A BUSINESS GUIDE
TO VISUAL COMMUNICATION

VISAGE

WHY WORDS ALONE AREN'T ENOUGH

As humans, we are biologically wired to process the world visually. We understand images instantly—long before we learn the language to describe them. That is why visual communication is the most powerful medium for transferring volumes of information. In a world of exponential information growth, we crave content that is efficient, engaging and easy to synthesize. Thus, communication as a whole, both in media and the enterprise, is becoming increasingly visual. But successful content is not simply created from words and pictures thrown together. It is crafted with intent, understanding and a solid framework. This guide will show you why visual communication works—and how to make it work for you.
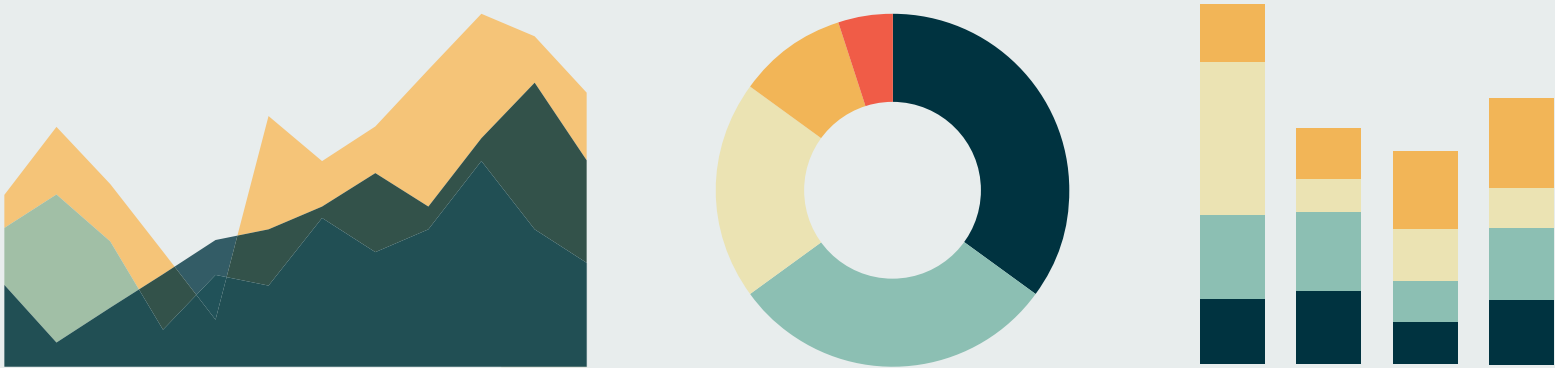
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WHY OUR BRAINS LOVE VISUALS

Through the visual system, the human brain quickly recognizes, stores and recalls images, seamlessly and subconsciously cementing ideas in long-term memory. This active response has always helped us remember vital information for survival: fire is hot, lions are scary and mangoes are delicious.

Today, our concerns are less primal, but navigating our dense media landscape is equally daunting. Using visualization to synthesize ideas is not only an effective medium, it's the type of communication our brains crave.

AVERAGE CONSUMER ATTENTION SPAN
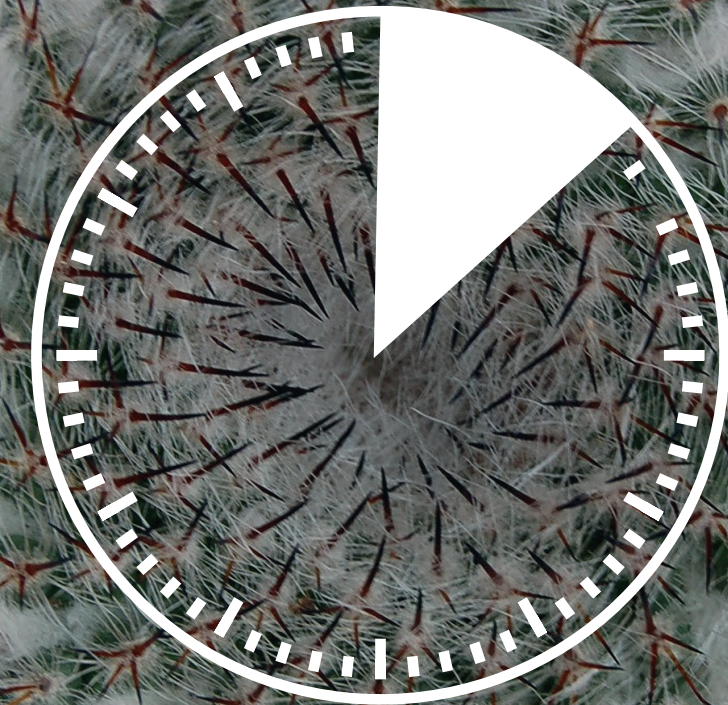
= 8 SECONDS

*National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine, The Associated Press

THE VALUE OF VISUALIZATION

We can break down the efficacy of visualization into three core areas of value: appeal, comprehension and retention.

You may prioritize these values, based on your specific communication objectives.

