Twitter and Facebook have become essential tools for adding a social dimension to current communication strategies. More and more marketers use social media as an integral part of their digital strategy to the point that it has even become indispensable.

If interactivity and personalised communication are key elements of these new marketing forms, the message itself still needs to be further developed: in a world where we are all bombarded by information, targeted by mass media and social networks, what can we do to make our message heard?

Through examples and case studies, you will learn, in the course of this brief article, how to give a new dimension to your communication in a way that draws attention to the information you want to convey.
SOCIAL MEDIAS ARE TRENDY BUT...

Last October, Adweek magazine published an article that shed light on the speedy evolution of communication modes and discussed a new revolution in the field of target marketing: data visualization [http://bit.ly/diKVy0].

According to FORBES, the (super)abundance of data forces us to find ways of making information more understandable – data visualization, previously limited to the worlds of research and science, has democratized to become “pop-culture”, as is shown in this video [http://bit.ly/cM7Die] which has generated more than 500,000 screenings in 6 days.

In the article “Why data visualization is about to become very important for your brand” published in the October edition of Advertising Age, data visualization is described as an essential element of brand marketing [http://bit.ly/aLrqgM]: Consumers are increasingly asking for more precise information on brands and products yet this information is itself becoming more and more complex – hence the need to develop ways of communicating it clearly.

Data visualization lends itself extremely well to this kind of information by offering a new narrative form, one that is more factual, graphic, informative, authentic, social and interactive.

By giving way to a more personalized and interactive form of communication, the rapid development of social media has profoundly altered modes of communication (and consumer expectations) during the last couple of years.

But social media is not an end in itself, information is also critical: In a world where consumers are bombarded by information, targeted by mass media and connected by a wide range of channels, it’s information itself that has to be worked.

“The problem is bandwidth: we simply cannot deal with the quantity of information we deal with daily (...) and data visualization becomes [therefore] an important factor in modern communications.”

Why Data Visualization Is About to Become Very Important for Your Brand, Oren Frank & Michael Miller, Advertising Age, August 2010

According to Bob Sander from Sanders Consulting, “just as marketers are getting religion about the importance of social media, they are in danger of failing to see that social media is just a vehicle, not the solution. Rather, information is the keystone. The new market leaders in the next several years will be determined by how well firms embrace the information flow that surrounds their own brand and their customers’ lives.”


COMMUNITY + DATA = MORE CLUTTER

An undeniable fact is that information is generated at an exceptional rate and fed by an increasing collection of products that themselves create it. Consumers are increasingly interacting more and more through virtual communities, within which they ask questions about products, services and companies that interest them. At times, they are prone to expressing their disapproval of or bad experience with a certain product.

As consumers get more into the habit of sharing information online, they disseminate more data linked to the companies, consumers and products that they use while online.

Although these communities provide the advantage of being able to listen in directly on consumer conversations, find in them trend indicators and then decipher what products or initiatives are successful (or not), the number of online communities is enormous and still growing.

The advantage lies not only in being aware of the conversations that take place on a brand or a product but also, and especially, in the ability to rely on these discussions in order to make decisions that will lead to a fast turnaround in the sales and avoid costly consequences for the sales and marketing departments.

As people continue communicating about brands and their associated products, they create a data pool that is becoming increasingly more difficult to synthesize. Here again, visualization is a tool of choice needed to see data clearly, in a way that represents complex material in a more visual and intuitively understandable way, which in turn, allows to detect trends and future changes, and ultimately gives way to better decision making.

WHAT IS DATA VISUALIZATION AND WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

The main goal of data visualization is to communicate information clearly and effectively by graphic means. Data visualization is just beginning to be recognized for the advantages it brings to branding.

Data visualization and infographics are powerful means of communicating data, statistics or information, and the majority of communication professionals are just now beginning to discover them. Certain magazines like GOOD or newspapers such as The Guardian or The Times have understood their importance from the get-go and knew how to take advantage of them in their publications.

Although a photo of a pretty girl always makes a sale, the public is increasingly asking for more precise information, as is emphasized in the article “For ad revenues, hard news beats Lindsay Lohan” [http://bit.ly/9eggQO].

In a world that is ever more saturated with data and information, data visualization has the ability to create a real story, which allows it to distinguish itself and help people, all at the same time.

The power of visualizations comes from the fact that they stimulate the brain in a different way, by focusing attention on the sensorial and rational sides simultaneously. They act as a discovery game that incites one to focus on the displayed information that otherwise would be left unnoticed. This is a very interesting point for marketing professionals, one, which gives them new perspectives on how to set themselves apart and better, communicate with customers.

