From Data Snore, to Data Score: Communicating Library Assessment Data Visually through Infographics

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From Data Snore, to Data Score: Communicating Library Assessment Data Visually through Infographics

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Introduction

With competing interests and tight budgets, libraries must be innovative in communicating value to their stakeholders. Since people process information faster through images (Thorpe, 1996), an infographic—a visual representation of information—may be an effective way of capturing attention while communicating impact. Use of infographics in information environments has increased over the years and has become commonplace in marketing and reporting. Libraries today are focused on showing value and impact to answer calls of accountability and compete for shrinking resources. In addition, it is common for those served to not be aware of all that the library has to offer.

Capturing and holding people’s attention can be a challenge with so much competing content in emails, on the Internet, and through other sources. Information production has quintupled in the last 30 years (Hilbert, 2011) and filtering out that information is often done by ignoring it. How can one piece of content stand out?

One solution is using infographics. This paper will discuss different types of infographics, how academic libraries are using them, and tools and tips for creating effective infographics.

Background

Auraria Library serves over 53,000 students at three institutions on one downtown Denver campus; The University of Colorado, Denver, Metropolitan State University of Denver, and Community College of Denver. Capturing the attention of students, faculty and administrators with 52 professional
and support staff is a challenge. The author discovered that one option for engaging students and faculty with complex library data and information is by using infographics.

Why Infographics?

Infographics are a quick and easy way to digest data-rich information.

In addition, as stated by Qualey (2014):

Information we share with our target audience might be dense, confusing, or, frankly, not that interesting to readers with differing viewpoints or interests. Even the most supportive administrators or engaged patrons do not have the time or information to properly understand all the facets of our work or services. (p. 7)

Through infographics the goal is to humanize data, capture interest with color, images and charts, and increase retention of the message.

Specter (2013) says:

Looking at a nice visual to process some of that information is a relief. It is also important to note that images and text make something exponentially easier to understand. I think it’s good to remember people’s attention span for information these days is low. Being able to convey your point visually is the best strategy when you have a wide audience and a lot to convey. (p. 3)

When to Use Infographics

Ask yourself if the data you want to use to convey impact and or value will be better communicated visually than if it is solely in text. After you have decided to create an infographic, next to determine is what type.
Types of infographics

There are many types of infographics. Choosing the type depends on what message or story you want to convey. The following are a few types:

- Timeline
  
  ○ If it appears that the data follow a chronological order use a timeline.

- Versus
  
  ○ If you want to compare two things use a versus infographic.

- Flowchart
  
  ○ If the goal is to guide or show people what to do, use a flowchart, which answers a question by giving choices.

- Informative
  
  ○ This type educates the audience by explaining something or answering a question.

- Photo or Animation
  
  ○ Photos can be used in place of charts, such as a headdress in place of a pie chart as in: behance.net/gallery/924345/Information-graphics-in-context. Examples of animation are a wind map, hint.fm/wind, and an interactive quiz, slaveryfootprint.org.

Library Infographics

In February of 2014, multiple searches were done in Google images for “academic library infographic”, “library infographic”, “research library infographic”, and “information literacy infographic”. Also, a Google text search and LISTA database search for “library infographic” was performed.
Results for both revealed that academic libraries are predominantly using infographics to relay impact, advocacy, research and searching guides, and usage statistics.

Particular libraries and librarians that succeeded in incorporating infographic tips discussed later in this paper are the following:

- **Capilano University Library**
  (www.capilanou.ca/library/news/libqual-infographic/)
- **University of British Columbia Library**
  (about.library.ubc.ca/2013/05/27/snapshot-stats/)
- **McGill University Library**
  (news.library.mcgill.ca/mcgill-library-and-archives-fun-facts)
- **Transliteracy Librarian**
  (http://transliteracylibrarian.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/infographic_information-literacy-follow-up.png)
- **University of Illinois Undergraduate Library**
  (https://magic.piktochart.com/output/1854340-ugl-study-spaces)

At the Auraria Library, infographics are used for communicating library comparisons and challenges, particularly the challenge of escalating journal costs. Table 1 includes a “BEFORE” text version and an “AFTER” infographic version of the key points of the same information and data.
By creating this particular infographic the author focused on three comparisons which then became part of library talking points or elevator speeches. Through the simplification of the data, which is necessary when creating an infographic, a habit emerged of repeating the data verbally internally and externally.

Another infographic created at the Auraria Library, focuses on library teaching of critical thinking skills with the inclusion of the number of annual research classes, online instruction and face to face consultations (Table 2).
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEFORE</th>
<th>AFTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Teaching, Learning and Research  
  – 19,365 Reference questions answered in person  
  – 3,001 Online Tutorial views  
  – 2,846 Reference questions answered online  
  – 17,421 students instructed through 783 sessions | ![Auraria Library Infographic](image) |

**Infographic Tools**

While, infographics are not new, there are new online services that offer ready-made templates and themes for users to modify, upload images and data. With these tools, you do not need graphic design skills or advanced design software to create visually pleasing, professional infographics.

