


# Visual marketing in the digital age

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Visual imagery is swift becoming an online lingua franca. [Suzy Bashford](#)  investigates its impact on the B2B world – and finds out how savvy marketers can benefit

A friend's teenage daughter sent me a text recently made up entirely of emojis. As a woman who is (ahem) not a 'digital native', it took me a while to decipher, but I managed. This experience hit home to me how radically language is changing, fuelled by millennials who think and communicate in a fundamentally new way.

Research by [TalkTalk Mobile](#), for instance, shows that 72 per cent of 18 to 25 year olds say they find it easier to express their feelings in emoji icons than in words. Facebook's survey on consumer behaviour also shows that millennials scroll much faster than baby boomers, consuming ads 2.5 times faster. Concentration spans are shorter, the need for instant gratification is more intense and the amount of information being assimilated every day is much bigger and broader.

But this trend isn't just about the kids. While they may be driving it, the rest of us are following their lead and embracing visual communication too, with emoji deemed the fastest-growing language today and The Uniform Consortium releasing 2834 new emoji icons last year. There's even a crowd-sourcing project on Kickstarter to translate classic novel Moby Dick into emoji (Emoji Dick). Seriously.

People like visuals because they are much quicker than typing out words on a smartphone, they're easier to use on the move and they require less brainpower. In a world where we are feeling increasingly drained by content overload (see the box on page 23), we are all craving shortcuts and welcome any way we can save time and energy. As a result, emojis are now commonplace between friends, and businesses are starting to get in on the action too. For example, in the US you can order a Domino's pizza via emoji.

## **What it means for B2B**

Traditionally, the language used in B2B marketing has been much more formal. But experts are predicting that soon we will see this more visual, casual way of speaking pervade the B2B market and become the norm.

“Emojis will increasingly be used in B2B environments,” says [Ranzie Anthony](#), executive creative director at design and technology agency [Athlon](#). “The lines are blurring between enterprise environments and consumer ones. Increasingly, people are bringing their own personal devices to work, or using enterprise-grade software in the home environment. As such, B2B brands need to be able to bridge the gap. They will increasingly need to be comfortable being more emotive and visual, because visual communication is increasingly being used as a shorthand that people use to select and filter what they will engage with.”

As he says, we’re already seeing this, with time-poor business users often comfortable sending an emoji to communicate tone. We’re also seeing it in business software tools like Slack. Businesses that don’t embrace this trend run the risk of looking old-fashioned or out of touch.

“The future of B2B marketing will include a language of visual shortcuts that enable faster, more emotive communication,” Anthony continues. “This may not necessarily be the smiley faces and thumbs up from the consumer world. However, in the same way that familiar iconography enables business users to intuitively use software and applications, visuals will be used to help convey tone of voice.”

[The Partners’](#) creative director [Nick Eagleton](#) believes that emojis are basically iconography and that they will continue to creep into the B2B space. However, he warns, in a professional context they need to be used with care and appropriately as: “It’s a bit like dad-dancing. You have to be careful not to look embarrassing.”

He actually believes that the rise of emojis is deeply significant because it is indicative of a much wider trend affecting the whole of marketing: the growing importance of using a visual to convey a complex meaning simply. This means, he argues, that visual identity is much more important in the digital age than it has ever been before, much more so than traditional advertising channels.

Yes, he is the creative director of a branding agency, so you would expect him to say this. However, he does also have compelling fresh research to make his point. The study, conducted by [Millward Brown](#), spans a 10-year period and proves that advertising is far less effective if the advertiser does not have a strong visual identity in place. Brands perceived by consumers to have strong advertising but weaker branding only grew 27 per cent over the decade. In stark contrast, brands perceived to have strong advertising, as well as strong branding, grew by 168 per cent.

These results are particularly pertinent for those working in B2B, he says: “Often in B2B you’re all offering the same services. You can’t rely on visuals of the product to differentiate. So communicating visually in a memorable way can make all the difference. Especially in the digital age when consumption is quick and bite-sized.”

A case in point is The Partners’ work with law firm [Eversheds](#). The company came to The Partners with a brief for using its visual identity to convey personality and a distinct point of view in the marketplace. When researching the competition, Eagleton quickly realised how many professional services firms are missing a trick when it comes to using visual marketing as a way to cut through: “Professional services don’t like brevity and they are most comfortable communicating in longform. They use lots of generic words and jargon. But it’s not just the language that is generic, the images are too, full of stock pictures. Even the infographics look the same. So, it’s not so much that the landscape isn’t varied, it was just all so boring and similar.”

As a result, Eagleton advised his clients that if they were bold and dared to take a more visually-led approach, summing up their positioning through design and minimal copy, they could much more effectively convey what they’re about.

Together, they decided to create a visual around the idea of ‘thinking without boundaries’. “We then built this idea into everything,” explains Eagleton, “using simple, colourful typography to stand out, like brands such as IBM, Google and Apple do so effectively, which works beautifully on digital.”



