What makes Infographics so effective?

Infographics have become popular over the last few years. As the web becomes increasingly visual, and people want to absorb information quickly they are a great way of visualising facts and data. They are also more likely to be shared on social media than a text description is.

However, I think there's also another reason why they are popular, one rooted in neuroscience. Firstly, I should make clear what I mean by infographics. There are a lot of illustrations that get called infographics these days that I don't consider to be. For example, one style of 'infographic' is to have a range of text next to illustrations or cartoons. What I consider to be a true infographic, however, is where the data itself is presented graphically in a way that makes it more intuitive to understand. The former just makes something pretty to look at by illustrating it, whereas the later creates more of an 'aha' increase in understanding of the data.

Our brains didn't evolve to understand data in terms of numbers, but they did evolve to easily understand visual information: size, position, order etc. By converting information into shapes and patterns it becomes easier to absorb. So what infographics do is make information that we are used to being complex (statistics etc) easy and intuitive to understand. This is the key to why I believe infographics are so loved. Our brains get confused between things we find easy to understand and things we find familiar, and we usually have a liking for things that are familiar to us. Its sometimes called the mere exposure effect, because in experiments when people have seen an image before, they rate it more favourably when they see it again, even if they can't consciously recall seeing it. The effect is independent of how

attractive the picture is; hence it’s the mere prior exposure that makes people like it more. So when we see something easy to understand we are automatically more disposed to like it than if it’s presented in a more complex format. The effect is particularly strong when its something that’s unexpectedly easy to understand. A good analogy is to compare it again to familiarity. Usually our good feelings when we see something familiar are pretty weak. For example, when you see your neighbour outside your front door you aren’t necessarily particularly delighted, because you expect to see them in that environment. However, if you bumped into your neighbour somewhere unexpected, such as the airport, it would be far more likely to make you smile. We often forget that such simple things can produce a short burst of happiness or pleasure.

So what use is this information if you aren’t looking to turn statistical or numerical data into graphics? I think there are a few communication lessons we can draw from them:

(1) Use size and position carefully

We have excellent intuitive understanding of the size, shape and position of things. If you need to present information think about how you can communicate the relative importance of things by making them different sizes, or their relationships by how you position them together.

(2) What illustration would best reveal the inner workings of something you wish to communicate?

A well-chosen image or illustration can work in the same way as an infographic. For example, the cutaway illustrations that shows the inner workings of machines, buildings or vehicles. Does your business, product or service have hidden features with useful benefits to customers that could be communicated visually in this way?

(3) Use powerful visual analogies

By painting a picture in people’s minds through using analogies you can create a memorable and effective way for them to understand your product better. For example, when launching the first ipod, Steve Jobs compared it to a pack of playing cards, something people are already familiar with and hence comfortable with.

Infographics can be a great way of communicating with your potential customers, and also a good model for communication in general.