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Unlocking the Power of Infographics

In This Chapter

▶ Seeing the value of infographics

▶ Defining an infographic designer

▶ Building your tools and techniques

▶ Using your internal resources

▶ Working with an outside professional

▶ Dealing with the decision makers

*H*umans are incredibly visual creatures. Thousands of years ago, cave-dwellers used visual images to track time, to depict their prey, and to record their celebrations. Later, civilizations created hieroglyphics and visual symbols for letters and numbers, providing a code to organize their communication. Visual communication can bridge cultures — travelers on any continent can find a pharmacy, a hospital, and the correct restroom thanks to the power of simple graphic images.

Flash back to the 1970s for a moment. Most Americans read a newspaper or two. *The New York Times* was so heavy with text that it was dubbed "The Old Gray Lady." Most households had a TV. News was broadcast three times a day, on the three major networks. Corporate reports were very dense, with pages full of text and little more than the occasional headline to break them up. The Internet as we know it today was but a dream.

Also in the 70s, newspapers and magazines began to use *infographics* — charts, maps, and diagrams — to illustrate and illuminate news stories and break up columns of gray text. Infographics have been with us for a long time, but they've matured and become more and more dynamic, especially with the advent of the Internet. Nowadays, infographics can be quite sophisticated, showing condensed ways of looking at data and figures and information. You can pack quite a lot of valuable information in a small, attractive, and entertaining piece of content.

Recognizing the Value of Visuals

Speaking of the advent of the Internet. . . . No news flash here, but we live in an ever-increasing electronic and digital age. Most folks are barraged all day by some sort of media clamoring for attention. Most people have Internet access at their fingertips via smartphone, tablet, or computer. All that "Hey, look at me!" can make a person weary, and the overload of messaging and devices has taken a toll on the human attention span.

Those folks who deliver content — be it via television news, print journalism, a corporate report, website — realize that they have a short window of opportunity to grab a viewer's attention. And with only about eight seconds to do that, enter the increasing use of infographics, which are meaty morsels of lots and lots of content in attractive, digestable, informative chunks, whether online or in print.

An increasingly multimedia and online technology climate shift has fostered an explosion of infographics within all forms of communication. The old way of communicating messages in a text-heavy manner is simply not effective anymore. There is simply too much research and science behind the power of visual storytelling to ignore. Companies and organizations cannot afford to be out of date. It's time to embrace the power of visualization, and find a way to incorporate it into what you and your company do every day.

If we haven't convinced you by now, plenty of research backs up this idea that visual communication can provide quicker, clearer comprehension of complex topics. Here are a few statistics:

✔ More than 80 percent of the learning we do takes place visually.

    www.hp.com/large/ipg/assets/bus-solutions/power-of-visual-
            communication.pdf

✔ The average person retains only 20 percent of what's read when it's delivered in text-only format.

    www.hp.com/large/ipg/assets/bus-solutions/power-of-visual-
            communication.pdf

Print isn't dead

The New York Times produces some of the best, smartest infographics in the world. Corporate reports feature charts, graphs, and illustrations to highlight information. Nonprofit organizations rely on infographics to spur potential donors and volunteers to action. Magazines like *National Geographic* create infographics that rival the excellence of their photography. Although an ever-growing number of websites and blogs compete to take the place of print vehicles, infographics still are widely used and very valuable to content providers.

✔ Images are liked on Facebook 200 percent more than text.

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www.jeffbullas.com/2012/08/27/the-facts-and-figures-about-the-
            power-of-visual-content-infographic
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✔ On average, websites register a 12-percent increase in traffic after publishing an infographic.

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www.wpvirtuoso.com/a-guide-to-content-management-marketing
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✔ The Wharton School of Business determined that when listening to presentations, 67 percent of the audience were persuaded by the verbal presentations that had accompanying visuals compared with 50 percent of the audience when it was verbal only.

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www.macrovu.com/VTVCInterEffectiveness.html
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The same Wharton study found that visual language shortens meeting time by 24 percent. That's some serious added productivity.

