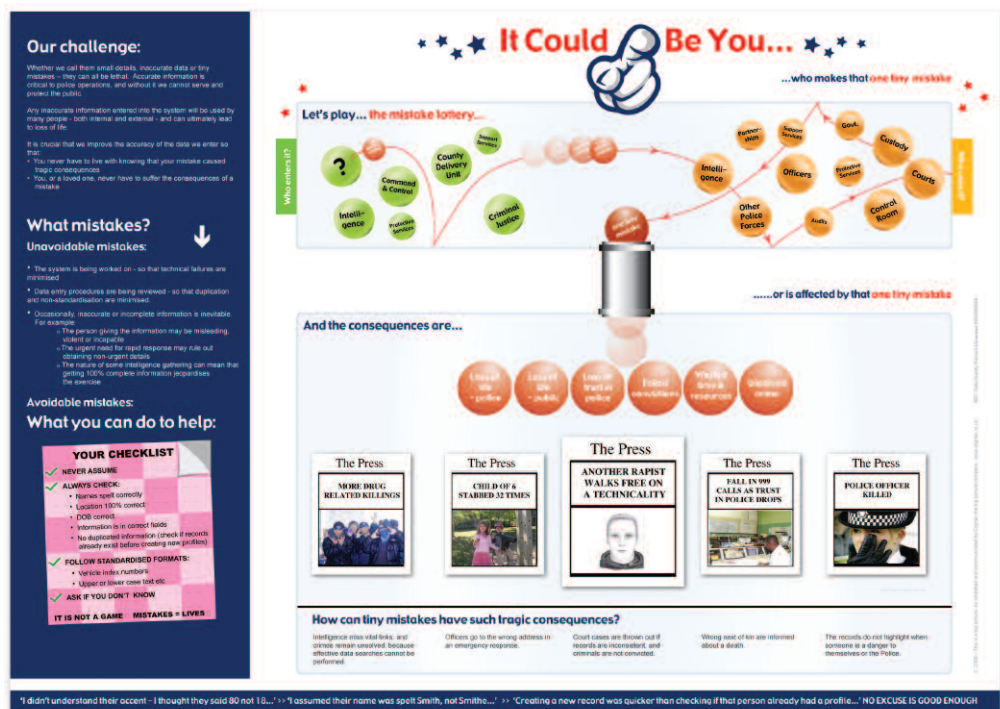


# The Visual Advantage

When you're explaining a complicated topic or trying to reach a jaded audience, innovative imagery can give you an edge

by Ellen Coomber



In this poster aimed at employees of a regional police constabulary in the U.K., a lottery theme illustrates how one tiny mistake can have an enormous impact, and plays off the familiar “It could be you.”

As an “industry,” visual communication is still in its infancy. We all recognize and use visual communication in our everyday lives, from understanding fire exit signs to sketching a map to show a friend how to find our house. However, the development of an industry that harnesses its power into a defined format and enables the replication of a successful form of communication is in the early stages of development. Although this makes it difficult to define and to map, it also makes it an exciting and untamed player in an uncharted field. It’s all about discovery, growth and unlimited boundaries.

A common theme in the development of any discipline is the development of a common language, and as an “infant,” the language of visual communication is far from standardized. Visual communication means different things to different people, and the boundaries between what different professionals do within this industry are also unclear. Visual tools may be used to capture meetings, open dialogues, aid discussions, get across a complex point or help people navigate a process. In some cases these tools may be used unconsciously. It’s the conscious, deliberate and measured use of these tools that has created our fledgling industry.

Everyone in this developing space is finding their own niche. For our company, it’s using words, structure and images to communicate to people—or, as we’ve defined it, “the art of rapidly and clearly communicating a complex topic using a combination of structure, images and text.” We have created a focus on “rapid” and “complex” in response to today’s business environment. Visual tools enable effective communication, understanding and engagement in an increasingly complex world. We are all overwhelmed, and visual thinking and the parallel trend of simplicity are gaining momentum. We need relevant information that we can quickly and easily understand. Words alone are not enough to deal with today’s complex business problems. In a time-strapped

## Seeing the big picture: Make your message matter

- 1. Use meaningful titles to draw the viewer in** and summarize the information presented (for example, “High Growth Investing” rather than “Introduction”).
- 2. Try creating a visual theme.** As per the police case study, we used a familiar theme (the lottery) to convey a serious message. The audience had been bombarded with “serious” messages, and so they needed a different angle to embed the message.
- 3. Guide readers through your communication.** Using strong navigation enables a message to stand on its own when required.
- 4. Use visual techniques to help organize and differentiate information.** Distinguishing between elements on the page helps the reader assign priorities to them. Intense colors, for example, showcase important information, different textures distinguish elements of information, and giving areas of text a structure helps people understand them from a distance.

