

# YOU ARE HERE

Information designers are ideally placed to make the most of the new digital era. *By Max Gadney*

The digital revolution that has replaced manufacturing as the western world's main growth area brings a huge opportunity for information design. At the heart of all digital products is data - and the many ways it can be collected, stored, processed and presented. Designers who can work with data and marry the needs of engagement and utility, of science and art, will prosper in this new age.

Graphic design has always served commerce. Its heyday in the years following the Second World War saw big brands using mass media advertising, illustration, typography and photography to sell in industrial amounts. In the 1980s, global companies needed corporate identity programmes. Graphic designers became good at rule-setting but these top-down skills became less relevant when the commercial internet rose in the mid-1990s, and they were compelled to confront the shifting challenges of browser incompatibility and fluid Web layout.

## Today's challenge

As their businesses are transformed by the data-driven digital revolution, clients have new needs. Sporting organisations such as football clubs are considering presenting their fans with player data they can use in messageboard debates. Soldiers in Afghanistan plan patrols with software that tracks the local incidence of IEDs. Market research businesses create platforms that allow clients to discuss insights as well as view them.

We are in the middle of a longer-lasting change to our discipline than the information design renaissance of the late 1970s, which produced seminal publications (*Information Design Journal*, *Graphics Diagrams* and the influential books of Edward Tufte) and important work, but nothing like the opportunity provided by the amount of data now on tap.

Take bookselling. A public relations strategy featuring newspaper reviews, cover design and advertising used to go a long way to help a new book's success. Yet nowadays, online booksellers run algorithms on what books we buy and are able to show real-time approval ratings.

Digital media also demand new formats, such as Lanyrd's gimmick-free interface, which allows people to share conference information, and apps such as Flipboard and Tumblr.

Graphic designers may be well placed to innovate and exploit the way people use new devices — but it is important to note that information design

## EMERGING FORMATS

## PERSONAL ANALYTICS

Data applications are becoming more human in scale. These interfaces, inspired by the single-task clarity of phone apps, bring accessible focus to data use. Nike+ allows you to track your jogging times and race against others. Spokes NYC helps you plan cycle routes. These are not complex operations. They are about quick use of known data sets rather than intricate discovery.

## INFO-VIDEOS

Online video sites and increased connection speeds mean that short-form videos have become increasingly popular ways to disseminate messages. Historically, video has been more about entertaining than informing, but designers are weaving information into engaging narratives that, with the addition of a voice track, provide short, rich bursts of accessible information. These info-rich content formats create value for business by keeping the attention of customers, allowing advertising or selling opportunities – just as TV does.

## TOWER GRAPHICS

Known by many aliases (listicles, charticles, tower ads), these vertically read information displays are replacing press releases in the fight for our attention. They fit the scrolling form factor of blogs and messageboards well but are often derided for their over-simplicity. In the same way that *USA Today* boiled down concepts for basic presentation, this latest incarnation of the 'infographic' is sneered at by purists but popular for clients and agencies involved.

## 'AS IT HAPPENS'

News organisations will get better at communicating what is vague or emerging. Audiences have two needs here. One is for instantly updated facts, which precludes fancy production values. The other is for authenticity of message, knowing that things are emergent, and not expecting them to be shown as if complete.

skills are required for the whole interface and not just the content or the moment of visualisation.

### Data visualisation vs information graphics

Modern information design is split into two main camps, defined by the amount of edited meaning in each — data visualisation allows more interaction, and information graphics is more edited.

Data visualisation is generally interactive and allows expert users to find meaning in complex data fields. Information sciences such as library science led the way here. In data visualisation, the meaning is there but it is for the user to find it. General users will struggle with most data visualisation apps or graphics, but the likes of sports fans and financial businesses will want this level of detail and interrogation available. An unintended legacy is an aesthetic of complexity copied by superficial designers who celebrate visual patterns rather than enabling people to find meaning.

Information graphics maximise their message in engaging forms suited to the audience. This is ideal for a mass-market audience communication. We are used to these in newspapers, and formats such as 'tower graphics' (see above) are increasingly popular with marketing companies looking for something beyond an average press release. There is always a risk that communicating for simplicity can veer towards the trivial, but, just as data visualisation needs to temper its cleverness to suit its public, information graphics need to balance an engaging visual quality with an information resolution that respects its audience rather than patronising it.

Just as typographers argued about legibility in the early 1990s, and usability specialists criticised Web animations several years later, modern information design has its own skirmishes.

The current debate is between the engaging David McCandless and the analytic Stephen Few — still hitting the same volleys as the academic Edward Tufte and *Time* populist Nigel Holmes 30 years ago (see page 37). Both are talented and insightful in this area and their differences should be seen merely as a beacon telling the industry that there are issues to discuss. These conflicts are essential to the designer's condition, for there is always a healthy dilemma between form and function.

Twentieth-century information design assets always fitted into some other media channel. Wayfinding projects needed exhibitions or architecture.

Information graphics needed annual reports or newspapers. These days the designed interface is often the actual product, and mobile mapping applications and company analytics programmes are products in their own right. The product is designed — but the design features of structure, navigation and functionality are often the mainstay of the product rather than a module framed within.

New media commentator Lev Manovich, professor of visual arts, University of California, San Diego, said: 'Nineteenth-century culture was defined by the novel, twentieth-century by the cinema. The culture of the 21st century will be defined by the interface.'

Information designers used to have to fit their work into the templates and experiences of others; now they can create the whole product, defining the service as well as its look. This calls for a more rounded view of design rather than just the graphic layer. This calls for an understanding of how people use your products and not just what they look like.

### Business and society

Information design can benefit 21st-century businesses by helping them use and present their data better.

First, much of business takes place through man-made interfaces. We make, supply, pay and measure using on-screen tools. We also use screens to read, watch, play, date and learn. But the data that powers these experiences is nothing without someone making it useful and engaging. Information designers can bring utility, meaning and humanity to this man-made thing.

Second, information design will make citizens and workers more literate in systemic thinking. This century's business, political and social issues are defined by their interwoven complexity. This year's news stories — the global financial crisis, phone hacking and ongoing anti-terror campaigns - are best represented in network diagrams. New businesses are networks of suppliers, reputations and relationships, rather than just linear factory lines. Visualising these systems is the best way to begin to understand them.

Third, by visualising their processes, information flows and finances, companies can 'work smarter' and also show the public what they do. Increased transparency reaps not only internal business efficiency but also external trust. And trust is something that is sorely needed at this time in the commercial history of the western world. @