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# Visual translation the power of visualizing strategy

## Visual Translation The Power of Visualizing Strategy



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### **What is Visual Translation?**

Visual translation is a form of graphic facilitation used to guide teams through the application of conversation, graphic recording and idea generation. It is a creative process of capturing the collective thinking of teams—groups or individuals—with the blending of relevant text concepts and graphic images to improve the retention and enhance the recall of ideas, strategies and directions created during a session.

### **Application**

The true power of Visual Translation is in the application. Strategic planning, concept development and journey mapping that leverage this unique blend of text and graphics create

a single page artifact that can be a guide tool to strategic goals. It is this usage as a guide tool that makes visual translations such an important element of strategic planning.

By creating a graphic interpretation of shared ideas and concepts, teams can begin to uncover possible opportunities previously undiscovered through traditional documentation methods or communication channels. Visual translations offer participants the ability to see relationships of ideas and explore possible connections and opportunities that linear text cannot provide immediately. As the old adage goes, 'a picture is worth a thousand words' and visual translations become a storyboard of many images and ideas to tell a story of change and growth.

## **History**

Professionally, the birth of visual translation began around the early 1980s in San Francisco, California and is contributed to a design firm called the Grove. However, its roots reach further back in time than even the Grove's contribution. The oldest known application of visualized communications dates back to over 35,400 years ago in caves on the island of Sulawesi, in Indonesia as documented in an article by the [smithsonian.com](https://www.smithsonian.com) in January of 2016. Cave paintings where the original storyboards for sharing stories, ideas and experiences within the communities. These paintings became visual documentation of a culture's knowledge of the world around them. The communicated methods for hunting and strategies that were successful. They became the guiding mechanism for the survival of the tribe.

This idea of capturing communications—in graphic form—has spanned the vastness of time. Granted, cave paintings were created out of necessity since there was no written language at the time, but the application still remains the same. Record visually, ideas and information so others (even of different languages) can understand and learn. These cave paintings became the earliest versions of modern day graphic recording. Homo sapiens may have evolved over time, but the need to share information quickly has not, only the techniques used.

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Back to modern day—originally developed as a process to capture conversations at client meetings in visual form called graphic recording—the concept began to quickly evolve as the benefits and the value increased. The process of recording conversations graphically soon became a powerful mechanism for also guiding conversations and thinking processes around strategy and goal setting.

Graphic recording slowly filtered into many more of the client sessions. And, as with many great techniques, the idea eventually spread outside the company. The concept and practice of mixing graphics with text began to emerge at other firms and during various other types of gatherings. Ideas were being captured, collaborated on and shared with attendees and teams along the West Coast. Graphic recording began growing in popularity and was quickly evolving into something new and extremely useful.

Eventually, recording became a guiding process. The blending of images and text began leading meetings and strategy sessions. Facilitators began using graphic storyboarding as a method to keep ideas and conversations focused on the objective. These facilitated recordings became both a guide and an artifact of strategy.

In 2008—as the recession began to take shape—the application of graphic recording and facilitation took a step forward out of the need of the next evolution. Rapidly adapting to a growing need brought upon by economic turmoil, a process, now called Visual Translation, became the response to individuals, companies and large organizations to prepare for stagnation and to strategize about recovery. The traditional process of graphic recording takes on an additional function beyond that of merely recording or idea exploration—a function of investigation and strategy organization.

## **Enter Science**

What makes visual recording and facilitation the power tool of thinking and strategy? It lies deeply in the way the brain processes and records information. Back when the cave man painted on walls, we were all hunter gatherers. Our brains had evolved to spot visual clues about our surroundings. We looked for variations and disruptions in patterns to spot prey or to alert us to other predators. It was a life essential tool for the survival of man.

Memory plays a key part of this process of visual identification and recall. Commonly referred to as the 'lizard brain', the smaller part of the brain nearest the stem (amygdala) which governs a simple process of the 'Fight or Flight' response. Early men needed to learn that certain patterns on animal fur or skin meant predator and others were prey. Those that didn't learn, never survived very long.

