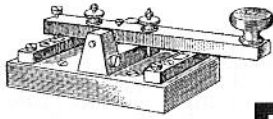by
donna f.
ekart

Tech Tips for Every Librarian

▶ helpful hints from the mavens of libtech

Telegraphic Messages

I spend a lot of time thinking about how my library is perceived: by our users, by visitors, by the larger campus, in the context of our community, and on and on. Telling our story is definitely part of my communications-based job description, but I did it even when I had a different role. Maybe it's just a quirk of my personality, but, if so, I advocate all librarians to get quirky. After all, the public face of your library has a lot to do with whether your programs are well-received and attended, whether your collections circulate, and how often people approach your reference librarian for help with a research problem. In many ways, it should matter to you regardless of your primary role—everyone from circulation clerks to catalogers to reference desk staff to directors has a part to play in how libraries are perceived and understood by users.

This month, I want to talk about a specific way you can telegraph who you are to your users and your community: through graphics. Information you put on the web can be very visual, and visual communication is becoming increasingly sophisticated. While it might have been acceptable at one time to take some clip art, toss in a fancy font, and call it a day, that's no longer the case. Whether on your primary website, your library blog, or social media outlets, how you present information visually matters. And right now, a strong trend in communicating visual information is through infographics.

What are infographics? They are visual representations of data, processes, and other sorts of information. They've been around for centuries, but they have recently grown in popularity due to the proliferation of simple online tools to create them and ease of distribution through social media.

If you've ever used Pinterest, you've seen infographics in abundance. Basically, it's a way to distill complex information into something that people can consume more easily, especially if they are visual learners. If you really want to delve into the topic, there's no better source than Edward R. Tufte. His series of books (*Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative; The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*; and *Envisioning Information*) define the philosophy of making data visually appealing, information-rich, and easily digestible.
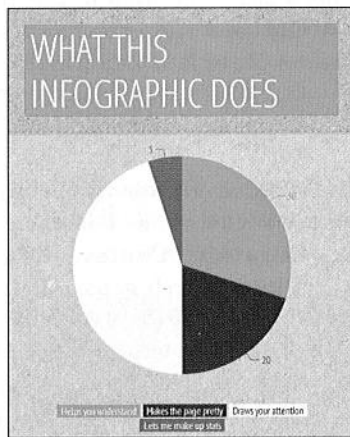

Infographics can serve a variety of purposes. It's probably best to avoid the "making stuff up" purpose.

Why might you use infographics at your library? The possibilities are endless. Just a few simple reasons are showing annual circulation statistics in an online report, representing reasons people visit your technology lab on your website; showing steps to getting a library card, and demonstrating how to access a research database. Try to think about ideas you want to get across that seem complex, but actually can be boiled down to a few ideas or steps.

How do you create attractive infographics? The simplest way would be to hire an awesome graphic designer, tell her about your needs, and let her get to work. If that scenario seems unlikely at your library, you're not out of luck. There are a number of great programs online (some are free and some you have to pay for) that can help even a design novice create attractive images to use online. Let's look at a few that are good and, for the most part, free to use.

Infogram

Infogram is all about data. Think of it as Excel on design steroids. If you already have a chunk of data—circulation stats, gate counts, event attendance—that you'd like to represent, Infogram lets you choose a graphic style, input your data, and see it come to life. If you customize colors to match your existing themes and add in photos or video, you suddenly appear to be a design pro. Completed infographics are saved to your library and can be linked to or shared with a single click to Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest at any time. Embed code is also provided if you'd like to include your creation on your own website. The pie chart to the left was created in Infogram.
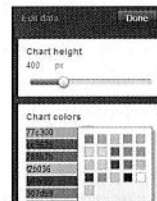
Many infographic creation programs allow you to customize color schemes to match your existing branding, or you can opt for a pre-existing, well-coordinated theme.

Visually

Visually focuses most on social media and web metrics. It would be very

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useful for demonstrating the impact of your various web presences. You can pull Google Analytics, Facebook, and Twitter data into beautifully designed infographics simply by logging in to your various accounts. There are even options to have some of the infographics automatically generated and delivered to you on a schedule. You have fewer design options than with some other programs, but creation is literally a click or two, and you're done. New themes and types are added often. Visually also lets you browse infographic creations by designers for inspiration or sharing. I found numerous graphics in the education theme that I could imagine sharing on my library's Facebook or Pinterest pages.

Don't be afraid to get creative. While this Venn diagram design was probably intended for some other use, it would work really well to advertise a library cafe.

Wordle

If there's such as thing as the granddaddy of DIY infographics, Wordle is it. A few years ago you couldn't swing a cat (not that you would) without hitting someone's website Wordle. The fervor has died down a bit, but it's still a great way to make a bunch of text visually interesting. You could use Wordles to represent feedback from events, subjects in your collection, favorite authors, or anything wordy. You can paste or type in text, or even just

a URL, choose fonts and colors, and generate in horizontal or vertical orientations. Wordle runs on Java, which can't really give you a handy JPEG download, but you'll get embed code, or you can hack a save via screen shot or printing to PDF.

A Wordle-ish form was used to show off the top tweeters at this spring's Computers in Libraries conference. What info could you show off?

easel.ly

Super simple, super cute, easel.ly has a gallery of charming graphics you can adapt, or a blank slate if you'd like to start from scratch. One thing I really like about easel.ly is that it's inspiring: Just seeing the gallery prompts a ton of ideas about things I could communicate. It might be a great place to start if you're not sure exactly what you want to say, but would like to see the possibilities infographics have to offer.
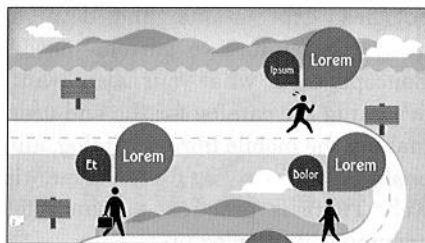
easel.ly has great designs that could fit a wide variety of circumstances. By customizing or swapping out the people forms and talk bubbles, you could make this walkway graphic suit dozens of different needs.

Piktochart

Piktochart is perhaps a little more advanced, but it's still simple to use. It would be great for using graphics to convey more complex stories about your library. There are great themes available for free and more than 100 themes available in the reasonably priced monthly pro plan. You can upload your own bits to include (useful for logos and such) and export your completed infographics in a variety of formats. It may be a little more work than some other options, but the results are great.

Some of Piktograph's stock themes walk you through customizations right on the graphic itself. It couldn't be easier!

Beyond these five tools, there are dozens more online that may be useful to you, so don't hesitate to explore. Even if you're at one of the lucky libraries who has a graphic designer on staff, these tools might provide inspiration or a starting point for conversations about graphics created in-house. Move beyond clip art today and take a giant step forward in how your users perceive you tomorrow. ●

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