A great infographic leads readers on a visual journey, telling them a story along the way. Powerful infographics are able to capture people's attention in the first few seconds with a strong title and visual image, and then reel them in to digest the entire message. Infographics have become an effective way to speak for the creator, conveying information and image simultaneously.

Here's a hypothetical example to demonstrate this idea. You just completed detailed and accurate market research for your company, looking into all sorts of pinpointed information about your target demographic. The purpose of this market research is to help your sales and marketing teams better understand your customer. The results — hundreds (or thousands) of stats compiled in an Excel document — are then written up and presented in a PDF document using nothing but words.

Seeing is believing

In 2011, molecular biologist John Medina published *Brain Rules,* a fascinating account of how the brain processes information. It's a great book all around, but two rules are particularly interesting.

Rule #4: We don't pay attention to boring things.

Returning to *The New York Times* and the corporate reports examples, we know today that readers simply do not stick with material that is too dense. Medina's book suggests that humans need a spark every ten minutes or so to entice us to pay attention. Infographics can provide that spark.

Rule #10: Vision trumps all other senses.

Medina's research led him to determine that a person who hears information will remember ten percent of that information three days later. If pictures are added to that information, the subject remembers 65 percent of the information three days later.

This opens the door for great graphic presentations of information. Media outlets, corporations, nonprofit groups, sports leagues, and more now know that telling their stories with pictures as well as with words helps attract and retain readers.

This shouldn't be a problem, right? The results are so compelling that people will be willing to read 50 pages of findings, right? Sorry. They won't. You can have the greatest data in the world, but if you don't have the proper way to communicate this data effectively, you won't get anywhere.

The solution? Create a visual to showcase the market research findings in a way that people will actually digest. For the average Joe, choosing between wading through a 50-page text-heavy PDF or perusing a visual like the infographic presented in Figure 1-1 is an obvious choice.
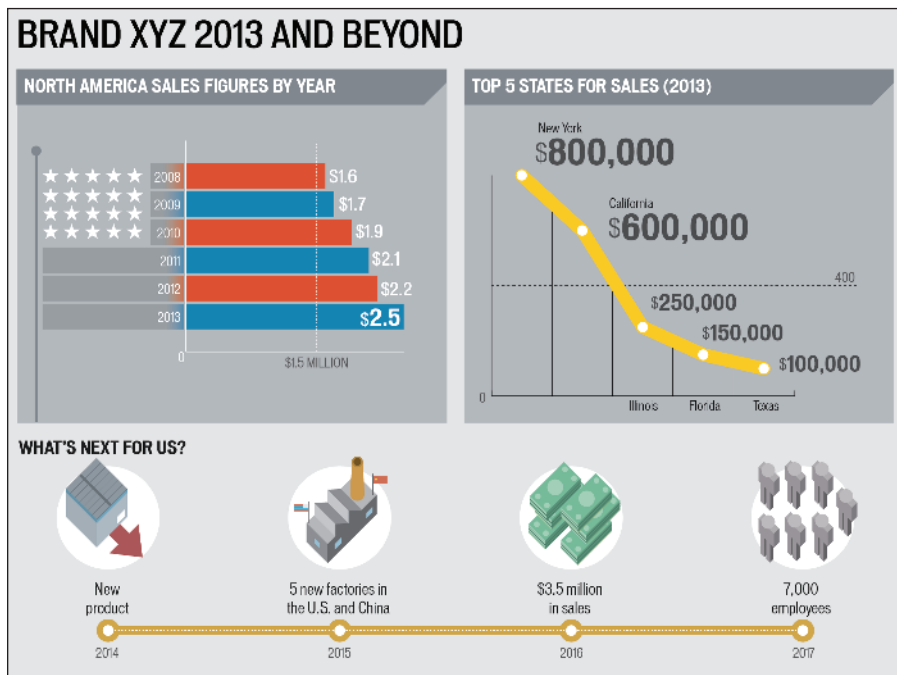

BRAND XYZ 2013 AND BEYOND

NORTH AMERICA SALES FIGURES BY YEAR

2008 $1.6
2009 $1.7
2010 $1.9
2011 $2.1
2012 $2.2
2013 $2.5

0   $1.5 MILLION

TOP 5 STATES FOR SALES (2013)

New York
$800,000

California
$600,000

400

$250,000
$150,000
$100,000

Illinois   Florida   Texas

WHAT'S NEXT FOR US?