△ **Academic/Scientific**

△ **Marketing**

△ **Editorial**

APPEAL

Well-designed information is stimulating, attractive and engaging. These qualities pique interest even before information is processed. Aesthetics are not superficial; they are how you get people's attention.
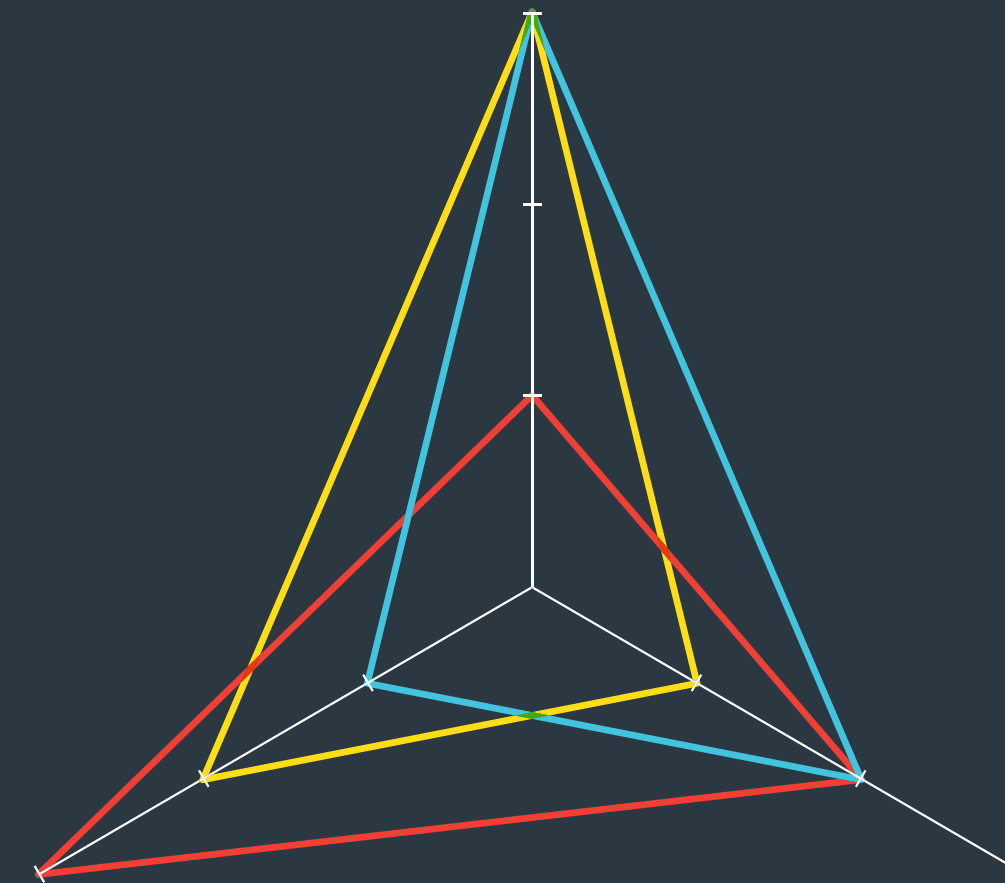
COMPREHENSION

The brain is pre-wired to automatically interpret relationships between objects, allowing for instant comprehension with minimal effort. Representing these relationships visually, as opposed to merely describing them, means that your message is understood quickly, clearly and with significantly greater joy.
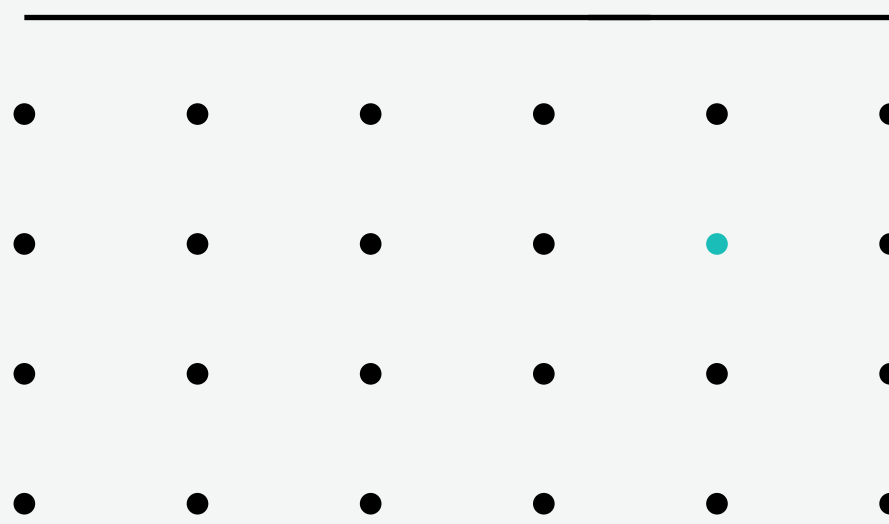
RETENTION

