

communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Great picture, but what's your story?

New technologies are taking images off the page and into 3-D—and making your message pop

The Center for Digital Storytelling's tagline, "Listen deeply, tell stories," is applicable to any organization that wants to tell its story to an internal or external audience.

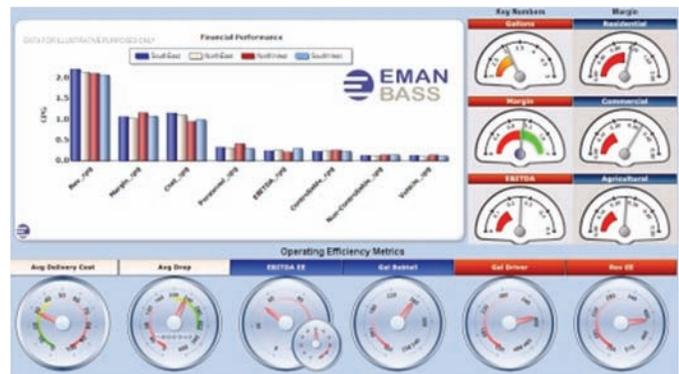
about the author

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We all have stories to tell. Communication and marketing departments try to tell these stories in creative ways, whether through a case study, statistics embedded in talking points prepared for the chief executive (so he doesn't veer off the main story) or a strategic piece of information pitched to the media through a press release.

What better way to advance two elements of our story, narrative and perspective, than by doing it visually? We typically support stories with photos, videos, logos and the head-and-shoulders shots of thought leaders. It's a way of giving audiences a sense of the bigger picture.

In our interconnected, digital age, there are new tools to help us create this big picture. We're not talking about adding a multimedia section to your web site or setting up a public image gallery on Flickr. We're talking about a rapidly emerging trend to push the boundaries of visualization so as to provide more context and a more enlightened perspective.



Digital dashboards like this one from Data to Dashboard can enhance storytelling by helping people visualize complex business processes.

The first approach is to deliver information in a three-dimensional format. The second is broadly lumped under the heading "information graphics," for those interested in technology road maps and strategic planning. The third involves big-picture visualization using immersive environments.

Depth of field

Photosynth, a Microsoft application developed in collaboration with the University of Washington, allows you to assemble digital photographs of multiple views of a scene, an event or a building, and knit them together to enable some-

one to see it from a variety of angles or experience it in 3-D. This means someone could click on a photo of a building or complex piece of engineering, zoom in on a detail, and fly through or move around it by tilting and rotating the image to "see" it very differently than one would a regular photograph.

The richness of perspective depends on there being hundreds of photographs of the same scene or object, preferably taken at different times, from different distances. Photosynth uses as examples well-photographed landmarks, such as St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, Italy, captured by differ-

ent photographers. Some have focused on the ninth-century piazza and the pigeons, others on the details of the mural above the main doors. In another example, a person can zoom in on the dragons and motifs on the ceiling of the 14th-century Gyeongbok Palace in Seoul, South Korea, assembled onscreen using thousands of images.

Each image is run through Photosynth's "vision algorithms," which identify the salient features of the image (patterns, textures, craftsmanship), look for these features in the many images and knit them together to create a composite. By calculating the distance and angle of the cameras at the time the pictures were taken, a 3-D image with "depth perception" emerges, giving the viewer a richer, more detailed way to see something.

Another application called Fotowoosh builds a 3-D image in a different way. It takes any two-dimensional photograph that you upload and converts it to 3-D. Unlike Photosynth, which analyzes the image, Fotowoosh "tears it apart," separating the elements of the image as sky, ground, etc. It then calculates where to "fold" the image and rebuilds it as a 3-D model.

Maps and immersive environments

You can apply 3-D to the business of storytelling in different ways. The tried-and-tested for-

mat for conveying complex information—about the organization, a department, a business process or a new direction being taken—on a large poster is called the strategy map. Most organizations use it for internal communication, because a strategy map not only tells a story but also stimulates a discussion around one.

The idea of mapping things out visually was popularized by Robert Kaplan and David Norton in 1992. They proposed measurement as a management discipline and, based on the concept that "you cannot measure what you cannot describe," introduced the idea of the map to give perspective. The strategy map, they believed, was the best way to connect the dots between business processes, employees and management. Today the attempt to make a 3-D representation of a complex story on a 2-D poster is being replaced by digital counterparts such as the digital dashboard and the data dashboard (Microsoft even has software for creating one, called PerformancePoint Dashboard Designer). These dashboards attempt to give employees a better view of the business process and how it fits into the unfolding story.

Digital storytelling is racing ahead in other directions. The Center for Digital Storytelling, based in Berkeley, California, trains nonprofit organizations, schools and companies in the

value of capturing stories. Its tagline, "Listen deeply, tell stories," may be applicable to any organization that wants to enrich or tell its story to an internal or external audience.

Even more fascinating are immersive visual environments that work on a different scale—the big picture becomes a big realistic picture. The rich visual information can also be interactive. At Arizona State University's Decision Theater (full disclosure: I work here!), we put scientists and policy makers in a room surrounded by seven floor-to-ceiling digital screens, and create rich visual contexts to help them better understand issues in urban expansion, education, the environment and public health. The screens create a panoramic view of a simulation in 2-D or 3-D, and participants can pull up data sets from their own organization or those in the public domain to create different scenarios. Far beyond the scope of strategy maps, the 260-degree perspective is a great way to get participants to see the big picture in fine detail. It's not unusual for someone in the room to say, "I've never looked at it like that before!"

In an overcommunicated world with data and "knowledge" coming at you from every angle, consider how you may be able to overlay, mash up and knit it all together to give your story more impact—and relevance. ●

see for yourself

Many Eyes is a project of IBM's Collaborative User Experience research group. Its web site features data visualization where people can create interactive data maps on anything from births and deaths to government spending. <http://tinyurl.com/3ddvzd>

related links

Photosynth
<http://labs.live.com/photosynth>

Fotowoosh
www.fotowoosh.com

Center for Digital Storytelling
www.storycenter.org

Decision Theater
www.decisiontheater.org