New product — 2014
5 new factories in the U.S. and China — 2015
$3.5 million in sales — 2016
7,000 employees — 2017

Figure 1-1: Concise, informative graphic that's easy to consume.

The power of infographics is that it keeps things short and sweet. Instead of some 50-page tome, you could present three or four pages of infographics, with a few pointed sentences, to communicate your key data points.

The concise, pointed nature of an infographic works well with the fact that people's attention span is decreasing significantly. This is especially the case online, where every website on the planet is competing for your reader's

attention at any given moment. It's far too easy for someone to come to your website, lose interest and be gone all within a few seconds. It's often said that you have four to six seconds to grab someone's attention when they come to your website. Are you going to accomplish this by having a lot of text and a couple of charts or by having a stunning visualization front and center?

So You Want to Be an Infographic Designer

When you were a kid, and some well-meaning adult asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up, what did you say? A professional athlete? A doctor? Dancer? Firefighter?

We've never met a soul who set out to be an infographic designer — but we certainly know some great ones. A few followed logical paths toward infographic design, and a few more wound crazily through other careers and professional skills before coming to infographic design. Many professional infographic designers are artists or writers. Some are graphic designers, whose primary work responsibilities involve page layout and creation of art elements.

But this is a DIY world, and you can indeed teach yourself the art of the infographic. Stick with us as we talk about everything you'll need to do so, from research skills to technical tools.

Filling Your Toolbox

We spend a lot of time discussing specific creation (software) tools and techniques later in the book, particularly in Chapter 3 (designing your approach to infographics), Chapter 9 (Adobe Illustrator), and Chapter 10 (Adobe Photoshop).

Assuming you're just starting out with infographics, though, start with a good foundation. Our first recommendation is to be a voracious reader. Whether you prefer print or an online version, take a look at a few newspapers every day. Read something national in scope (*The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal*) and a local newspaper, too. Because infographics distill data — sometimes, lots of data — consider yourself as a journalist who not only reports (without bias) but does research as well. Sure, graphics play a major role (go figure) in infographics, but so does the data underlying your presentation.

As an infographic designer, you're not just an artist. The best infographics designers are really considered "data journalists." The more infographics you take time to really examine, you'll start to get a sense of what type of material can be turned into a graphic.

As for more tangible tools you'll need, make sure that your computer is in good working order and can support the design software you'll need. It's a designer's worst nightmare to have repeated computer crashes as deadline looms. You'll obviously need an online connection as well as basic office productivity apps, Adobe Acrobat, some sort of photo management app, and Adobe Creative Suite. Can't forget about the behind-the-scenes code creation if you're going to post online (and you should). Some folks like to create animated or interactive infographics (or add sound or movie files) program in Flash, but that can cause problems (we talk about that later). Probably the safest bet is to use HTML5 and CSS3 and JavaScript.

We're pretty proud of the information we present later in the book, but if you'd like some face-to-face tutorials, keep an eye out for classes in programs like Illustrator and Photoshop. Continuing education programs at local colleges and high schools often provide excellent ways to learn the basics of new computer software.

Good planning before your project gets rolling can save you from a lot of stress later.

Assembling Your Team

In this section, we assume that you're not working alone. Perhaps you work for a company looking to expand its marketing efforts by placing infographics on social media. Maybe you're a writer for an online news site, and you're hoping to generate more infographics. Or maybe you're a university researcher, and it's dawned on you that your research could use some graphic presentation to make sure people are reading and understanding your work.

Bottom line: You need to assemble some internal resources and work closely with the people who will make your plans come to fruition.

Using internal resources

When a company decides to use its own employees to create infographics, they are choosing to work with people who know the brand and the messaging and feel of the company better than anyone outside the company ever will. Gut-checks like this are definitely very important when an infographic needs to align with a company's brand.