While not an exhaustive list, this paper identifies a wide variety of websites that provide infographic software with an introductory free account for a limited library of templates and/or images. The content you create is downloadable and these sites host the content.

**Picktochart** ([piktochart.com/](http://piktochart.com/))

Picktochart is an intuitive drag and drop infographic design application tool. Free templates are available and for a minimal monthly fee (education account) you have access to a large template library. There is a chart wizard where you can manually add or import data to make a simple chart. There are
thousands of free graphics for customization or you can upload up to five of your own images. You can link, embed, email, download and print. With the free account all of your infographics will include the Piktochart watermark at the bottom of the document.

**Easel.ly** ([easel.ly](http://easel.ly))

Easel.ly uses visual themes (called “vthemes”) to create infographics. You have access to fifteen themes when you sign up for a free account. Start with a blank canvas or drag and drop a vtheme onto the canvas in the creation tool section. Customization is easy with pre-loaded objects, adding shapes or text, and uploading your own images. At this time, Easel.ly does not include any chart-making capabilities.

**Gliffy** ([gliffy.com](http://gliffy.com))

Gliffy is an online diagram editor. Create flowcharts, venn diagrams and other drawings as an infographic. Gliffy’s easy editor, vast symbol libraries, and templates make it easy to communicate visually.

**Infogr.am** ([infogr.am](http://infogr.am))

Infogr.am is ideal for creating smaller infographics with charts. There are only six infographic templates to choose, but it includes a robust chart generator. You can create a treemap, pie chart, word cloud, and much more.

**RAW** ([app.raw.densitydesign.org](http://app.raw.densitydesign.org))

Upload data sets to RAW to build vector-based visualizations from bubble to sunburst graphs. No programming knowledge is needed and the interface is simple.

**Powtoons** ([powtoon.com](http://powtoon.com))
Create animated infographics with Powtoons. No technical or design skills are needed. It is user friendly and intuitive software for creating professional looking infographics.

**Tips for Effective Infographics**

**Audience**

What questions are important to your target audience? Be sure to think about your audience prior to creating the infographic to tailor messages and data. What may be compelling to one group may have no impact on another. Always consider who the infographic is for and if it is worth their time to view it.

**Wireframe**

It can be challenging to organize an infographic to convey a message and keep the viewer interested. An effective way to flesh this out is through wireframing. This is a good technique even if you are selecting a template. Having to reorganize the layout after completing the design can be time consuming. Avoid this by setting up your storyline at the start to determine what are the main takeaway(s) and what data to show.

**Hierarchy**

Hierarchy prioritizes content and gives direction to the audience on what to look at first.

According to Statelman (2014):

Hierarchy guides the user from one element to the next, ideally in a flow that corresponds to the content’s message. Also keep in mind that if you give visual importance or weight to too many elements, everything becomes flat. It's like saying you have ten ‘favorite’ flavors of ice cream. Elements should not have to compete for our attention...think of all the ways you can achieve
hierarchy using type (size, proximity, contrast, weight, style, color, uppercase vs. lowercase).

(p. 1)

**Keep it Simple and Focus**

This seems obvious, but always have an outsider evaluate the infographic for too much information. Less is more. No more than three points in the infographic, so that the topic can be remembered in one sentence.

**Color and Font**

Best practices from commercial infographic sites is to select no more than three colors and one font and choose a color palette that does not attack the senses (Balliett, 2011). Useful color-picking tools are COLOURlovers (http://www.colourlovers.com/) and Adobe’s Kuler (https://kuler.adobe.com/).

**Cite Your Data**

If it is internal or external data make sure to include where it came from, to confirm its validity.

**When to show and when to tell**

If there is an opportunity to change text to an image, make it happen. Since the goal is to make complex data and information easier to digest, use of images and charts in place of text will make it more compelling and memorable.

**Hook and Impact**

Think about what is your hook - the primary take-away that you want to invoke on viewers. The ultimate goal should be to impact the person that knows the least about the library.

**Library Infographic Content**
Which information and data can provide the greatest value to patrons and deliver the greatest impact through an infographic? Here are content ideas for library infographics:

- how to start research
- how the library compares to others
- internal marketing to improve customer service
- marketing top resources
- help patrons understand the types of information available
- to show impact and value (recruitment, retention, student and faculty success)

Conclusion

Academic libraries are using infographics to relay impact, value, advocacy, research and searching guides, and usage statistics. Libraries have much data and information to share, but communicating this needs to be balanced with shortening attention spans and information overload. An infographic is a powerful tool to relay complex data in an easy-to-digest format. Not only does it simplify the complex, it is a marketing tool for visual engagement.

References


