



Seeing is Believing

A Guide to Visual Storytelling Best Practices



resource media
Unlock the Power of Communication



Flickr user rsgranne

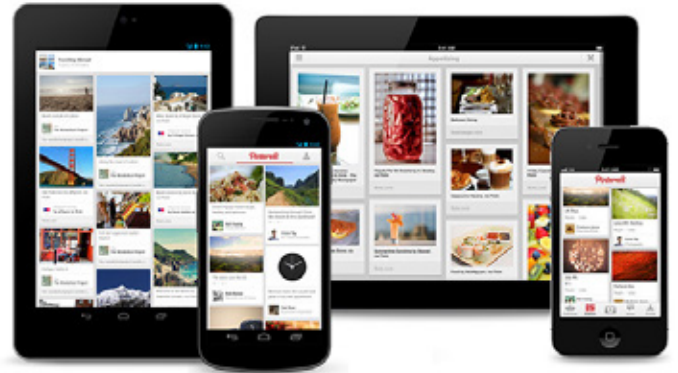
The Power Past Coal campaign is spearheading the effort to block the export of Powder River Basin coal from ports in the Pacific Northwest. When it came time to conduct focus groups for message development, Resource Media helped the campaign test visuals, too. In port communities, the locals were largely supportive of proposals to construct export facilities, even in the face of opposition messaging. They believed in the promise of jobs, and envisioned a clean, safe, high-tech operation. But when they saw pictures of long open rail cars and coal dust pollution, people began changing their minds. In his analysis, public opinion researcher Dave Metz from FM3 wrote,

“ It is impossible to overstate how effective these images were in building opposition to the project.”

The Visual Revolution Has Begun

Dear Colleague,

The opportunities for telling good stories continue to evolve and expand all around us. Technology has made it possible for everyone to be a reporter or publisher. Yet while there have been great advances over the years in word craft, far less attention has been paid to the science of visual communications. Resource Media embarked on a research project to better understand and address this imbalance; this report shares some of our initial discoveries and recommendations.



To get you started, here are a few statistics to ponder:

- 1 By the end of 2012, 300 million pictures a day were uploaded to Facebook, 40 million to Instagram.
- 2 Ten percent of all of the photographs made in the entire history of photography were made last year.

A medium that has been around since before the Civil War may just now be entering its golden age. The advent of cell phone cameras, videos and photo-sharing websites has a lot to do with it. But there is a larger underlying impetus that is rooted in millennia of human evolution. We are a visual species.

This brief guide explains why images matter more than ever, and how you can start incorporating this reality into an effective communications strategy.

We invite you to join the visual revolution. Read on to learn more about the science of visual communications and how you can put this knowledge into action today to communicate in the most powerful way possible. Seeing is believing, so let's get started.

Sincerely,
Liz Banse
Resource Media

“ All rebellions understand that to control a country, the pictures must also be controlled.”

— California State University, Fullerton Professor of Communications Paul Martin Lester

The Three Principles of Visual Communications

1 Humans are visual first, verbal second.



Genta Masuda

Scientists have a name for this: the pictorial superiority effect. The visual cortex is the largest system in the human brain. The visual sense dominates. Study after study bears this out. Effectively pairing words with pictures and video enhances attention, memory, recall, and believability. For example, in one study when information was presented orally, people remembered only about 10 percent of what they heard when tested 72 hours later. That figure jumped to 65 percent when pictures were added.²

From the earliest stages of cognitive development, our brains organize the world around us by processing visual information.

“ Humans are extremely visual: We think largely in images, not words. It’s important to be rationally on-message. But it’s even more imperative to be on-emotion.”

— Dan Hill, author of *Emotionomics*

² Medina, John. *Brain Rules*. Seattle: Pear Press. 2008. P. 234.

2 Our decisions and actions are based more on emotional reactions than rational thought.

Antonio Damasio was one of the first doctors to record that his patients who suffered damage to the emotional regions of their brains had immense trouble making decisions. In 1994 he published *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, which *Science Humaines* cited as one of 20 books that has changed the vision of the world. Today's neuroscientists, using the latest brain scanning technology, have confirmed this: tap a person's emotions and you have a much greater probability of influencing his or her decision-making. Good visuals make people feel first, and think second. Effective pictures and videos evoke powerful emotions. Emotions drive decisions. Let emotions be the initial filter for selecting one picture over another.