Visualizations trigger us to pull information from our long-term memory, allowing for rapid connections to already stored information, which help to cement the concept in the brain.
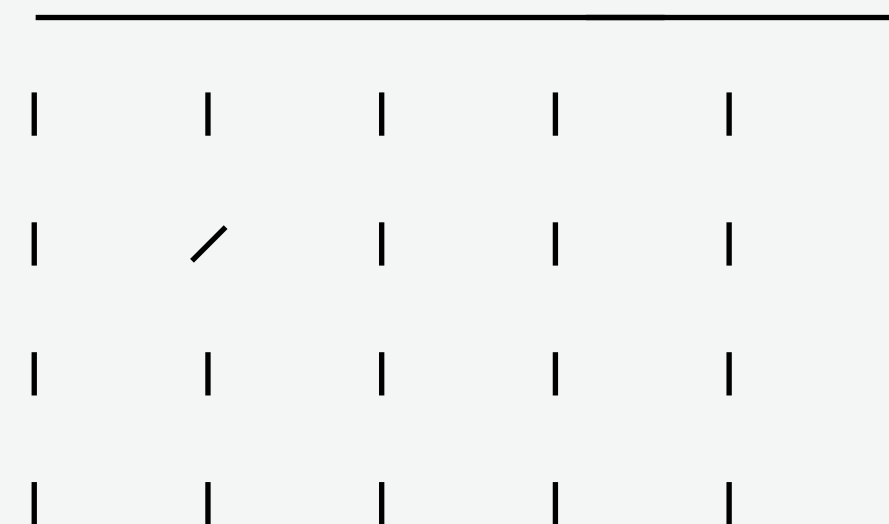
4
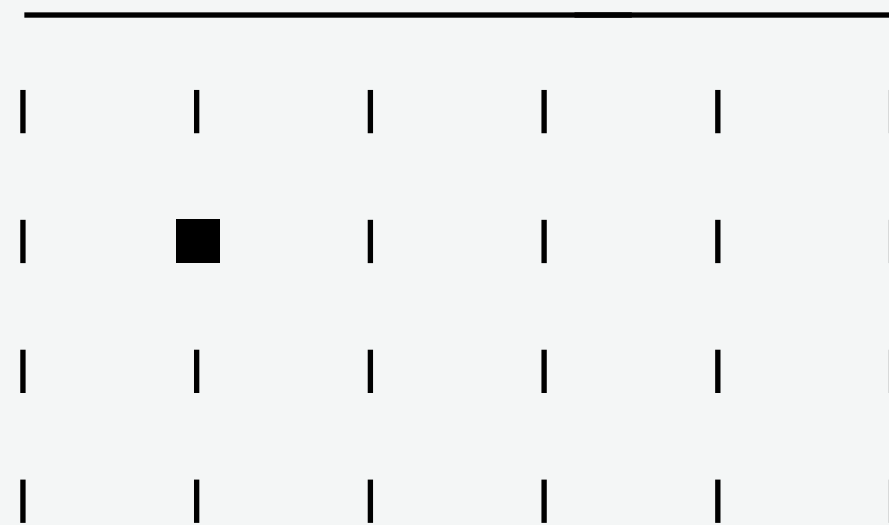
SHAPE
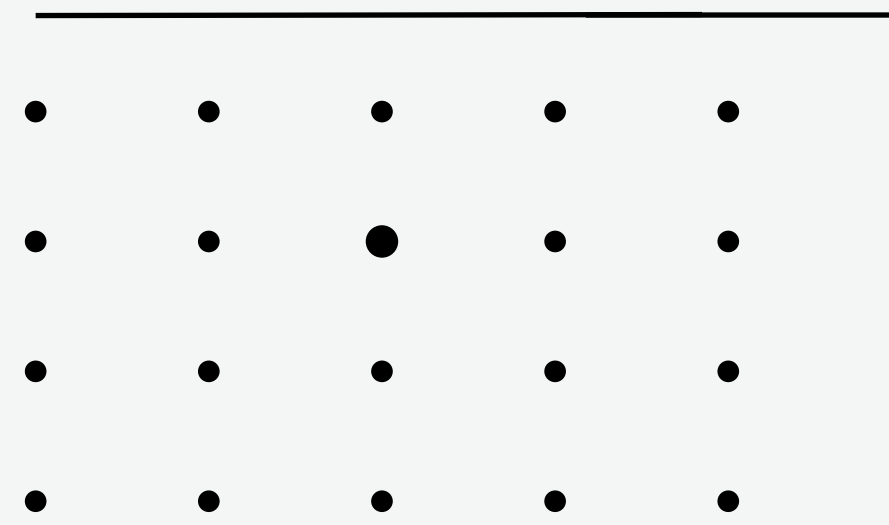
SIZE

THE SCIENCE

Our brain gathers information through pre-attentive processing of visual cues in our environment, which we unconsciously absorb and filter—within 250 milliseconds.

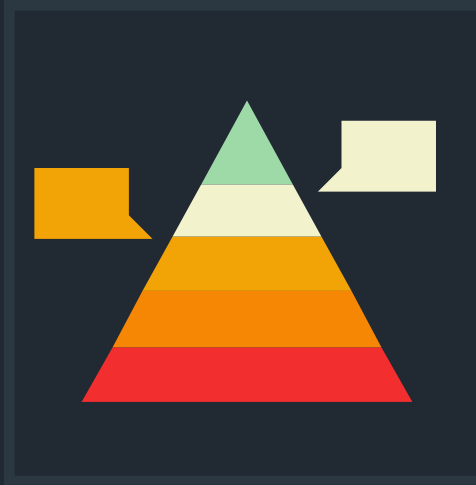Notice that your eye is naturally drawn to these variations on the left.

HUE

ORIENTATION

FIND THE STORY IN YOUR DATA

Comb through your data to find opportunities for visualization.
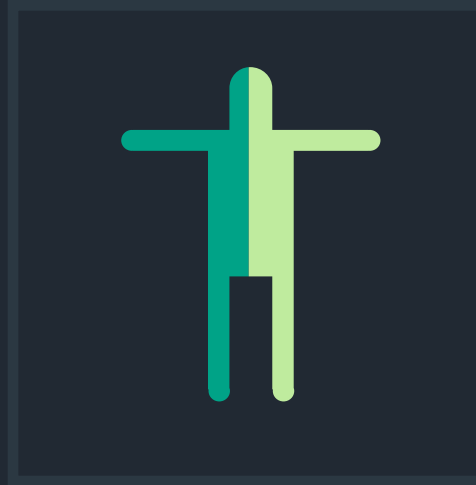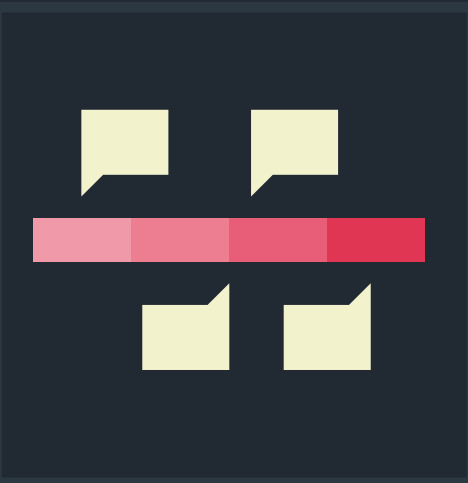Look for relationships in your information, such as:

