

HARNESS THE POWER OF IMAGES

...combating complexity

In prehistoric times, when mankind took its first steps with communication, cavemen drew on walls to share stories. Fast forward thousands of years and children make sense of the world around them instinctively by drawing pictures and learning from picture books. The human brain is best designed to retain information when it is demonstrated pictorially through clear and bold imagery. Research suggests that 30 percent of people learn best through the use of visual/spatial thinking, 45 percent use a combination of visual/spatial thinking and thinking in the form of words, and 25 percent think exclusively in words.

The term “visual thinking” is the practice of using images and visual activities to approach challenges, formulate strategies and, in our case, communicate messages effectively.

A major issue for internal communicators is combating complexity and information overload. When communicating with your workforce, whether it be company strategy, a change initiative, reworked organizational structure or just simply explaining how a new benefit might work – messages are often lost or misinterpreted amidst a sea of words. Visual thinking provides a solution.

The need to conquer complexity

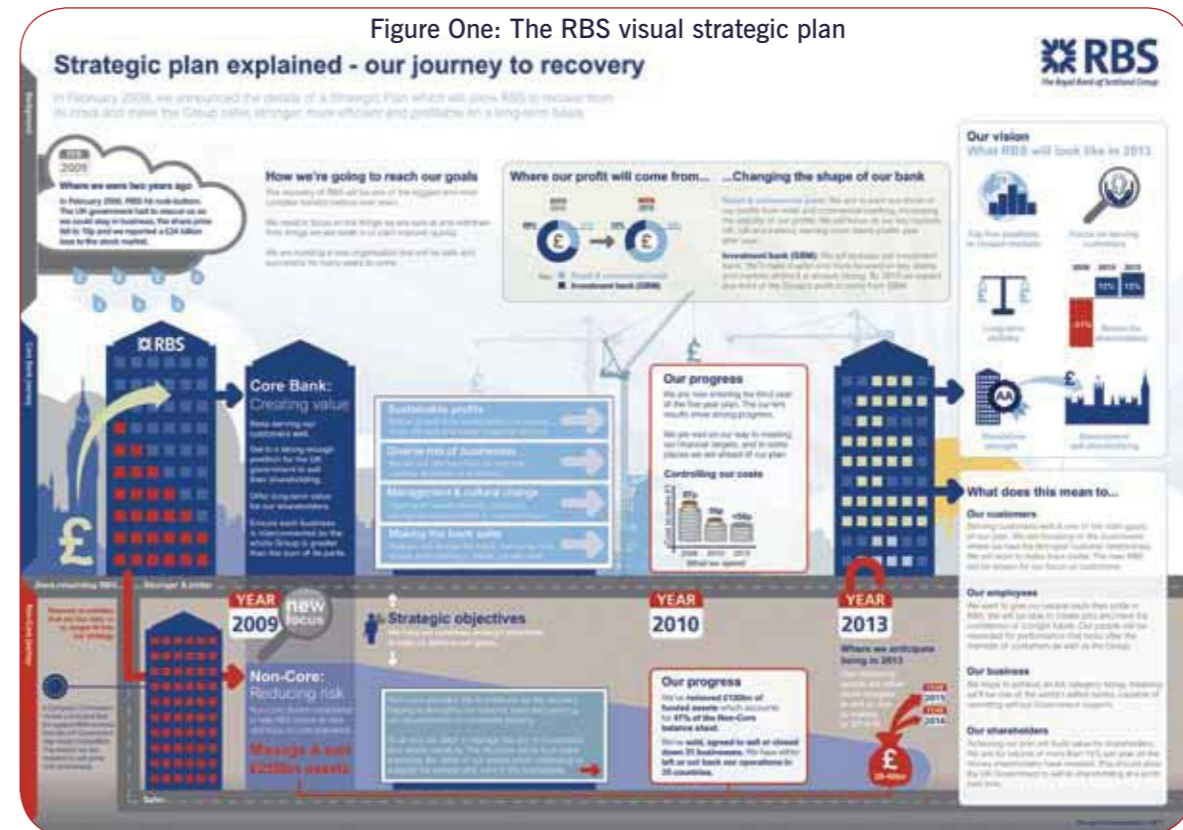
At all levels, communicators have to ensure employees understand the meaning of their messages. A visual approach appears to be a

