your graphic. If the audience has high visual literacy, the graphic can be more complicated. If it's a general audience, we need to think carefully about how we can make the piece intuitive.

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For example, in recent years, equal area U.S. cartograms have proliferated across news sites. They're normally used to show state-based data and use equal-sized areas, like circles, squares, or hexagons, to represent each state. The cartogram avoids the geographic distortion of traditional maps. Cartograms are great at what they do, but in our experience, the decoding required delays emotional connection and adds distance between the reader and the aha moment.

Why? Most American readers have a long history with a traditional, state-by-state map of the United States. They have internalized the visual reference: they know where their state is and where the other states are; they understand regional populations and economics. The abstraction of a cartogram means people lose existing contextual knowledge that informs their understanding of the data.

One way to get the best of both worlds—data accuracy and familiar visual reference—is to pair a cartogram with a traditional map. That way, the relationship between the data and the states is clear, but the emotional connection isn't lost.

Sometimes, infographic designers lose sight of the audience they're designing for and, instead, start making graphics that will impress other designers. We can get carried away with complicated data visualizations that make things look stunning, but most people who don't make graphics for a living won't take the time to understand them.

The problem is not that these complicated graphics exist, but that it is a mistake to call them news graphics. If readers have to spend more than a nominal amount of time figuring out how to read a storytelling graphic, they will turn their attention elsewhere.

However, it is possible to make your infographic complex without pushing away readers. Charts should make things clearer; it is a failure on our part if they're difficult to decipher.

User testing plays a major role in the process of making our graphics accessible. Sharing graphics with colleagues, potential audiences, and others who aren't familiar with the work allows us to find out if your visuals are really communicating. Give them a minute to look at the piece and then ask: "What did you learn?" and "What was the main point of this graphic?" If the answers you are getting are muddled or very different than what you intended, it's time to go back and rethink it. We often adjust visual approaches, language, and interaction cues after we test graphics with users.

This process has taught us that illustrated infographics and pictorial approaches are often far more intuitive than charts. Despite that, data visualizations are still much more common these days—a missed opportunity to connect with readers, because they really respond to infographics.

One of the most popular graphics we've done was a piece we did about the health hazards of sitting. It showed what happens to various areas of the body when you spend all day in a chair at home, school, or work. It's an explanatory graphic based on qualitative reporting. It's critical that we don't forget we have these tools in our belt.

Playful concepts can be a gateway to the aha moment. At one point, we created a piece that explained how California's aquifers were running dry by using the browser as the aquifer: the water rises and falls on the screen. The intent was to give the reader a real sense of what the data represents—water levels—while still displaying data accurately. We have a number of other tactics for forging connections with readers. We use lots of annotations to make intimidating charts less daunting. The playful tone of handwritten annotations attempts to make the reader feel like a friend is there to guide them and identify key data and trends. We have seen hugely positive reactions from readers when we use these techniques.

We also use animation to emphasize connections between data points. We build up the complexity bit by bit so that when the entire piece is revealed, the reader knows exactly what they're seeing. With interactivity, we can juxtapose a reader's expectations against real data. That action contextualizes the information we're presenting and shows it through the lens of a reader's personal experience—and brings about the aha moment. The text in a graphic needs to be clear, concise, and jargon-free. In many cases, the text is treated as a label rather than a storytelling mechanism. Each piece of text should not only clarify what you're seeing in the visuals, but also reinforce the narrative. Every element in the piece should work together to build a clear, cohesive story.

If something can be visually encoded, the advantages go beyond ease of understanding. Images are highly portable, sharable, and easier to keep track of in the digital ecosystem. They have a higher barrier of entry for production and, therefore, they're harder to replicate. Copyright issues make it tough to aggregate them without permission.

For those reasons, we think a lot about why readers would want to share the piece as we begin a project. The design of infographics is also important because wherever they spread, they represent the brand, company, or person making them. A consistent palette, font style, voice, and branding will help users recognize the source of the graphic even if people are encountering it for the first time via Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, etc. At the *Washington Post,* aside from our core graphics style, we've tried a number of styles for specific events, such as the Olympics and our Political Fact Checker. Other outlets like *Vox, Quartz,* and *fivethirtyeight* also have strong branding across their visuals.

The work we create is about informing, challenging, and delighting readers. We want to help them understand the world around them in deeper and more meaningful ways with the least amount of friction possible. That's the difference between raw data visualization and information design. We must always be thinking about that elevator pitch. If we can win the readers' hearts, we can inform their minds.

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