In order to ensure the safety of the tribe, drawings on the cave walls were created to educate others of what could be hunted versus those which are hunting. They learned through visual representation. Even today, researchers studying these drawings and paintings could identify hunting patterns and selections because of the visual cues and group image association.

### ***How does all this make graphic recording a powerful tool?***

Simply stated, we are wired since prehistoric times to process visual information first over everything else. This is why advertising leverages dynamic imagery when selling goods or services. There is added popularity with Instagram and memes because remember messages when combined with images. We learn with the use of visuals, because visual images store better and longer in our memory than the sequence of text or spoken words.

Evidence of this phenomenon was identified in a research paper by Allan Paivio and co-author A. Dan Yarmey entitled 'Pictures versus words as stimuli and responses in paired-associate learning', October 2013. The report investigated the ability of people to learn based upon words or imagery. What the research uncovered is that 'PA' (Paired-associated) learning was better with pictures than with nouns as stimuli—the effect being greater when nouns served as responses.

To briefly sum all of this science; we know from scientific research that people learn more effectively and remember longer when images are incorporated and paired with written language. It only makes sense that the use of visual imagery and text, paired together, can improve strategic planning as well as increase the retention of the information created or gained. By using memory, we are able to achieve that which was created.

### **Mapping Transformation**

After the recession in 2010, businesses began looking in earnest for a better way of creating lasting strategies. Technology was advancing, brands were evolving, cultures were changing and people were connecting better than before, but the planning session was slow to adapt to the needs of the changing environment. A change that was more than retooling or efficiencies, a change that was transformational. In order to achieve any kind of dramatic transformation, strategy needed a new and powerful tool to help. A tool like a Visual Translation (VT).

The VT process is a unique evolution of graphic facilitation that focuses on additional information not previously being recorded. A visual translator works with a facilitator and team of people to not only focus on the existing conversation, shared ideas and connections, but also listens to capture one more set of critical details that advances a strategic planning session—or discovery program—to the next level of thinking and collaboration. The translator is also listening for what is lacking or not being included in the conversations, as well as the emotional response within the groups.

By capturing more than just spoken dialog or provided details and include emotional cues and absent information, VTs have the ability to map out a pathway to help guide teams through the defining and creating of a transformation process custom to themselves. In addition, the completed VT becomes a reference artifact to keep the focused and on track to achieve their goals and implement the desired outcomes.

*“What the mind can envision and eyes can see, the hands can make real.”*

### **Working Applications**

The whole of the VT process is not limited to only strategy sessions. The recording, mapping and investigation of ideas, conversations and information can be applied to many possibilities. Journey mapping can be elevated to create a better understanding beyond knowing where a customer journeys, but also to explore why and how.

When using this style of facilitation and recording, problem-solving takes on a much more dynamic experience. The ability to explore, discover and challenge has greater potential for success than merely identifying conditions. Using a blend of images and text, teams can begin to see the problem differently. By teams getting a different perspective on problems, the possible options for solutions can be more expansive and impactful.

Designers working with clients, can leverage this same process to create a much more in-depth process for designing physical digital places. Scenarios, once overlooked, can be explored to reveal new possibilities or forms.

So, no matter what type of planning, exploration or engaging event where people gather to share and exchange ideas, Visual Translation is a powerful tool that can help capture, explore and discover new and enlightening ideas.

When it comes to recalling events, a visual reminder becomes a very useful tool. The final artifact, the physical Visual Translation document, also becomes a memory device from the event and the interactions around that event. It has the ability to recall details of the event quickly that written text cannot. It becomes an artifact that can be shared or promoted physically in print and poster or shared digitally in email or on social media. In the end, there are very few other methods of recording communications offer the impact, retention and recall capabilities that Visual Translations can provide.

## **About the Author**

Kevin M. Dulle, Certified Experience Economy Expert (CEEE), is Director of the Experience Innovations Strategy Team at NewGround, an experiential design build firm. He has spent over 25 years serving the financial industry Healthcare and with strategic planning, visual thinking, and experiential business development. With visual translations and graphic thinking techniques, Kevin guides clients in discovering unique strategic solutions, develop long-term planning options and organize complex concepts into cohesive strategies.

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