## Info from fresh angles

[Lorna Nightingale](#), head of marketing at [Esri UK](#), also believes this shift to a more visual type of marketing is particularly important to B2B marketers. She has worked in the B2B sector for years, mainly in the software industry, and has lived through the marketing focus shift from outbound to inbound: “As B2B marketers, our priorities are to contribute to revenue and demonstrate our efforts to drive revenue. Today, high-value content engages and converts into revenue. That means we have to be experts in content creation and inbound marketing. With so much content, you need to be more visual to cut through the noise.”

In Nightingale's experience, the content that works best in terms of engaging a prospect and converting them into a customer is: "Content that doesn't necessarily sell your brand, but helps the customer to be successful, or gives them a new, interesting piece of information." Visuals that display data in a quick, easy to understand way are particularly effective, such as Esri's data maps. These take a spreadsheet of information and drop it into a map and, by doing so, bring the insights to life, illuminating the data in a way you wouldn't necessarily see otherwise.

For example, Esri produced a visual for the Mirror newspaper mapping the solar eclipse online for its readers. "The use of visuals has increased the dwell time on the website. When you embed something like a map into the story, it engages the readers because it's interactive. They can personalise the story for their situation, switching on and off different layers. In this case, finding out when the sky would go dark over their house," says Nightingale.

The fact that consumers are spending more and more time online is also affecting the components of visual marketing, from font and colour to logo positioning. "People are engaging with information on much smaller platforms," says Craig Barber, art director and head of the content studio, [Bite Communications](#). "It's no longer billboards, newspapers and magazines, it's screens of all sizes and a lot of them are small. Because of this, logos and typography in particular have to look great and be readable at small scale. Therefore, design and marketing has become a lot simpler."

Luckily, research is coming to the fore in this area around what colours, fonts and positioning work best for brands using visuals online, like Rocket Fuel's research on creative optimisation.

You can see this modern, brutal simplicity of design in new logos from the likes of Yahoo, AirBnB, Google and Apple, which have all been revamped in order to look better in digital. That doesn't mean traditional typographic values are irrelevant in the digital age. In fact, Anthony argues quite the reverse, saying that we are seeing a revival of the importance of typography and a much wider awareness of visual design in everyday life. He cites the backlash against Apple when it recently changed from the typeface Helvetica to San Francisco in its operating system. Because consumers increasingly feel ownership over how brands look, brands need to tread carefully when tinkering with their visual marketing. As one Apple fan tweeted after the font change: "The new iOS font is weirding me out a little bit. It's like Apple moved all my furniture an inch to the left and I keep bumping into things."

While there's no doubt that visuals are becoming more important in the online world, that doesn't mean words are redundant. In fact, the most successful brands will be those that can break content into bite-sized, easily digestible chunks, interspersing words and images and content of differing depth. Hence the growth of technology that helps companies build up a brand narrative online, such as Microsoft's Sway product. These applications strive to take the reader through a journey that ends in a click to conversion. Charities use this new technique to great effect, telling an emotive story of their work, bringing it to life through visuals, maps and videos, then embedding a call-to-action link at the end.

## **The future for B2B**

So, where could this trend go for B2B marketers? There's huge potential. Heavy-going, longform content such as academic papers could be transformed into lively, interactive visual storyboards that can be shared much more easily, and gain much more traction on social media. Similarly, there's no reason why smart B2B brands can't also piggyback on the returning gamification trend, too, to make their content more engaging and visual. There are signs that some brands are already adopting gamification techniques in their content strategies, like Yahoo news reader, which now presents its headlines in an interactive progress bar, which naturally encourages you to read more to get to the next level.

Another growing trend is the use of visual search, which enables consumers to take pictures of items they want to purchase and then be directed to where they can buy them. It's already being used by retailers like Neiman Marcus and ToysRUs via tech company Slyce. Again, there's no reason why this type of marketing cannot not be replicated in B2B.

The main barrier to B2B innovation in this area is not the technology: it's marketers' imaginations. And that, unfortunately, is sometimes an issue in the sector. As mentioned earlier, B2B content marketing has a tendency towards heavy longform, is often generic and similar to other professional brands in the market.

What's needed here to really take advantage of the opportunities inherent in this more visual way of communicating, is the courage to push the boundaries of B2B brands. [Katy Halewood](#), head of Maxus for Business, at media agency network [Maxus](#), sums this up.

"Yes we're living in the digital age. But we're still human beings and humans will react in the same emotive manner to a digital or non-digital image," she says. "The question is more around bravery for me. If an image can truly say a thousand words then I'd encourage brands to create visual portraits of themselves without copy. Any brand should be able to communicate meaning through imagery alone. Given our default reliance on explanatory copy in B2B, let's go for it and move out of our comfort zone."

**Data visualisation specialists Esri have produced a storyboard of our cover story. To read it, [click here](#).**