Using in-house staffers also helps the assigning staffer confer with the artists more easily than if using external freelancers. Granted, with the rise of telecommuting and people working remotely, this benefit is definitely lessened a bit.

If you're going to build your infographic in-house, you'll need to make sure you have people dedicated to the following tasks/roles:

- ✔ **Brainstorming the idea for the infographic.**
- ✔ **Researching data to support the infographic and help tell the story.**
- ✔ **Fact-checking the data.**

  Fact-checking should definitely be done by someone other than the person who did the research.

- ✔ **Writing the copy.**
- ✔ **Editing the copy.**

  Again, have this done by someone other than the copy writer.

- ✔ **Coming up with the infographic concept and design ideas.**
- ✔ **Designing the infographic.**
- ✔ **Reviewing the entire infographic.**
- ✔ **Implementing any changes requested by supervisors.**

This is not to say you need a different person for each task, but whoever you put in charge of the infographic should be mindful of all those duties. Depending upon the size and scope of your project, anywhere from one person to a team of three or four or more could take it on.

Having a tech person or two in the loop and on your side is a good idea. In today's digital world, you want to make sure that all your work is compatible with the website, blog, or document that will eventually showcase your work.

In a larger company, the person you have in mind to work on infographics may have many other responsibilities as well. Your graphic may or may not take precedence. Depending upon your project's priority level, you may have to wait before a request is handled. If your deadline is going to be tight, we recommend making sure that the artist can complete your work in the timeline that *you* set. Sometimes you can help an artist clear a little time in his schedule by asking various department heads to be mindful of your project.

Working with your online team

Your online team is the group of people who handle all the content that goes onto a website. At this point, virtually every company has one although it might be outsourced. The online team is likely to include coders, web designers, and any number of technical support staffers.

The online team knows the technical requirements of your particular website better than anyone. One important element that you'll have to be mindful of as an infographic designer is the size limitations for content on a website. This is more important than it may seem.

Space on websites is measured in pixels. When you're preparing to place your infographic, there may be other permanent items on the page, like advertisements, or links to other areas of your website. This being the case, you need to know how many pixels your infographic should be to fit on the page properly and co-exist with other permanent content on the page.

The online team will also coordinate with you about the file formats you need to deliver to them, how long it will take to get the infographic onto the site (as with other teams at your company, they will likely be getting pulled in many different directions with requests), and other important tasks to launch the infographic.

Getting your social media team ready

The social media team will need to be prepared in advance of you launching the infographic. Given the importance of social media in the marketing and promotion of the infographic, everyone needs to be on the same page.

Your company's social media experts (which may include marketing staffers, the webmaster, social media strategists, among others) will help you determine the best day and time to release your infographic and begin marketing and promoting it. (More on this is discussed in Chapter 13.) Bear in mind that the social media team will be balancing other requests to have material tweeted or posted to the company's Facebook page. So again, collaboration is key: The more notice you give people about your project, the more smoothly things will go.

Speaking of professionals . . .

The obvious pro to hiring an infographic agency is very simple: They do nothing but create infographics, every single day. Some obvious bias here. Justin is, after all, the CEO of Infographic World. Here is a brief list of projects that Fortune 500 companies have hired us (at Infographic World), to do:

- ✔ Help build more engaging PowerPoint presentations that don't leave audiences with glazed eyes.

- ✔ Create website content to help establish a client as a thought leader within its industry and drive more traffic to its website.

- ✔ Improve SEO ranks by creating and placing infographics online, with the goal of getting other websites to link to them.

- ✔ Create a visually stunning annual report or investor report.

- ✔ Communicate market research.

- ✔ Release content on social media channels to entice readers and encourage readers to share that content.

- ✔ Create brochures and other documents for conferences.

Working with the social media team can also help you set the tone for your project. Depending on the content of the infographic and the target audience, you can set a tone that's serious or snarky, news-oriented or feature-focused. This can help guarantee that you get the readers you want.