Scientists use brain scanning technology to understand human decision making.

3 Visuals are the most effective communications vehicles for evoking emotion and getting people to take action.



Madison Avenue was built on this very premise. It is why advertisers spend far more time wrestling over their choice of pictures than they do over the words they use. They know that images have the power to grab people emotionally in a way that words alone cannot; they also realize how important the visual element is in determining the way consumers view products, companies, organizations and issues.

With their ads, they create desire in consumers. They focus on the emotional pay-off elements of their product and tap into deep-seated longings. People buy their products in the hopes that this will bring them masculinity, love, wealth, freedom or other desires.

The rationale for paying close attention to visuals when you are trying to get people to make a decision or change behavior is clear. However, understanding that pictures are important isn't enough. You need to be intentional about how you use them. This is where the art of communications strategy meets the science of human behavior.

Seven Rules of the Road

Consider these seven Rules of the Road as you look for ways to maximize the tremendous impact visuals can have on the people you are trying to reach each and every day.

1. Don't assume others will react to a picture or video the same way you do. Test visuals with your target audience.

Use this...



Flickr user Let Ideas Compete

..or this?



Flickr user wreford

The smokestack picture above would seem to make sense for a group trying to fight air pollution. Fortunately the group decided to listen before leaping. They tested the picture with key supporters and discovered that major donors were turned off by the image—it struck them as too anti-business. These donors wanted to see what they were saving, not just what they were fighting against. Spending some money on image testing kept this organization from making an expensive mistake. Have your visual vocabulary follow the same formula as your messaging – threats need to be coupled with solutions. They can be at their most powerful when delivered together.

Image testing is easy and affordable

The great news is that there are lots of cost-effective ways to test images. New online tools have made it easy and affordable to conduct side-by-side or A/B tests on websites and emails. In fact, with most email programs, A/B testing is free. The screen captures below show an A/B test used in fundraising emails by the Obama 2012 team. The test showed the image on the right to have a 19% higher conversion rate.

A few hundred dollars is sufficient to run several ads concurrently on Facebook to see which headline and photo combinations generate the most clicks. On YouTube you can test which stills from a video reel in the most viewers, and you can track repins and likes of various image types on Pinterest. As the digital landscape evolves, traditional opinion research firms and online companies are developing new, creative, inexpensive ways to test how various images perform before finalizing the design of potentially costly marketing campaigns.

CONTROL



OBAMA BIDEN

DINNER WITH BARACK
Your chance to meet the President

GET STARTED

DINNER WITH BARACK

YOU'RE INVITED.
WE'LL COVER YOUR AIRFARE.

OBAMA BIDEN

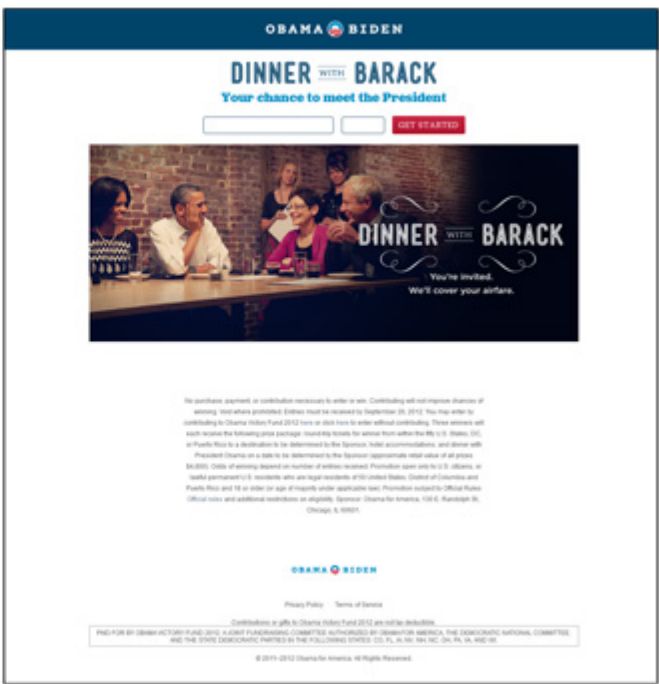
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IMAGE VARIATION



OBAMA BIDEN

DINNER WITH BARACK
Your chance to meet the President

GET STARTED

DINNER WITH BARACK

You're invited.
We'll cover your airfare.