By looking at the most popular viral images of recent years, it becomes clear that visualizations have a successful web content archetype.

DATA VISUALIZATION: IN SUMMARY

/ COMMUNICATE COMPLEX INFORMATION SIMPLY

/ IMPROVE THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION WITH NEW NARRATIVE FORMS

/ RESPOND TO THE CONSUMER DEMAND FOR INFORMATION

CASE STUDY SECTION

PAGE 8
NIKE PLUS

PAGE 10
SPRINT NOW

PAGE 12
IONZ

PAGE 13
GENERAL ELECTRIC

PAGE 15
NASA BUZZROOM

PAGE 16
SUPER BOWL

PAGE 17
CES SOCIAL CIRCLE

PAGE 19
MTV MUSIC VIDEO AWARDS 2010

PAGE 20
NUTRITION FACTS
One company that has understood the potential of data visualization to the fullest (and banked on it) is Nike, with Nike Plus. Nike Plus uses data visualization to create stronger connections with its users.

NIKE CREATED A REAL COMMUNITY OF RUNNERS— ALL CONNECTED BY ITS BRAND.

Nike Plus uses data visualization to show runners their progress. The site traces each run, illustrates the rhythm and distance ran in comparison to one’s previous runs and those of other runners.

This wealth of information allows athletes, as much as occasional runners, to better train themselves by measuring their performance in time. Information gathered is also used to suggest equipment that corresponds to the user’s needs.

Mark Parker, Nike’s C.E.O, has greatly stimulated sales with Nike Plus: “Nike Plus is turning to be huge.” By combining a simple way of accumulating data and tools so that both can be used and shared, Nike has attracted the biggest united community of runners ever – more than 1.2 million runners who together have ran more than 130 million miles and burned more than 13 billion calories.
SPRINT: WELL PRESENTED INFORMATION ATTRACTS CONSUMERS LIKE FLIES

SPRINT and its campaign “Sprint Now” is a good example of how data visualization is used in a large-scale advertising company.

The concept is simple: the world’s largest widget — a one-page snapshot of right this second. Direct feeds and information in real time invade the screen, showing anything from photos of newborns to live recordings of Niagara Falls.

Here are a few numbers that speak to this campaign’s success: since the site’s launch, the campaign appeared favourably in more than 100 publications and blogs, including The Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times and The New York Times.

Thousands of people have tweeted and blogged about the campaign. In the first three weeks, the site produced about 700,000 visits, each with an average of 15 interactions. The average time spent is 4 minutes — all on a one-page Website.

Sprint made solid returns on the campaign. From April 6 to 26, the company confirmed having received almost 340 ad impressions and added that brand exposure time was about 45 seconds per impression, which almost doubles the general average for a rich media ad.

The site won almost all of the digital awards there was: Cannes Cyber Lions, AICP Next Awards, DHAD Awards, The Clios, New York Festivals and Webby Awards.
http://now.sprint.com/nownetwork/
IONS: GATHERING INFORMATION IN A PLAYFUL WAY

For someone who uses the internet, nothing is more off-putting than filling in a personal information form. Jose Ramon Courtiza, in his IONZ project, shows a playful way of using visualization in a way that makes this process interactive and inviting.

IONS’s personality infographic generator constructs a data visualization of your personality and habits. This tool analyses characteristics of your personality by your answers to various questions – eating habits, time spent online etc. The analysis produces your personality map, presented within the context of the relative relationships of your answers to those of more than 42,000 other individuals.

http://ionz.com.br/ - IONZ Project
GENERAL ELECTRIC: UTILISER LES DONNÉES POUR DÉVELOPPER UNE IMAGE DE MARQUE

«Of all the assets a company owns, its brand is the most important and valuable.»
—Owen D. Young, President, General Electric

In 2001, GE dealt with several setbacks including the after-effects of the September 11 events, the explosion of the dot-com bubble, a new C.E.O, a changing market, the emergence of China and India and so on.

A renewed focus on the brand has become the key element of GE's expansion strategy. GE simplified and unified its company so that the public can better understand its brand. Still, the company is not well known in one of the key markets - the health market.

At the beginning of 2010, the development strategy of the GE HEALTHCARE brand was based on data visualization, particularly to simplify complex data that GE wanted to communicate and make accessible to the public-at-large. The objective of the HealthyImagination campaign, which directly integrates data visualization, is to sensitize the population to the problem of health care access and position GE in the medical world.

Data visualisation was used by GE because it’s an ideal instrument for:

- Turning people’s attention to GE’s technology;
- Differentiating GE from its competitors;
- Signalling a change within the company;
- Updating GE’s image.