creative option, but will presenting a company strategy in this format really help employees understand and retain the message? Louise Kidd, content development and copywriting manager at RBS, says: “Complexity puts people off; we’re trying to engage people and communicate on a level that is not intimidating. We found people were put off by complicated financial concepts, but when they viewed them set out in a visual way – with a glossary included – they were far more engaged. These aren’t simple things to explain, but the key thing is that the explanation can be quite simple.” [See Figure One.]

Simon Hardaker, director, group employee communications at global engineering group GKN says his company’s need for visual thinking methods came from the implementation of the company strategy, which needed to be shared globally with employees. “From the outset, I felt we needed people to visualize what the strategy was. In some ways, our strategy is simple, but in other ways our employees couldn’t see how different pieces and processes in the organization joined together. We felt a visual thinking method would help employees retain the message because we planned for it not only to describe the strategy, but for it also to be possible – just by looking at it – to link the various component parts. So, for example, if an employee was wondering how performance measurement lines up to organizational planning processes, they could see on the map exactly how and where they are connected.” [See case study, page 47.]

Dean Rodenbough, corporate communications director at Hallmark Cards, also believes that communicating visually makes messages easier for employees to digest. “We recognize that learning styles and preferences vary among individuals and across cultures. In our change management work, we have often turned to visual thinking approaches that help our employees more easily internalize business strategies and new work processes,” he says. “For us, visual thinking has been about bringing ideas to life through images – on visual thinking maps and different displays – to make ideas easier to understand.

“In developing visual depictions of your ideas or strategies, you can present them at a high enough level that conversations about them



can accommodate geographical differences in execution,” he adds. “It’s easy to confuse your employees by getting into a sea of details, which may or may not be relevant for everyone. When you’re forced to visualize ideas, you are making choices about the most important elements or components of the work process. It’s all about providing a ‘big picture’ view that aids comprehension.” [See Figure Two, page 44.]

He also emphasizes the point that images inspire storytelling, which in turn make ideas easier to understand and share with others. In a nutshell, making a message simpler means making it more memorable and understandable.

However, communicators must assess whether this method is appropriate for your workforce. It’s important to conduct your own research and potentially set up focus groups to test new ideas, such as Kidd did. “We were in the process of communicating to our staff how we arrive at the

numbers we get to in our financial results. We put together a slide deck for a focus group to assess and got good feedback – people were happy we had tried to explain things. However, they said that by the seventh and eighth slide, they were a bit confused. They said they liked the attempt but wanted something that could tell them what they needed to know, on one page with the use of graphical elements.”

Types of visual thinking approaches

Visual thinking map (VTM)

In its strictest terms, a VTM is a recognized method used by educational bodies to maximize learning through visually mapping out what pupils need to know. In internal communication, a VTM is an emerging channel to relay company strategy, change communication or other messages to employees. A map is usually condensed to an A4 pdf (but it could really be whatever size suits your

Read this and learn

➤ Approaches to using visual thinking methods to combat message complexity.

Complicated and content-heavy communication is a sure way to disengage your employees and ensure meaning is lost. Could visual thinking approaches and weaving imagery into your messages be the way forward for maximum understanding and engagement? By **LUKE DODD**.

Figure Two: Hallmark's visual thinking maps



If you have an example of a visual thinking approach you have implemented successfully at your organization that you would like to share, please contact Luke Dodd.

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requirements) and outlines a complete strategy or message using graphics, linking different elements to one another in an easily understandable way. You could either distribute it as a printed hard copy, an interactive infographic online or a projected image on a screen.

Story wall

A story wall is a larger graphic than a VTM, and is typically more focused on telling a specific story through photographic images, rather than the symbolic imagery used in a VTM. However, there are no steadfast rules and you can incorporate whatever elements you need to.