OBAMA BIDEN

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↑ +19%

The Obama 2012 campaign rewrote the rulebook for using rigorous testing to secure effective engagement.

<http://ly.lanuk.net>

2. Pair your pictures with words for highest impact and to cement them deeper into your audience's memory.



Pictures and text reinforce one another. In cognitive science this is called dual coding theory. When we take in visual information alongside verbal information, our brain's ability to encode it to long-term memory is significantly enhanced. One University of Cambridge study showed that combining visuals with text increased learning by 89 percent over text-only information.³



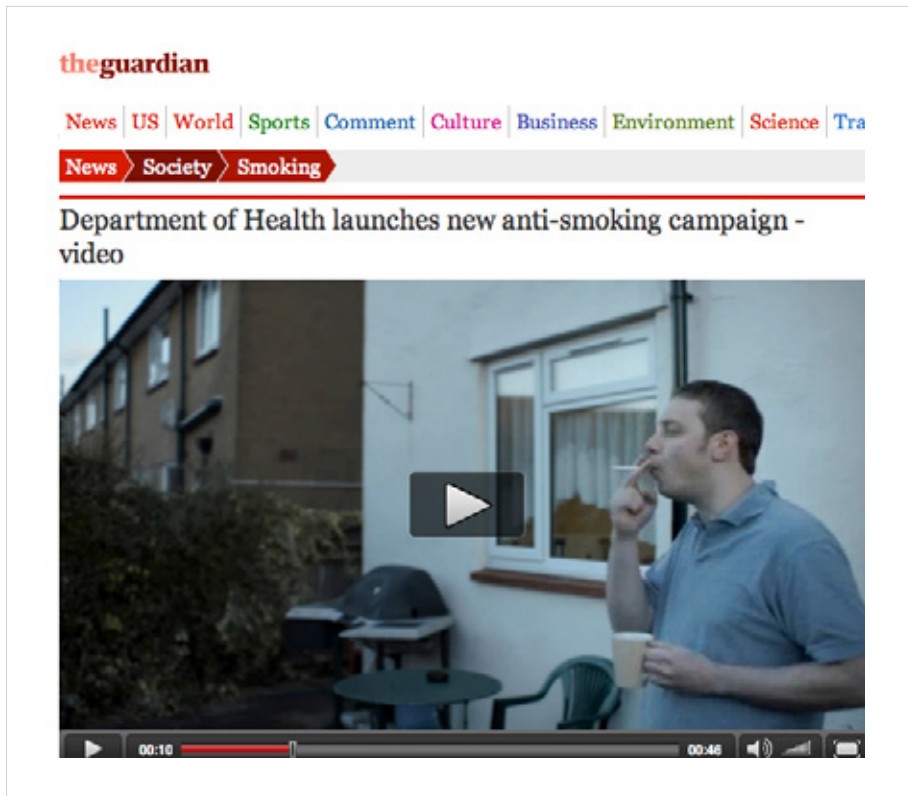
Research by KISSmetrics, a web analytics software company, showed that captions under images on websites are read on average 300 percent more than the body copy of the story with which those images appear.⁴ If your pictures are going out via social media, consider integrating captions into the pictures so that they can travel together throughout the social web. These social memes can go viral precisely because the message – humorous or serious – is not lost when the picture gets shared over and over again on a network like Facebook.



Two pictures, seven words and this story went viral with 40,500 likes, 36,700 shares and more than 3,500 comments on the Latino Rebels Facebook page as of press time.

³ Mayer, Richard E. 2001. *Multimedia Learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
⁴ <http://blog.kissmetrics.com/shocking-truth-about-graphics/>

3. Make sure your images match your message.



Show, don't tell. Our brains are designed to heed visual cues, so it's critical photos carry the message we're trying to send.

If your visuals send one message and your words send another you create a disconnect in your audience's mind. Don't, for example, pair a devastating picture with a hopeful headline. The visuals will win the battle against words every time. Why? Think back on the first principle of visual communications: The visual sense dominates and will override the verbal message if they are not working in concert.