In addressing the subject of health, GE emphasizes its products/solutions and positions itself as an important player in the health sector. In this way, GE HEALTHCARE hopes to increase its current revenues by three times in the long-term.
http://www.healthymagination.com/ - Official site of the HealthyImagination campaign

Affording Health Care [Via GE, Good & Thomas Porostocky]
NASA BUZZROOM: CREATE AND RAKE IN THE BUZZ

Nasa was aspiring to become more accessible and stronger in developing links with the public by bringing in social media.

It has thus launched "Buzzroom", a social media aggregator, collecting tweets, Flickr photographs and YouTube videos, which allow users to track and chat to their favourite astronauts.

In one setting, the site joins a highly engaged community who identifies itself with NASA's mission and activities. The site sparked renewed interest for the agency and more active public participation. This is crucial for an agency that depends on the American public's interest and investment in space missions.

http://buzzroom.nasa.gov/ - A website that aggregates discussions about NASA
MEASURE THE FLOW OF DISCUSSIONS SURROUNDING A COMMERCIAL SPOT

What happens when companies spend millions of dollars on Super Bowl commercials? How do discussions in social media networks such as Twitter reflect this?

Super Bowl 2009: while the Steelers and the Cardinals were battling it out on the field, Twitter users, from all four corners of the United States, generated a constant flow of tweets. The New York Times created a map showing the location and word frequency commonly used in the tweets related to the Super Bowl. One of the filters counted the mention of sponsors during the game.

Thanks to the interactive map, one can easily track that Budweiser, Doritos, CareerBuilder and Hulu sparked the most discussion during the event.

Matthew Bloch and Shan Carter
The New York Times
(2009)
http://nyti.ms/ctCaWA

http://squawq.com/superbowl/ - Website tracking twitter discussions on Super Bowl
SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY FOR EVENTS

The Consumer Electronic Association wanted to ensure that no mention of its annual event, the Consumer Electronic Show 2009 (CES), was going to get lost in the darker recesses of the web. CES is the biggest and best known fair of electronic products in the world. Every January, 100,000 tech fans meet in Las Vegas to see the latest Sony, Intel, Samsung and all other possible brand name electronic gadgets.

CES conceived a site especially dedicated to social media: the CES Social Circle. Using a variety of programming interfaces (APIs), the CES Social Circle presents the most popular subjects, tweets, photos and previously published articles, during and after the fair. The site gives a unique view of the "buzz" surrounding the fair and becomes in itself a promotional tool.

The Social Circle collected, indexed and presented hundreds of thousands of tweets, photos and articles. The site won a prize in the "Best usage of social media" category at the 14th Annual Webby Awards.
http://social.cesweb.org/ - Social Circle website
ENRICH THE DISCUSSIONS SURROUNDING A BRAND

For the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards, MTV wanted to create a tweet-tracking tool for the competing music artists.

The MTV VMA Twitter Tracker ranks participating artists by popularity by relying on the number of tweets received per minute. This beautiful data visualization tool reflects the wealth and dynamics of conversations surrounding the MTV brand, and artists, of course.

The MTV VMA Twitter Tracker counted more than 1,7 million tweets. The site was such a success that MTV renewed the experience for the 2010 MTV Movie Awards. MTV is currently the most popular music website and social media applications are the in-house norms of the network.
COMMUNICATING AROUND DATA

In an age where consumers are asking themselves a lot of questions about food, brands need to communicate more and more factual information that’s relative to their products.

Several food packages still portray imaged stereotypes: fields, animals – that are unfortunately often enough not linked to the origin and a product’s mode of production. What is more, the multiplication of stereotypical images doesn’t really allow a product to stand out.

In a research project, FFunction decided to create packaging by presenting the product in a more factual manner, which emphasized the product’s composition and nutritional value and represented both in a visually playful manner.

Published in numerous blogs such as the Dieline, Fubiz, Flowing Data, DesignBoom, as well as in Étapes Magazine and IdN World, this project was recognized and proves the interest in communicating concrete information to consumers.
DON’T MISS OUT: THE NEXT STEP

By providing your current clients with data visualization services, you could diversify your service and develop new sources of revenue. Data visualization is in demand and allows your company to distinguish itself on the branding and web communication markets. Your clients will be delighted.

FFunction was called to work on projects for the MIT Technology Review, Alcatel-Lucent and National Film Board of Canada. We have appeared in multitude blogs and publications. Don’t wait any longer and take advantage of our expertise to position yourself in the new modes of communication that are available to you!

Let’s stay in touch!

Written by the FFunction team – studio specialising in data visualization and web design. You would like more information on data visualization? Join our MAILING LIST. You would like to meet us? info@ffctn.com or 514-664-4654

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