COMPARISONS
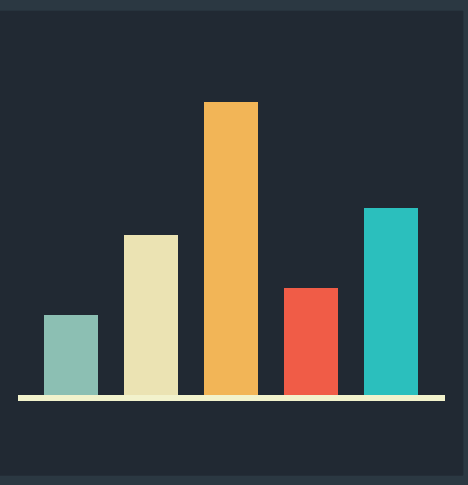
HIERARCHY
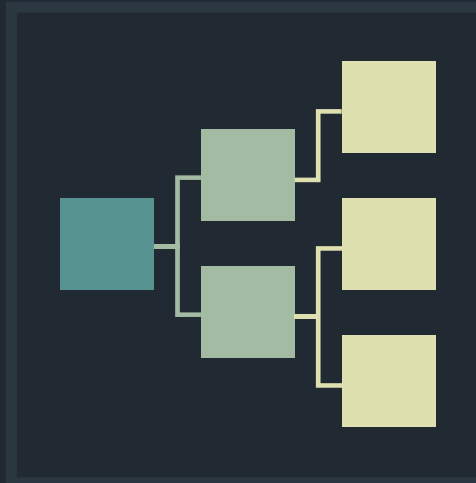
ANATOMY

CHRONOLOGY
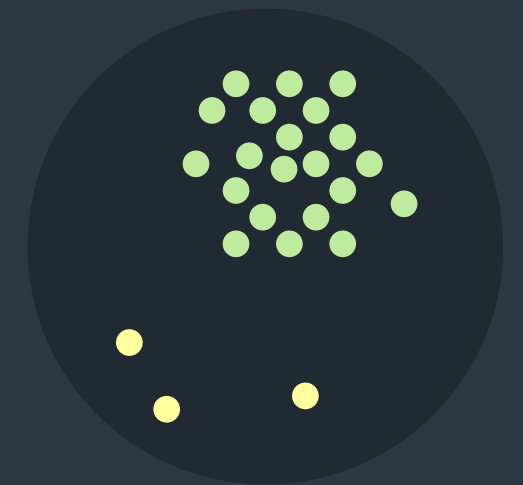
PROCESSES

GEOGRAPHY

Whereas using language to explain these concepts would be lengthy and difficult to understand, visualization can provide instant clarity.

Certain elements will help serve your story. In business, it is common to use data comparisons to uncover interesting and useful insights, such as:

CORRELATIONS

OUTLIERS

TRENDS

GIVE CONTEXT

Effective data visualization relies on not just the type of information visualized, but the amount. It is a delicate balance between providing comprehensive data that supports your story and providing more granular data that gives more specific insight.

Additionally, it is important to provide sufficient context to help frame your data. You don't have to tell the entire story, nor do you have to spoonfeed insights. But you should provide enough color to make your data meaningful and guide readers to the appropriate conclusion.

BIG
UNSTRUCTURED
DATA

SUFFICIENT
DATA WITH
CONTEXT

SINGLE
STATISTIC

BE AS SUCCINCT AS POSSIBLE.

The more simply you can tell your story, the more impact it will have.

Remember: Audience attention spans are limited, and they are often looking for an excuse to check out.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

In the enterprise, our decisions are increasingly data-driven, so it follows that much of our communication must include that data. It is vital to understand how to best communicate this data in a way that is digestible, accurate and meaningful.

> **THE TRUE VALUE OF DATA VISUALIZATION LIES IN ITS ABILITY TO HELP YOU SHOW— NOT JUST TELL—YOUR STORY.**

ISOLATING DATA CAN BE MISLEADING.

Although this chart shows an impressive 100% increase in sales...

$2M ----
$1M ----
2012   2013
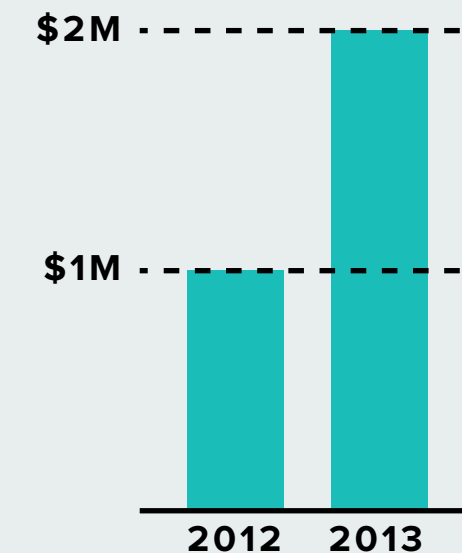
...a more comprehensive data set shows a different story; that increase is minor compared to the significant drop the year before.