Here's a good example of this principle at work. This anti-smoking ad shows a person smoking, the idea being that the accompanying audio message will turn people away from cigarettes. However, Joseph Cappella, a Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, found that if you show people smoking in anti-smoking ads, it has an unintended effect of encouraging, not deterring the use of cigarettes. In spite of the fact that the written messages detail how bad smoking is, the social cues in the images drive people in the exact opposite direction.

4. Use genuine, not generic pictures.



Kathleen Hennessy, Picture World Hope

Authentic and memorable.

We recognize authenticity when we see it. Eye tracking studies have shown that people can intuitively distinguish stock images that merely serve as decorative filler from images that come from an organization's own work. Take candid photos of the people you serve and the places where you work. Avoid staging photos that look contrived.

One good test to determine whether a photo has true emotional impact or is simply filler is to try and write a caption or cutline for it. If you can't write a caption for the photo that relates to the point of the body copy surrounding it, the chances are good your photo does not belong there.



Fake and forgettable.

5. First impressions matter! Invest the most in the first picture your audience sees, and in overall design quality.

The human brain is programmed to give first impressions top billing. We evolved to react quickly at the first sign of danger or the appearance of a potential meal in order to survive. What's more, the first impressions that stick are often nearly instinctive, rooted in our values and beliefs, our likes and dislikes, our pre-conceived notions, our age, nationality, gender, and even genetic predisposition.

Think of the first picture your audience might see in any communication you develop as the "hook." But make sure you are hooking the emotion you want. Don't confuse the most beautiful photo with the most effective photo. The two can be very different.

Here's an example. This picture of a wolf on the prowl is a gorgeous photo, particularly if you are a group dedicated to protecting wolves in the wild. Yet to most people, it still screams "predator", triggering deep-seated emotions that get us ready to fight or run.



Beautiful? Yes. Effective? No.



Klaus Pommerenke

This photo, however, triggers very different emotions – our instinct to protect and nurture our young and our strong value for family. It is pretty easy to guess which would be the preferable first impression for a wolf protection organization.

The success of your visual storytelling also hinges on how it is packaged and presented – that is, your overall visual design. People form an opinion of your website, for example, in a mere fraction of a second. It is the design, the look and the feel, that is influencing people's first impressions, not the content, no matter how lovely your prose.

6. To use pictures effectively, be diligent about taking them...



James Balog/Extreme Ice Survey

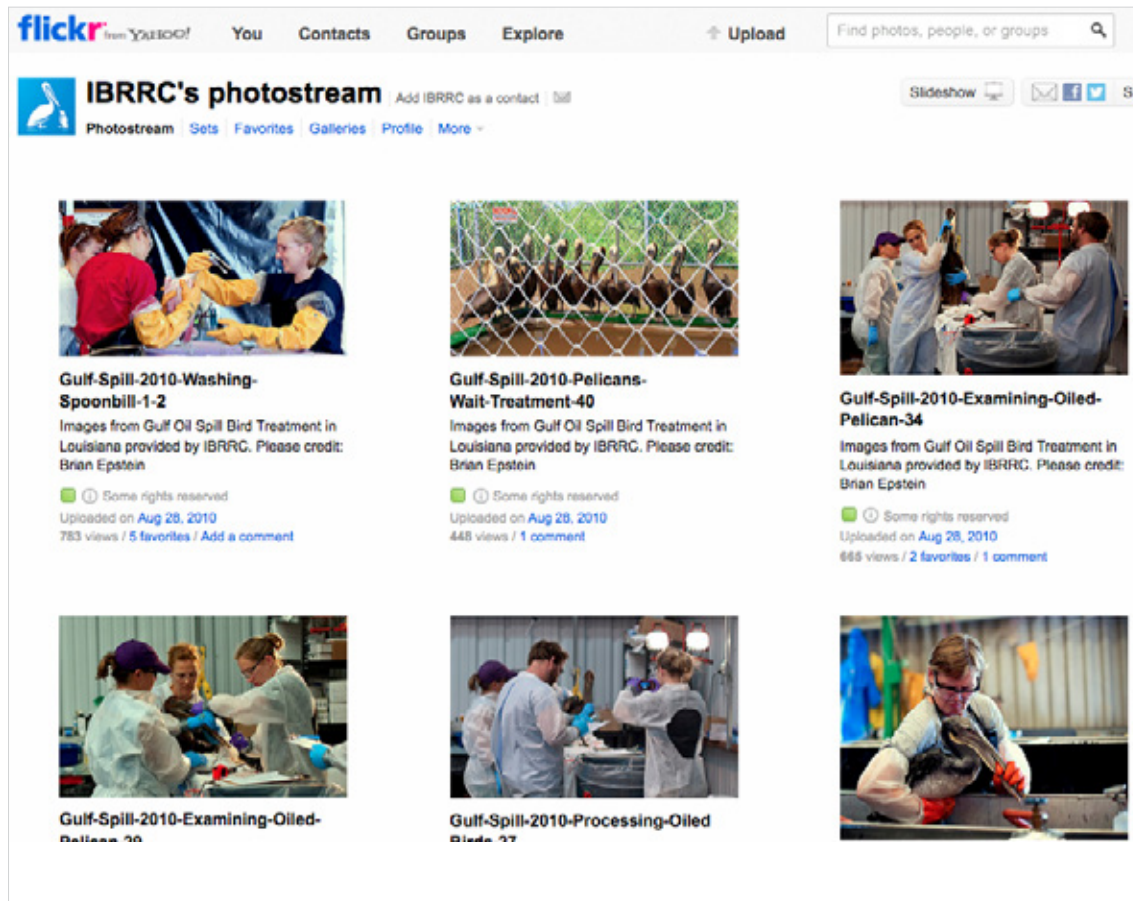
Take photos wherever you might be...