- 5. Use anchor images to draw the reader in.** The anchor image may be the core of the message being communicated. For example, an ad about alleviating poverty may use the image of a starving child as its anchor. This image is where the eye rests and sets the scene for the story being communicated.
- 6. Use branding.** Reinforce your message by creating new brand elements—a new image that supports your message but also links into the company brand. This new brand element can then be used elsewhere in the business, in everything from marketing materials to the intranet, constantly reinforcing your message.
- 7. Infographics can help simplify complex ideas or communicate data.** However, be wary of “chart-junk.” A simple chart is far more effective than a busy, complicated chart.

—E.C.

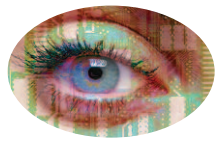
society, our goal is to bridge the gap between the 10-second headline and the 10-hour presentation with a visual message that can be communicated and understood in 10 minutes. Resistance to change and losing sales are just two challenges businesses face today. Everyone wants to be comfortable with their environment; change threatens to upset the status quo and thus can bring resistance. Change communicators have an enormous remit, including restructuring, mergers, business developments and behavioral change. With today’s surplus of messages, ensuring that the right message stands out is critical.

### Playing the lottery

A regional U.K. police constabulary recently identified the need for behavioral change: It needed to reduce the amount of inaccurate data entry by the

administrative staff. Before they could change their behavior, however, they needed to understand the reasons for and benefits of change, and the impact that their role has on the police and the public. Every day, vast amounts of information are entered into the database. This information is used in a variety of ways to prevent and solve crime. Everyone involved in frontline policing is aware of how inaccurate data affects them—it wastes their time, puts them in danger and reduces public confidence. But they are not always aware of how their mistakes can affect a huge range of people. Incorrect information leads to connections being missed and, in the worst-case scenario, loss of life. Through

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## visual appeal

### i vizthink, therefore i am

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interviews and analysis, we realized it was critical to illustrate to the staff the impact and consequences of inaccurate data on other people.

We chose a lottery theme to demonstrate how one tiny mistake can have serious consequences. On a large poster, pinballs depicting errors pop into the “mistake lottery” machine, and people who use the data or are affected by it get mixed in too. The consequences range from wasted time to loss of life, and the impact is heightened through the hard-hitting newspaper headlines underneath. Conveying a sense of community (“our challenge”) and understanding (acknowledging there are “unavoidable mistakes”) ensures that the audience is engaged without raising their defenses.

The familiarity of lottery imagery and terminology like “It could be you” engages people and challenges the “it’ll never happen to me” attitude.

### Mapping it out

U.K.-based PEO Projects offers a full range of HR services, enabling small businesses to focus on their core strengths to develop and drive their business performance. But the company was losing sales because potential clients did not understand the proposition or the full range of PEO’s services. What’s more, the message delivered by different salespeople was unclear and inconsistent.

PEO’s managers knew that the first 10 minutes of a meet-

ing have the most impact on a busy executive. They needed these people to understand, remember, engage and most important act by taking up an audit or purchasing transformation consulting from PEO Projects. The sales team needed to explain clearly and simply the range of PEO’s services to HR directors and managers (or to the CEO or business owner directly).

The solution was a visual communication piece—a road map—that not only lays out what PEO Projects does (its value proposition), but also helps prospective clients realize and identify the need within their business and the process they need to enact to achieve this. The use of imagery on the map brings an otherwise intangible product to life, and guides both the salesperson and the client through a simple process of explanation and identification of need; a circle featuring illustrations depicting PEO’s offerings has far greater impact than a written list. By showing the services visually, they are easily understood and the whole range is instantly accessible. The overarching message clearly communicated by the images at the top left and right is that without using PEO Projects, companies risk loss of talent and reduced growth.

The simple navigation, meaningful titles, appropriate images and relevant branding produced a clear and effective multi-use piece. It provides a basis for an easy, structured and professional prequalification meeting, and leaves potential

clients with something tangible. Since it was introduced, PEO Projects has shortened its sales cycle and is closing deals more quickly.

The solutions offered by visual communications are extensive and varied. We have faced sales challenges in an uneducated market, complicated or undifferentiated propositions, and unscalable business models. Resistance to change or engagement, buy-in to a vision, and credibility issues have all been successfully overcome with visual communication. Despite being a fledgling industry, there are a fast-growing number of people around the world who are learning to provide, or to use, the expanding skills and capabilities of this exciting, effective and highly varied form of communication.

Although the principles have been around for decades, it is today’s increase in complexity that has meant more and more people are going visual. Will you be one of them? •

### about the author

Ellen Coomber is a director at Cognac UK Ltd. and president of IABC/U.K. She is based in London and specializes in visual communication techniques that help clients communicate complex messages to staff and partners.