$4M ----
$3M ----
$2M ----
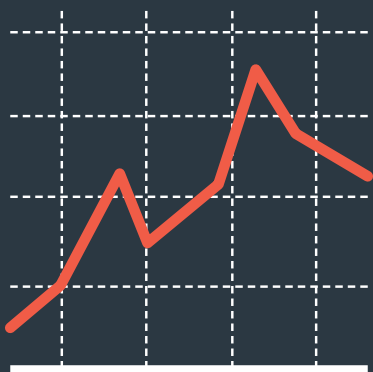$1M ----
2010   2011   2012   2013
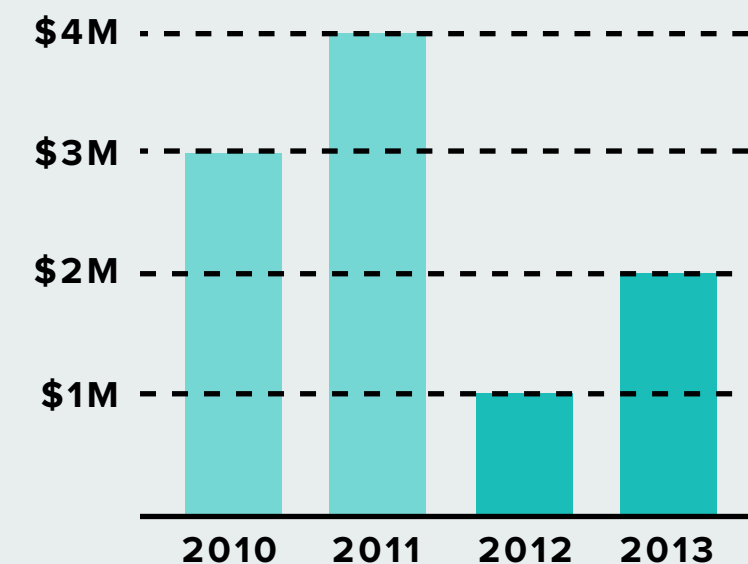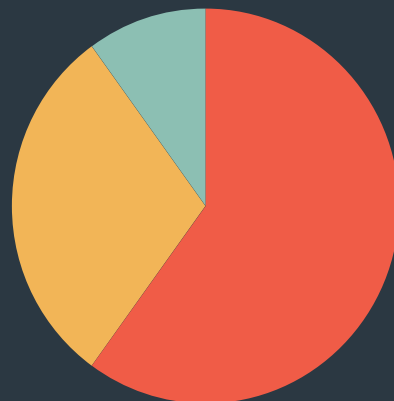
DOS AND DON'TS OF DATA VISUALIZATION

Visualizations are highly effective, but only if they are accurate. Not only does misinformation corrupt your narrative; it threatens your reputation. When including data visualizations, make sure you:

2 | PRESENT DATA ACCURATELY:

NO

$600		
$550		
$500		
$450		
JAN	FEB	MAR

YES

$1,000		
$500		
$0		
JAN	FEB	MAR

1 | SELECT THE CORRECT VISUALIZATION FOR YOUR DATA TYPE:

TIME-SERIES

PART-TO-WHOLE

NOMINAL COMPARISON
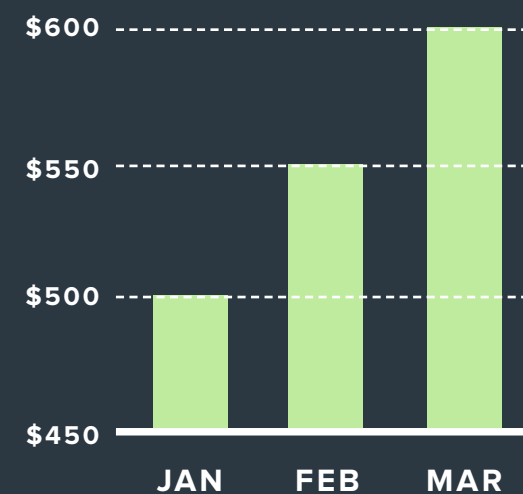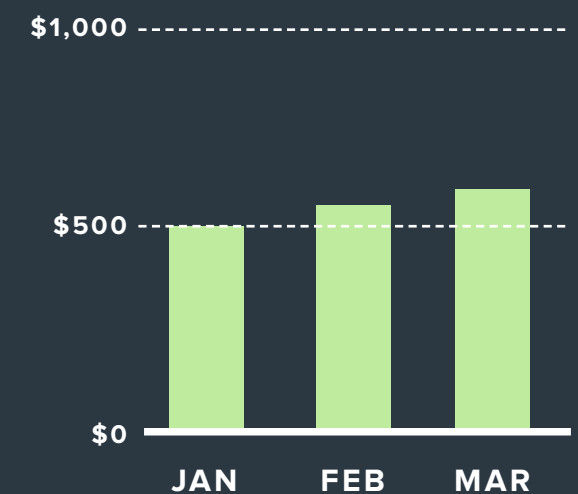
3 | FOLLOW BEST PRACTICES FOR EACH VISUALIZATION:

NO

2011	2012	2013

YES
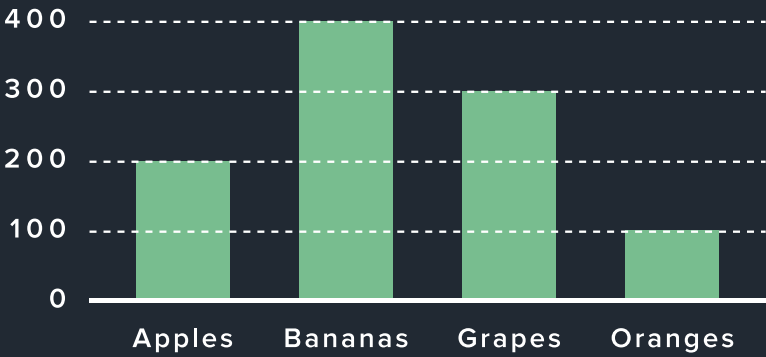
2011	2012	2013
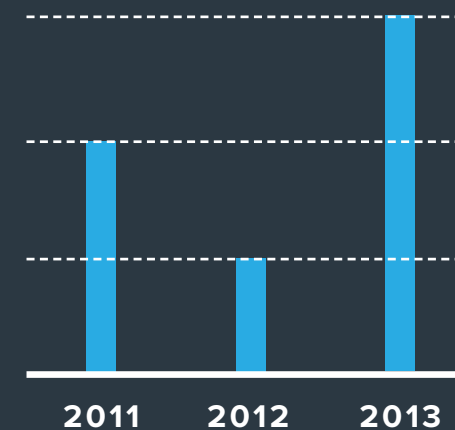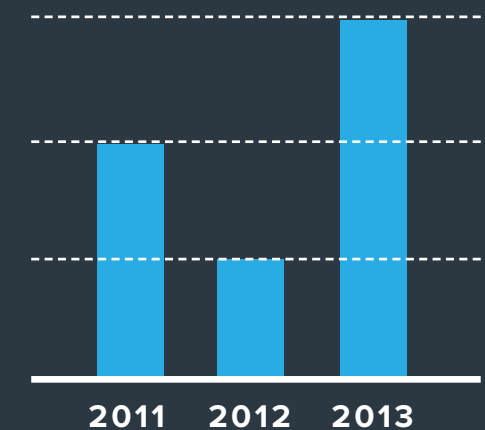
Space between bars should be roughly 1/2 the bar width.

DO YOU KNOW THE THREE WAYS A BAR CHART CAN BE ORDERED CORRECTLY?

ALPHABETICALLY

Value	
400	
300	
200	
100	
0	

Apples Bananas Grapes Oranges

BY VALUE

Value	
400	
300	
200	
100	
0	

Oranges Apples Grapes Bananas

SEQUENTIALLY

Value	
$400	
$300	
$200	
$100	

Jan Feb Mar Apr
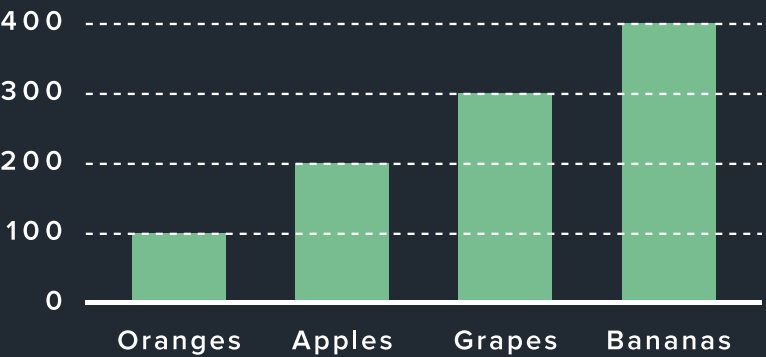
FOR MORE DATA VISUALIZATION DOS AND DON'TS, CHECK OUT:

DESIGNING YOUR CONTENT

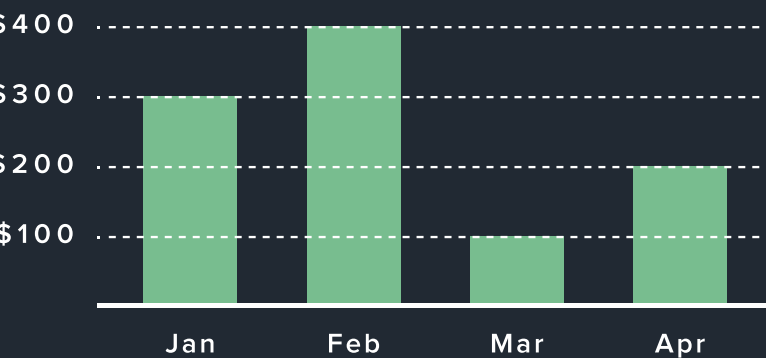Even the best story and the most compelling data visualization can be jeopardized by sloppy design. Good design is vital to creating a polished piece that conveys your message effectively. Design is the hook (the appeal) that draws readers in.

GOOD DESIGN SHOULD BE:

CONSISTENT

Overall style should be similar for all collateral produced.

CLEAR

Readers should be able to navigate content easily.

ENGAGING

Visuals should be attractive and reflect tone and subject matter.

