

Visually Telling Your Story

By Nora Carr

Once denigrated as journalism's version of light beer, infographics are now de rigueur, especially for interactive news outlets. Done well, these colorful and clever variations on standard chart and graph designs can convey a lot of information quickly.

A staple of USA Today and other easy-to-read, easier-to-scan publications, infographics work by condensing data like test scores, budget priorities, and student demographics into visual representations that audiences can grasp easily. Unlike data tables, which tend to overwhelm non-statisticians with numbers, infographics make it easy for school officials to highlight key points.

Fueled in part by the social media explosion, infographics also are popular with content aggregators, which gather and redistribute information already published online. As a result, infographic press releases, which combine snappy graphics, credible data sources, and a factoid or humor-driven content, are becoming a "go to" tool for anyone with good data or a point of view to sell.

Reinventing press releases

In many ways, infographics are simply visual aids for the digital generation. Smart marketers, however, have found that dressing up factoids in fancy graphics and sending them out generates more pick-up power than traditional e-mail versions of press releases.

Infographics are also outperforming "smart" releases, with embedded video sound bites and hotlinks to interactive content. This is particularly true on social media sites, which thrive on recycled content and social sharing through "likes" and "dislikes," "tweets" and "retweets."

By tapping into the innate desire to share new knowledge, social media is a powerful point of connection and a conduit for information. No wonder marketers find that using infographic releases helps spread information more quickly to more people.

Corporate publicists also use infographics to position top talent as "thought leaders" through the packaging of original quotes, data points, research, and opinions rather than using the traditional white paper, video testimonial, op-ed, or advertorial.

Unlike most interactive content, however, most infographic press releases do require some scrolling. Readers seem to tolerate moving past the standard screen size limit more when data is presented visually rather than via text.

Content aggregators and other digital media distribution networks want high-quality multimedia content that hooks and informs social media aficionados -- and keeps them coming back for more. (In other words, do not even think about using free clip art or relying on a spreadsheet's rudimentary graphing capabilities.)

Still new enough to stand out in a crowded inbox, infographic releases are gaining momentum by catching the eyes of time-pressed reporters and editors who are competing across media platforms to win audience share and advertisers.

Since budget cuts have slashed art budgets for most news websites, search engines, and news outlets, accessing ready-made, high-resolution art that conveys an important message represents a win for the publisher and the producer.

Reporters also like infographics because the data points come prepackaged with authoritative sources. This saves reporters time and helps editors keep online content fresh -- a constant challenge in the 24/7 digital age, where 140-character messages now dominate.

To stay relevant, more traditional media outlets are adding open-source content to the mix and no longer rely solely on reporters for news. As a result, open sourcing is creating new communications opportunities for nontraditional news generators.

Right-brain communications

Thinking and communicating visually is as much art as science, however. It takes creativity and visualization skill to turn mind-numbing spreadsheet data and pages of written analysis into compelling and concise graphical displays.

For a group that has yet to master the seven-second sound bite and probably tilts more toward the left brain than to the right, relying on pictures rather than words to communicate may be a stretch for school officials. So far, Tea Partiers and other anti-public school forces have been more active and successful than public school advocates in producing infographic press releases.

Given educators' penchant to wax poetically about the need to tailor or differentiate instruction to meet student needs, switching from wordy press releases and presentations to visually oriented communications should come somewhat naturally. Yet school board meetings and district communications are awash in reams of 10-point text often written at the collegiate level.

The educator bias toward the written -- and printed -- word continues, even though disaggregated test score data, AP exam results, graduation rates, scholarship dollars, changing student demographics, potential budget cuts, district funding sources, strategic plan measures, survey results, etc., all represent complex information and ideas that could be conveyed visually.

School board members and others who care about equity, excellence, and access for all students are failing to take advantage of the infographic trend, however.

Refuting misinformation

Once again, the naysayers are filling the void, often with half-truths and innuendo. For example, an infographic posted by Avvo, a controversial online directory and rating and referral site for doctors and lawyers, has helped fuel the myth that government workers are overpaid.

At first glance, the graphic appears factual and research-based, even though no data sources are cited. Yet, like fact-twisting pundits, the graphic fails to paint an accurate picture by eliminating data that makes more accurate comparisons possible.

An analysis of 20-year compensation trends, for example, shows that local and state employees are twice as likely as their private sector peers to have their bachelor's, or an advanced degree. Currently, only 29.5 percent of U.S. adults have a college degree as compared to 74.2 percent of school board members, and 100 percent of fully licensed public school teachers. Most states require principals and superintendents to have advanced degrees, with some requiring a doctoral degree.

When compared to private sector workers with comparable education, training, and experience, the compensation advantage for public sector workers not only evaporates, but reverses.

Rather than use data selectively as a form of propaganda or persuasion, school officials and other public school advocates should combat slanted infographics with data visualizations that tell the whole story.

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Visually bridge the gap

Here are some tips for crafting that first infographic press release:

- Social media is about conversations, not revelations. Infographic press releases work well when they jog people's thinking, or serve as conversation starters. Find successful examples from other industries by Googling "infographic press release" or "infographics."
- Identify the next planned data dump, and commit to communicating it visually rather than, or as well as, with text.
- Brainstorm with other team members various ways to present the information visually, and come up with a game plan.

- Dress up key data points using SmartArt and charting functions available in Microsoft Word and PowerPoint programs, especially if a graphic designer is not on staff or on contract to provide illustration assistance.
- Make sure to list the data source and add links to the full data set, or other relevant and related content that already is posted online.
- Fact-check the release and resist the temptation to bury negative or controversial data online or near the end of the release.
- Convert the illustration to a jpeg or pdf file format to minimize the graphic's size, make downloading easier, and prevent data tampering.
- Create two different press releases, using the same information. Present one in standard written format, and the other as an infographic. Test both with intended audience members, and see which one they prefer and why. Better yet, ask the test subjects to share key data points and see which group gets the most right.
- Send out the infographic and the standard press releases with the same data at the same time, and see which one gets the most media coverage.

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