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ENHANCE YOUR STORIES WITH INFOGRAPHICS

Infographics can be a particularly effective way to communicate complex information with clarity or add personality and even humour to copy. "Infographic" is an encompassing term that covers all manner of charts and graphs, including: area charts, pie and bar charts, pedigree charts, comparison charts, line graphs, glyphs, pictographs, flow charts, timelines, photo infographics, maps and, of course, the social-media-popularized Venn diagram.

WHY INFOGRAPHICS?

Infographics establish an immediate, informative entry point into a story. They can be used to present information in a clear, concise and dynamic way. They can reveal patterns in your data to persuade or support your argument. And they add visual interest (and often colour) to the page.

INFOGRAPHICS ARE MOST USEFUL WHEN...

- the article has a how-to component that is difficult to describe in copy alone. For instance, a step-by-step annotated illustration of a clove-hitch knot would be less confusing for the reader than text describing the same process. This principle can be applied to a variety of topics; anywhere the use of an image can add depth of understanding to complex content and/or humour to simple ones.
- announcing survey results. Here, charts can provide hierarchy and clarity to numerical information and make the data visually appealing in the process.
- showing how something has changed. Has the data grown or shrunk? Consider a timeline to compare how your topic has evolved historically or use graphs, photo infographics or diagrams to compare and contrast products/ideas and point out causal relationships in an impactful way.
- illustrating "did you know"-styled content or Q & As. Creative flow-charts can convey storylines in meaningful, memorable and potentially funny ways.
- indicating a path taken or event location. Maps provide a quick geographic reference, often to aid news or travel stories.

HOW TO INCORPORATE INFOGRAPHICS

Want to create a richer reader experience with graphics? Increase collaboration between design and editorial teams to develop a plan at the assignment stage. Once an article has been submitted, look for content that can be broken out of the main copy and highlighted. Review the text for statistical information that is relevant, informative or persuasive. This data might be found in a variety of forms:

- percentages ("50% like coffee")
- average amounts ("the average quantity of coffee consumed by Canadians daily is...")
- lists ("the top three most popular times of day to drink coffee are 8am, 10:30am and 3pm")
- comparisons ("coffee drinkers vs. tea drinkers")
- timelines or progressions ("amount of caffeine consumed as compared to ten years ago").

Look also for opportunities to use infographics in unexpected ways—perhaps an annotated photo depicting the author's day without caffeine—to lighten overall tone and engage readers.

WHEN NOT TO USE INFOGRAPHICS

If an infographic isn't making the data easier to understand, it's not doing its job. If it doesn't have contrast, hierarchy and relevance, it's not working. More importantly, if the content isn't being represented accurately, it's a problem. Designers need to take care when developing charts and graphs. This is not the time to eyeball or guess-timate. Use built-in software rulers to help create charts or consider leaning on one of the many free online graph generators (e.g. Google Charts) as a starter template for more complicated pie, area, line, scatter or bar charts. A sloppy graphic may call into question the validity of the data or skew the message away from the original intention of the author.

RESOURCES

- Former Facebook designer Nicholas Felton has issued "Annual Reports" on the minutiae of his life since 2005. He also has an incredible portfolio of editorial work. Visit his site for inspiration or simply to marvel at how much coffee he drank last year: feltron.com.
- Because we could all use a friendly reminder (and it makes for a fun flow-chart): "Should I send this email."
- Data can be beautiful, even rendered entirely in black and white. Zoom-in for details: "Wind Map."
- An infographic on great infographics (meta lovers, rejoice!): "Anatomy of a Great Infographic."