YOUR COMPANY'S VISUAL LANGUAGE

When you communicate visually, you are communicating in many ways, not only in the content you present, but how you present it. Everything you design is a reflection of your business, which is why adhering to a consistent visual style is vital to establishing and preserving your brand identity. A visual language covers aspects of design that are used in visual content, including:
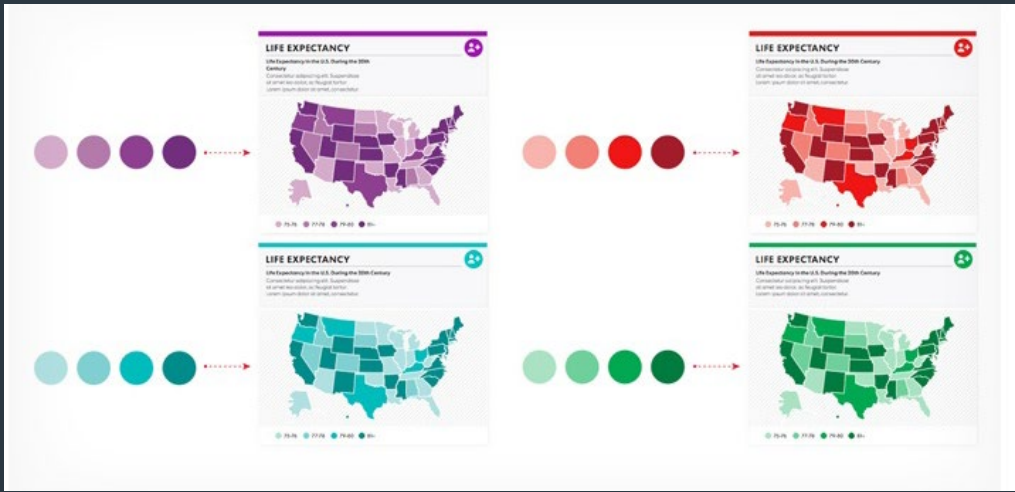
CHART AND VISUALIZATION TYPES

ICONOGRAPHY
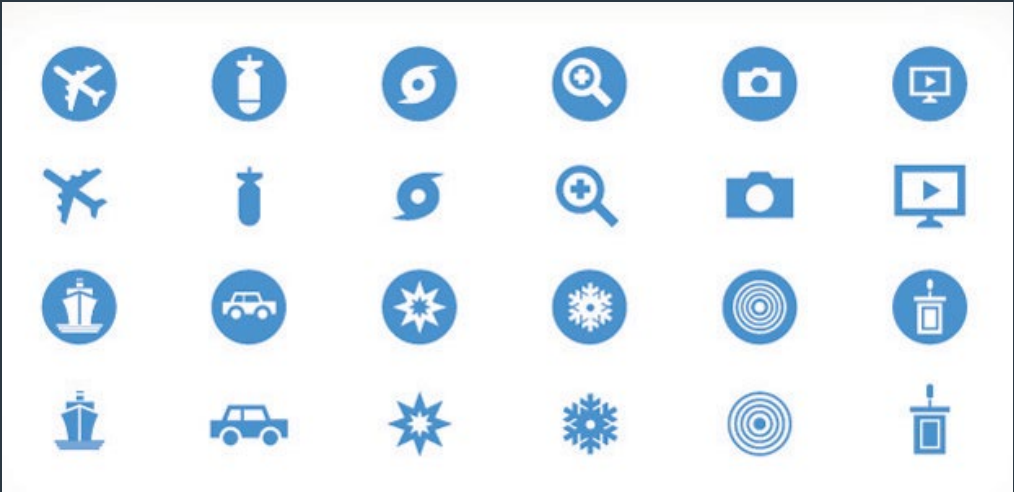
COLOR

TYPOGRAPHY

TEMPLATES
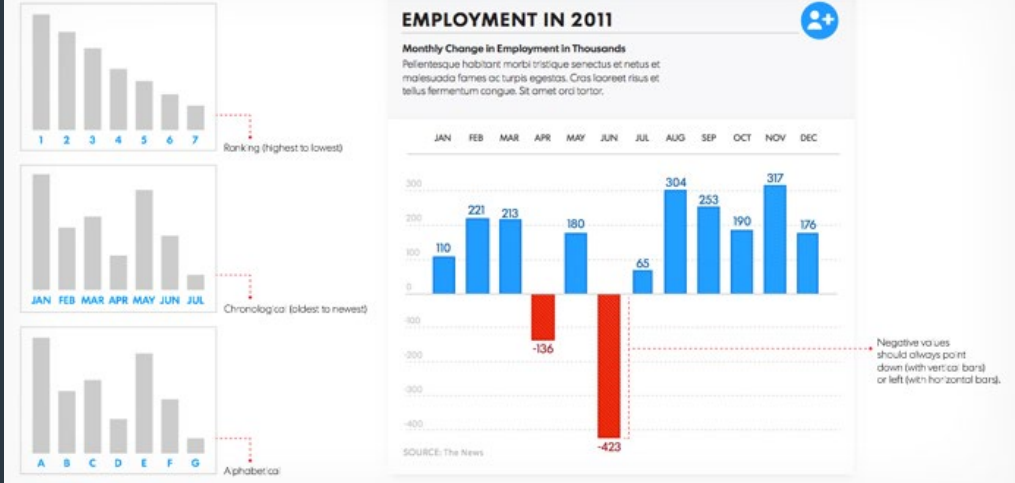
YOU CAN THINK OF IT AS A NECESSARY EXTENSION OF YOUR BRAND'S STYLE GUIDE, DEFINING HOW INFORMATION IS VISUALIZED AND PRESENTED.

10 TIPS FOR DESIGN

For non-designers, creating good-looking visual content can be a challenge. Seemingly minimal design issues can drastically affect the quality of your communication. Pay attention to these fundamentals to ensure your message doesn't get lost.

1 | COLOR

Use no more than five colors in a single layout. Color should be used sparingly to highlight important information.