Animation

Animation can be viewed as a visual thinking method in its own right, or can be incorporated into a VTM, which RBS did. “We used animation in all our maps, including our company strategy VTM, so that the main focus when people look at them is animation, taking them through the journey,” Kidd says. “Animation brings an image to life and potentially increases engagement in the existing message even more.”

A combination of approaches may well work best for your organization. You could also be hugely creative in this area and come up with your own methods, as Rodenbough points out. “You could use posters outlining annual business strategies that demonstrate alignment or synergy across multiple operating businesses; interactive maps online that allow users to click on highlighted icons to provoke a series of questions; murals that chart out work flow processes or hand-offs using visual symbols; or bulletin board images depicting standardized work station designs or plant floor equipment floor plans to maximize productivity. The possibilities are endless.”

Defining and refining

Through researching this topic, it's evident that the process of defining and refining the message is as equally beneficial as the end result itself. For instance, to create a one page VTM for your company strategy, you have to condense the message and cut out the jargon forging a simpler, compact message from what you had before.

But what does the process of refining your company's whole set of values and objectives into a single page graphic look like?

Toby Isaacs, head of visual thinking at UK-based communication agency Home, says: “Part of this process is working out who your audience is and what you want them to do. Part of that is testing the audience and finding out what they want to know. You have people in charge of strategy who go into too much technical detail and use complicated language – it's not appropriate if you are talking to a global audience with different functions; the message gets lost. Our job is to pull people back up to a bird's eye view of things and not get bogged down in detail.”

Additionally, Michael Weaver, programme director at UK consultancy DPA, outlines how its work with insurance provider Allianz benefited from the refining process. “What was interesting about our work is that the end product didn't look an awful lot like where we began. We were creating a story wall focusing

on Allianz's environmental efforts in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund [see Figure Three] and we had already pulled together a discussion paper with visual content in there, which was a more 'wordy' report about how Allianz makes business sense of climate change. What was really useful for us was to collectively go through the process of stripping down our thoughts to the absolutely key points. The conversations you have when you are distilling down to the essence of a narrative reveal the bits that are ambiguous and facilitate greater clarity across teams.”

Through visual thinking, you can provide line managers with interactive and efficient ways of communicating messages. Instead of employees being spoken at and shown a long-winded presentation, visual thinking is a dialogue enabler and helps employees connect their role to the wider business.

Weaver says managers crave this kind of visual approach so they can better interact with their employees. “It always strikes me how many managers want good content and things to talk about in team meetings. They want a medium that takes some of the pressure off them and is immediately accessible for their teams. This also increases the chances of messages and learning getting through.”

Rodenbough adds: “I believe that companies should create a user guide with talking notes for managers to maximize impact.” At Hallmark, an overview was provided to managers and incorporated into the *Hallmark Coach's Handbook* – the company's guide for managers – to explain its visual thinking maps, which initially outlined the company's financial cycle and relationships throughout the business.

Looking at the wider impact, Weaver believes visual thinking can be greatly beneficial for leaders. “We look at various areas when it comes to visual thinking and leadership communication is a strong focus. A lot of leaders still have an infinite capacity to over complicate things so visualizing strategy forces them to boil the message down to its simplest terms.”

The future

The changing technological landscape of business offers almost limitless opportunities for a visual approach to communication.

This includes the emergence of mobile phone apps already established in the consumer market. The uptake on using them internally has yet to begin, Isaacs says: “We have some



Figure Three: Allianz's story wall

projects coming up soon where we are seeing visual thinking maps getting translated into apps – this is obviously a great advantage when communicating a message to a non-wired workforce. This area is currently emerging and will be something that we see come to the fore in the future. However, funding restrictions could hinder progress as developing these apps doesn't come cheap.”

The potential of interactivity and e-learning within visual thinking mediums is also vast. For example, you could create a visual thinking map that has a built in online training session, talking the participant through the main message and teachings. The potential to link a separate e-learning website to the interactive map also boasts the opportunity to fully engage employees with the message. The VTMs could also be used as the sole training literature for a new technical or work process.