It will be difficult to use images effectively if you are scrambling to find pictures every time you need them. The most effective photos will, of course, reflect the work you do on the front lines. Carry a camera with you at all times to capture unique, candid moments whenever they unfold.

Organize a photography workshop for your staff where they can learn simple, but important techniques, such as lighting, angles and composition, for creating interesting photographs. Commit yourself to refreshing your photos often. People can spot it when old photos are used, so keep an eye out for styles, scenery and other environmental nuances that can quickly date an image.

You can also get great photos from your supporters or you can mine the Internet for photos. Make sure you have the legal rights to use them and that you use proper attribution. If you are looking for free, legal-to-use photos on the Internet, the Creative Commons is the place to go.

...and storing them for easy sharing.



Use online libraries to connect with your audiences.

Hiring a professional photographer or videographer can have a measurable effect on brand perception, raising your supporters' level of emotional connection and engagement. Budget for photography and video like you would for website and other design work. High quality design without high quality visuals is a waste of money.

But collecting pictures alone is not enough. You also need to be able to lay hands on them quickly and make them available to the media and the public. Websites like Flickr and Vimeo are excellent resources for archiving and cataloging your image collections.

In 2010, Resource Media helped International Bird Rescue with communications during the Gulf oil spill as they worked around the clock capturing, washing, rehabilitating and releasing oiled wildlife, mostly birds. One of the first things we did was set up a Flickr album to document their work. We made the library easily searchable, promoted it heavily and invited media to use the images. Their Flickr album was accessed 291,000 times and resulted in global media coverage, which gave a huge lift to their fundraising and membership efforts. Can you imagine the nonprofit having to email those photos one by one to media outlets in the midst of 24/7 oil spill work? It would not have been humanly possible.

7. People relate to people in pictures. Choose your subjects carefully.



Give Hope & Possibility in honor of someone special.
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Lives We Impact
Help Us Expand

Stop Hunger Now Responds to the Haiti Crisis.
READ MORE



Common ground between your cause and your audience can quickly be established through pictures of people. People, people, people – we cannot reinforce this point enough. But choose those people pics with an eye to what works best. For example, we are biologically programmed not to look away from people looking straight at us. We watch others' faces – their eyes, their expressions – to gauge what they are feeling. It is the way we instinctively try to judge whether we are encountering a friend or a foe. Avoid pictures of people wearing sunglasses. We think people are hiding something when we can't see their eyes.

The eyes have it! When subjects make eye contact, they connect with the viewer.

Photo by Stephen Mitchell

“Of all of our inventions for mass communication, pictures still speak the most universally understood language.”

— Walt Disney

We also connect better with people who are most like us. The 2012 “I’m a Mormon” campaign used this principle when showing people of many different ages, occupations and ethnic backgrounds above the simple caption “I’m a Mormon.” The campaign was meant to make the Mormon Church seem more accessible, more mainstream, by getting people to recognize themselves in at least one of these pictures. If you showcase diversity and your organization is not actually diverse, though, this strategy can easily backfire. The pictures you use should reflect who your organization really represents.



We relate to people who are like us.



Flickr user Henry

Babies provoke an especially powerful emotional response. One experiment conducted in the streets of Edinburgh, Scotland in 2009 reveals our altruism when it comes to babies. The researchers planted 240 “lost wallets” all over the city and found that the ones that had photos of babies in them were returned a whopping 88 percent of the time. Compare this to the wallets containing photos of elderly couples, which were only returned 28 percent of the time, and those with no photos in them were returned only 14 percent of the time. ⁵

Visuals drive emotions. Emotions drive decisions. Decisions lead to action.

⁵ <http://www.neurosciencemarketing.com/blog/articles/baby-pics-boost-altruism.htm>



Dan Won/Water 1st

Think about the emotion you want the person to convey. Facial expressions are universally recognized among all cultures. A smile will win the day, whether in Boston, Brussels or Bangalore.

Look at the picture of this person in need: a little girl responsible for collecting water for her family in Ethiopia. One billion people worldwide lack access to clean water and sanitation. Girls like this one are routinely pulled out of school and required to walk miles per day to get water for their families. The problem is immense, but we feel hopeful because she looks hopeful. Treat your subjects with dignity, and showcase their hope to generate the same feeling on the viewer's end.

However, if a viewer is distressed by a particular photo or video, coping mechanisms like distancing oneself from the situation kick in. A photo of an extremely malnourished child, obviously suffering, will cause people to change the channel or turn the page of the magazine. That kind of looking away is of little use to those who want their supporters to feel hopeful and empowered to help.

There is another reason why the single child in this photo is effective. When it comes to photos, our eyes want to focus in on one thing. Our brain hates the effort involved in processing a group shot. Effective fundraisers know that showing a single individual who represents or symbolizes your issue in a way people can identify with works much better than showing a crowd.

Of course, there is an exception to every rule. Group photos are effective when it comes to protests, rallies or public meetings on an issue. These are good times to show pictures of masses of people as your main point to the viewer is to show how many people cared enough to turn out, not for the viewer to care about an individual person.



Conclusion

We are in the midst of a visual revolution. Creating and storing visual images is easier than ever before. But it is not new technology that makes pictures and video so important and effective. It is cognitive science rooted in millennia of human evolution. To move people we must connect with their emotions. And the way to connect with people on an emotional level is through visuals...the right visuals matched with the right message. Seeing is indeed believing.

The Basic Building Blocks

- What are your goals and objectives?
- Whose hearts and minds do you need to win over (elected officials, donors, volunteers, etc.)?
- What channels and tactics will you use to reach them?

The Story Development

- What is the moral of your story, or “message?” Consider this formula:
Persuasive communications = shared values + a problem or opportunity + a solution or call to action
- What story, or set of stories, can carry your message, pull your audience in and help them make sense of the situation? Who is the hero? Who is the villain? What is the conflict or challenge facing the hero?
- What is your resolution or call to action?
- What emotions or desires will move your audience to action?
Joy? Hope? Empowerment? Anger? Fear? Surprise?

Visual Checklist

- Identify visual elements that tell your story:
 - Setting: Where and when?
 - Characters: Who is involved?
 - Emotions: Why should we care?
- How can you test to ensure the images resonate with your audience?
- Are your images authentic and original, not stock?
- Think about target audiences when selecting the people in your photos and video.
Will they trust, identify with, and relate to these characters?
- What is the first impression you want to create with your audience, or the hook?
Select your lead photo accordingly.
- What captions will reinforce and elaborate on your visual message?
- Are you giving credit where credit is due? Double-check permissions and attributions.
- Are you reinforcing your brand identity with these pictures? Are you being consistent in the quality, size, color and composition of your visuals? If not, time to develop a style guide!

Visit visualstorylab.org for additional tip sheets on how to create high impact visual communications and to share your own success stories and lessons learned.

Acknowledgements

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