Working with a marketing team

These days, one of the primary goals for creators of infographics is to have them go viral. This generates traffic and links back to your website, which will help promote your work, your blog, or the company you're working for.

If you're creating a graphic for a company with a marketing team, taking advantage of the marketing team's insight and expertise early on will pay dividends in the end. The staff members most likely to handle these duties may fall under the labels "marketing," "public relations," or "communications." These folks

- Prepare campaigns to get exposure for the infographic by building lists of websites to place the infographic, finding the best contact people, and determining how and when to pitch your infographic.

- Know what sorts of topics, statistics, and angles will be most effective in getting the infographic out to the masses and how content appeals to various audiences.

- Put more pairs of eyes on the infographic, finding things in the approach that might be misguided or a poor fit for your target audience, and share their take on how content appeals to various audiences.

Going with the professionals

The alternative to building an infographic in-house is to hire an infographic agency to build it for you. Like with the internal route, there are pros and cons for either path. You first need to determine whether you have the budget. Depending upon the company, the cost to get an infographic built by someone skilled can range from $700 to $6,000, depending on the size of the graphic and the scope of the content you want displayed, not to mention the quality of the infographic agency you want to hire.

Most agencies focused on infographics have systems in place to create projects efficiently and at a high quality. You may flinch at some quotes, but using an outside agency may actually be less expensive in the long run when you factor in the number of internal staffers and the cost of diverting them from their ordinary responsibilities.

Working with Decision Makers

Whether you're working solo or as part of a team, the first and most important thing to do is keep the decision makers within your company or organization in the loop the entire time. Unless you're the owner of the company (and even then, there might be investors who could qualify), you'll have someone (or several "someones") who needs to approve the infographic before it's put onto your client's website or into company marketing and sales materials. Here are a couple real-world examples you might encounter:

- ✔ If you're working for a corporate client — say, designing charts and graphs for an annual report — you will probably work with everyone from the company's art director to the CEO before getting sign off on your work.

- ✔ If you're working with a team of journalists on a big event — say, covering the Olympics for Associated Press — your infographics will have to pass muster with sports editors, news editors, top managers, and ultimately newspaper editors all around the world.

Real-world disclaimer: Our firm has had instances where all the work took place before the decision makers entered the process — *never a good idea*. The last thing you want is to go through the entire process of building an infographic — whether done internally or by hiring an infographic agency — only to have the decision makers see it after it's fully complete. You're just tempting fate that the decision makers will want major changes or disagree entirely with how the vision of the infographic was brought to life.

You should work *with* decision makers — not around them or against them — to make sure the final infographic project meets everyone's needs. Here's how things can go awry and how they could have been avoided.

1. **You get a great assignment to create an infographic for a large corporate client. Congratulations!**

2. **Your contact person is a midlevel marketing manager.**

    Wrong: You assume that she is the only person who will approve your work.

    Right: You immediately find out whether anyone else will be signing off on your project.

3. **You begin creating and revising your infographic. This stage can take weeks or months, depending on your client's needs and deadlines.**

    Wrong: You continue to work exclusively with your initial contact person. You're incorporating her suggestions, unaware that other decision makers haven't seen your work.

    Right: You make sure that your contact person is fully informing her boss as well as anyone else who will ultimately sign off on your infographic.

4. **You start to look for buy-in and approval.**

> *Wrong:* The marketing manager signs off on your work. Trouble is, his boss hates it — and only now do you realize that the marketing manager wasn't the top decision maker. So, you begin revising your work. Then you find out that the boss's boss loved your original product. The decision makers begin revising their vision of your work. Your previous weeks of work are down the drain. After another couple of weeks of revisions, the company signs off on your project. The job is finally done, but it wasn't the wisest use of time and resources.

> *Right:* You make corrections and changes according to the whole team's specifications. Your infographic gets final approval and is published. Well done!

If you're not the final decision maker at your company, do yourself a favor and make sure to identify all decision makers upfront and then keep them in the loop as you work on your infographics. There's just too much time and money to be lost and wasted by waiting until the end of the process to get their input.