10 STEPS TO USING VISUAL THINKING

1. Decide if visual thinking is appropriate for the message.
2. Sit down with stakeholders and talk about what's important for them.
3. Collate the relevant information.
4. Edit and decide what parts must be kept in with help from team.
5. Decide what visual thinking method you'd like to use.
6. Create the graphic.
7. Test it on a focus group.
8. Use results to refine.
9. Create a user guide with talking notes for managers.
10. Consider enlisting the help of an external agency for additional expertise.

TOP TIPS FOR CREATING YOUR OWN VISUAL THINKING MAP

- **Make sure you understand your audience.** Be very clear about what you want to deliver and what actions come out of it. You may need to use several maps for different audiences. You have to make them relevant to your audience.
- **Be clear on content and edit, edit, edit.** Be absolutely clear on what your message is. Make sure content is agreed and signed off. Keep editing, because you can always make something simpler.
- **Use a whiteboard and start sketching out information.** Next time you are in a meeting, whether you are exploring a relationship or new process, discussing a strategy or how to reach a new target audience. You will be amazed at the alignment and clarity you can gain by visualizing the information even if it is just stick figures, lines, circles and boxes.
- **Don't be frightened.** If you go with an external consultancy to create your visual, you will have to tell them the whole story behind the message you want to convey. They need context to get it right, so do not be afraid to go into great detail.

◀ CASE STUDY: IMPLEMENTING A STRATEGY BOARD AT GKN

The need

GKN employs roughly 40,000 people across 30 countries and after completing our review of engagement strategy in 2009, we were looking for a way to communicate what the overall company strategy was to our employees. Previously, people hadn't really understood the GKN strategy, as each of the four big businesses that made up GKN (Automotive, Powder Metallurgy, Land Systems and Aerospace) had its own strategy, alongside the set of common ways of doing business across GKN – which we collectively describe as the GKN Way. Our aim was to bring together those four businesses' strategies and this common way of working, so employees could draw connections.

The implementation

There was a cross-business team that came together to figure out the best way to communicate strategy across the organization. From the outset, I thought it would be best if we combined visual with words – we needed people to see the whole picture and not just parts of it.

We started to come up with some basics, starting at customers and worked backwards from that – if we knew the results they wanted and the processes required to deliver that, you could work out the resources required to deliver these. Seeing an early concept, the executive sponsor commented how alike it was to the EFQM business excellence model (management framework developed by business consultancy EFQM and used at GKN). It was a “Eureka” moment for the team. Communication consultancy Home facilitated the process of converting this into a big picture and provided designs using the nine-box business excellence model as a framework.

Then, we had to test that everything was represented. All the key elements were there, but would they sufficiently represent our strategy? The executive team thought we may be over-simplifying it, so we went out and tested it with groups of employees, who actually came back and said it was still looking “too busy” and asked if we could improve the images.

So, after reworking it, we came up with a final version.

We use it in combination with a managers' guide, which helps us to cascade. GKN is quite a flat organization, so it's not a steep cascade and line of sight is easier to create. The outcome was impressive and it helps employees understand the strategy – if you ask the Average Joe at GKN what our customer is looking for, the strategy big picture helps them.

It was launched at our international leadership conference by our executive sponsor, Andy Reynolds-Smith, and we beamed the whole image across the conference hall as he talked through its message; the response was great. However, even with positive feedback, you always wonder whether it'll be a disaster once it hits the field.

The results

After the strategy board had been established at various sites, we conducted a sample survey at the beginning of 2010 at our North American Powder Metal division.

Nine hundred people took the survey and there were three sets of questions we asked, categorized: Organization and method, General understanding, and Line of sight.

- **Organization and method:** “Using the strategy map picture helped me to capture what GKN's strategy is about” – 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed.
- **General understanding:** “I understand the GKN 'big picture' strategy” – 92 percent agreed or strongly agreed.
- **Line of sight:** “I am able to contribute more to developing my local plan though understanding of GKN's and my business's strategy” – 86 percent agreed or strongly agreed.

We were greatly impressed with these survey scores and, along with other qualitative data such as verbal feedback, has shown us that a visual approach is extremely effective.

By Simon Hardaker, director, group employee communications