2 | TYPOGRAPHY

All fonts should be legible and appropriate for the communication style.

3 | LAYOUT

Present content in a way that guides readers through in a logical hierarchy. Aligning the elements in a layout with each other will help maintain consistency.

4 | CALLOUTS

Use callouts sparingly to highlight only key information.

5 | SPACE

Keep significant negative space. When too much information is in a layout, messaging becomes cluttered and incoherent.

6 | ILLUSTRATION

Illustration should match tone and subject matter. Only include if it enhances the content.

7 | ICONOGRAPHY

Icons should be simple, easy to understand and universal; they're meant to enhance comprehension, never distract.

8 | DATA

Don't overwhelm the reader with multiple graphs of single data points when one combined will suffice.
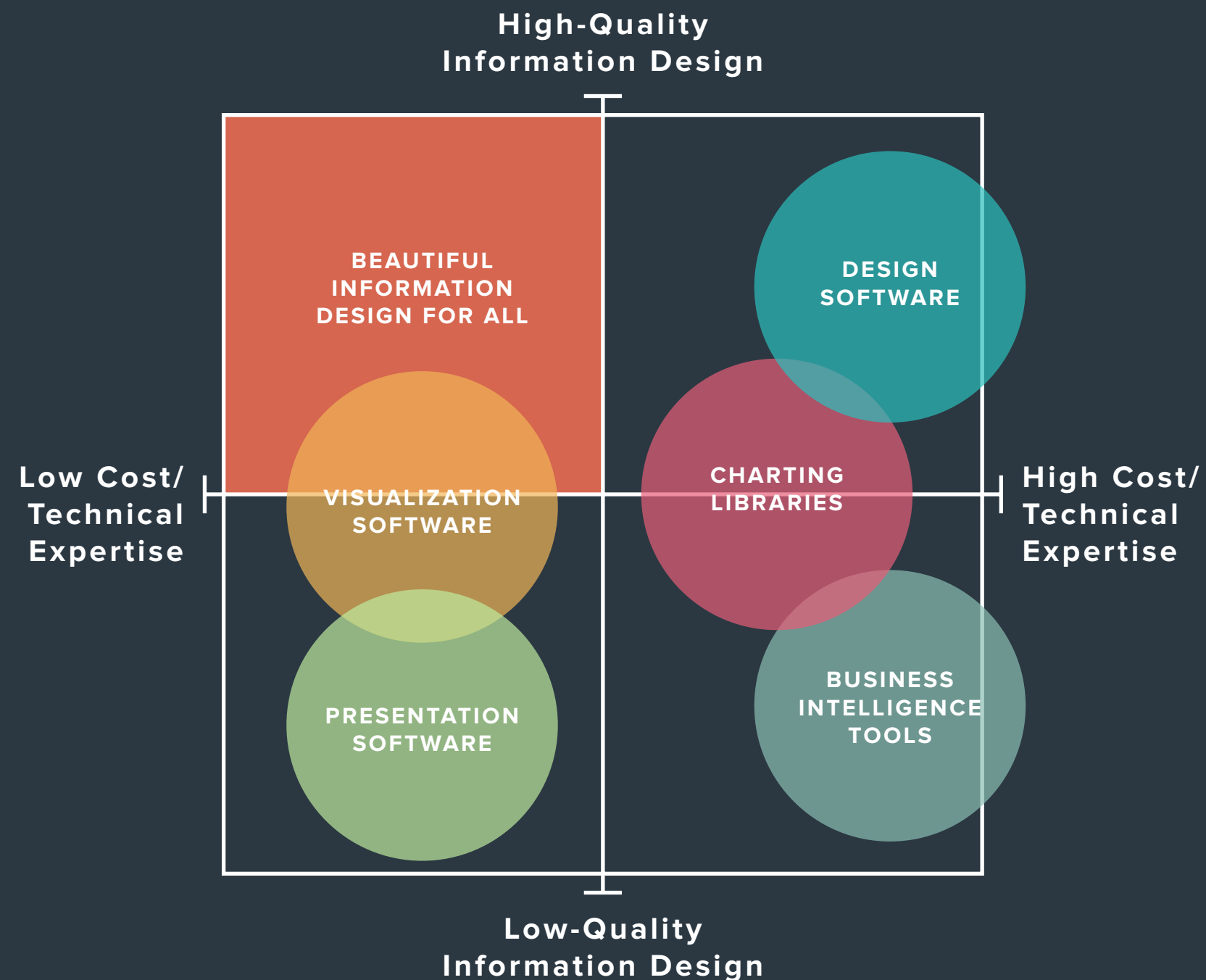
9 | PROPORTION

The eye can be deceiving; make sure items are appropriately sized in data visualizations so as not to skew data.

10 | SIMPLICITY

Avoid unnecessary design, including 3D charts, ornamental illustration or extraneous elements.

DESIGN TOOLS AVAILABLE

The traditional tools and design programs available are incomplete, challenging to master or limited in their aesthetic. Visualization software is an emerging field, providing better design tools that are easier to use.

VISAGE

Visage is a new platform that empowers non-designers to easily create beautiful, on-brand visual content such as data visualization, reports, presentations and infographics in a single web interface.

Visage was born out of Column Five, an industry-leading infographics and visual content agency with offices in Newport Beach, CA and Brooklyn, NY. Our leadership team has been working together for more than 5 years, and our focus is to help companies use visualization and great design to communicate more effectively.

GET EARLY ACCESS TO VISAGE

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VISAGE.CO/BLOG

Follow us on on these fine sites for more dataviz, design and whatnot: