

COMMUNICATING USING IMAGES

BY KEVIN LOHAN

feel compelled to begin this column with an apology.

The topic and the manner in which I am presenting it presents an unsatisfactory contradiction. However, I left myself too little time and began so close to the magazine's deadline that I simply could not create a piece in which I attempted to communicate my ideas to you using images.

In a coincidental way then, perhaps I have found lesson one in regard to communicating using images. It takes a lot of time to design images. Words come far more easily and quickly.

Perhaps that is why so many PowerPoint presentations are so wordy. The speaker just had insufficient time to create appropriate images.

The thing is though, words are an auditory medium - even when they are presented visually via say, a PowerPoint slide, on a screen to an audience. Reading the words becomes an auditory cognitive process for the learner as they kind of 'hear' them in their heads as they read.

An image projected on the same screen is a visual cognitive medium. You don't 'hear' it in your head as you are looking at it, in the same way you might do with a screen full of words.

So, lesson two if you like, is that words on a screen are not an image. Presenting information via PowerPoint, as a sequence of words is just not the same thing as communicating using images.

You need actual images.

Another lesson I'd like to present requires a bit of a background story.

I consulted my bloated library for some research material as inspiration for this column and I turned to (among others) *Mapping Inner Space* by Nancy Margulies. The way this book is designed is, in itself, interesting. Every page presents words on the left-hand side of the opened book and on the right-hand side is a mind-map.

As I was browsing I realised suddenly that I was skimming only the right-hand pages. I began to wonder why that was. Surely, if I was after coherent data to inform my column then I should be reading the words that Nancy chose to convey her ideas. Yet, I was skimming her mind-maps.

After some contemplation I decided that my unconscious took over and I just preferred to look at the pictures.

This, I think, could be lesson three to the idea of communicating using images. People are drawn to images in a way that they are not drawn to words.

But most importantly, our major question should be, 'are they a more effective way to communicate?'

It would take more space than I have available to me to debate that question but I doubt I would have many detractors if I said that generally, yes, they do.

However, I say that with a strong message of caution that comes from

years of experience as I experimented with the use of visual images.

Back in about 1986, I recall beginning a session about 'body language', by lying on the floor in front of the whole group as they returned from lunch. My first minute or so of speaking was done from that position. (Hey, I was young and the craft of training was almost as young.) But I'm going to call this an example of using images to communicate something, OK?

Anyway, as it happened, a couple of years later, I ran into one of the participants and he said, "I remember you. You ran that session where you laid on the floor." I was chuffed that he remembered so long afterwards and thought, "That's cool. My image was effective." So I asked, "Do you remember anything else about that session?"

"Nope", he responded.

So lesson four is that images have the potential to be remembered for a long time, but they lose effectiveness if they have not properly conveyed the message that was meant to accompany them.

Which brings me to lesson five. Bring it in tight now. Come a little closer.

Never, ever, agree to write a column about communicating with images unless you plan to add some images to the column.

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