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10
INSIGHTS
ON
the
STATE
of
VISUAL
STORYTELLING
IN
2019

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What is visual storytelling? In 2019, with so many high-tech tools at our fingertips and countless content creators and marketers working across styles and media, that's a loaded question. But at its core, it's a way to weave an enchanting tale. An engaging read that's impossible to ignore, or just a story – but one you can't tear your eyes away from.

Encompassing elements of video and animation, graphic and editorial design, illustration and typography, it's a narrative format that's exploded in recent years and which will only continue to grow with today's proliferation of easy and affordable design solutions.

But what does that mean for brands and publishers trying to communicate with audiences today? And how can they commit to infusing their own efforts with the best of what design can offer?

We reached out to designers, editors, content marketers, and other creatives across industries to pick their brains about the current state of visual storytelling and what we can look forward to in the year ahead. Their insights span the design spectrum, touching on content and editorial design, illustration, user experience, and inclusive design as well.

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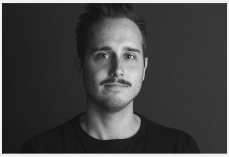
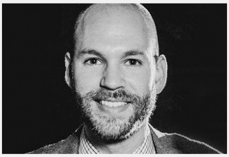


STEVE PEARSON
Head of Visual Storytelling at GET Creative, USA Today

LAUREN STREIB
Vice President of Editorial at Viacom

JOHN COLLINS
Director of Content at Intercom

AMY HATCH
Global Head of Content and Editorial at SAP



JEREMY FORD
Senior Art Director at NewsCred

CLAIRE FALLOON Creative Director at The Writer

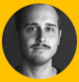
SEAN BLANDA Editorial Director at InVision

JULIE BLITZER Digital UX Manager at Design Group Italia

PAUL DES MARAIS Associate Art Director at Optimist Inc.

EMELIE RODRIGUEZ
Head of Business Development at The Writer

① You don’t need to have a whole team of developers to make design work



STEVE PEARSON
Head of Visual Storytelling at GET Creative, USA Today

We've moved past just reading words within the editorial experience. You can tell a much fuller story via the total experience by transforming a standard article

DIY
EDITING
DESIGNING
ANIMATING
PROMOTING

with a fully autoplay video experience, pull quotes that animate in, 360-degree video, and other ways of making the story jump off the screen. And with technology becoming more available, more user-friendly, and less expensive, you don't need to have a whole team of developers to make design work. A writer or editor can put visuals in and focus on the front-end, which just wasn't possible even a couple of years ago.

We're in an era of test and learn, and things are changing quickly right now. Visual storytelling has broadened into lots of verticals, going beyond videos and photo stories toward these really giant, amazing interactive pages with animations and all sorts of touchpoints. Before, we couldn't deliver them because of internet speeds. Now with 5G and initiatives like the AMP Project, the things you'll be able to download instantaneously will be interesting to see. It's really about trying to make content different and make it your own, while ensuring that you're leading people down the path you want them to go on. They need to understand the story and get those scroll depths and completion rates.

2 We're getting closer to truly immersive digital storytelling, to magazine-quality design on the web

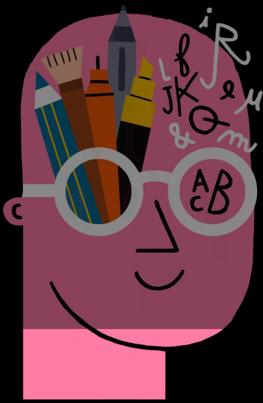
LAUREN STREIB
Vice President
of Editorial at
Viacom

Online publishers are finally starting to respect how much certain audiences value the visuals as much as – if not more than – the words. There's more breathing space in editorial design, it's more playful, mobile has caused the demise of the slideshow to a return to a scrolling experience, and we're getting closer to truly immersive digital storytelling. It's closer to magazine-quality design on the web.

I'd love to see more cool things happen with print becoming digitally immersive and experiential in a way that's not clunky or gimmicky. And I'd also love if the sans-serif font trend started to wane in favor of more original branding. But when it comes to the fundamental goal of getting readers to consume more content - I think it's still about having great, original visuals and compelling, unique perspectives, and strong, clear writing. In other words, it's the same as it's always been: make good shit that no one else can, and you become valuable to readers. That's always been about the best way to tell a story - and when a publisher nails that, readers follow.

3 Invest early on, come up with a visual identity, and decide that imagery matters as much as the words

JOHN COLLINS
Director of
Content at
Intercom



When I was working as a journalist, someone once said to me: "Pictures – they're the last thing a writer or content creator thinks about, and the first thing the reader sees." And I think that's still an issue. When we talk about any content marketing program or initiative, it's almost always about writing the words and then figuring out how to illustrate. Maybe it starts halfway through the process, but it's very rare that people actually start off thinking about how something is going to look and what it's going to visually communicate before they start writing.

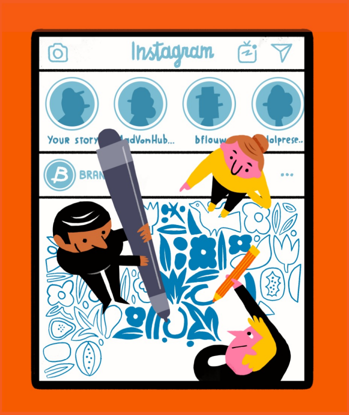
For me, it's really about investing early on, coming up with your own visual identity, and deciding that imagery is going to take the same seat at the table as the words. And for content marketers, it's about learning to partner and collaborate really well with designers. You need to be able to speak their language, give constructive feedback and learn what kind of feedback is actually useful. If you can build a healthy relationship with your design team, it can be really transformative.

④ There's so much visual pollution online – you have to find a way to engage from a design standpoint

AMY HATCH
Global Head of
Content and
Editorial at SAP

The world is sick of looking at 500-word blog posts. If the content is great, that's one thing, and if you have a pre-engaged audience that works on its own, fine. But you actually have to create something beautiful to lure them in. One of the things we do on the *Future of Customer Engagement and Commerce*, which is a design tactic that's part of our content growth strategy, is commission a standalone illustration for each piece of content we post.

We send the content over to the creative team the week before, they read it, they ask questions, we tell them the keywords people are using to get there, we talk about the concepts, and then they create an illustration that's unique to that piece of content and unique to SAP. And I'm starting to see other companies echo that style. There's so much clutter and there's so much visual pollution when you're online that you have to find a way to do something really engaging from a design standpoint. And at the end of the day, you have to take your cues from the editorial world.



⑤ Bespoke imagery will always win since it's unique and closely tied to a brand's visual tone of voice

JEREMY FORD
Senior Art
Director at
NewsCred

As brands feel the pressure to publish more content across more channels, cutting through the noise will become increasingly difficult – especially since there's so much attractive design out there. In fact, engaging design is now table stakes for a marketing organization, and it seems like everyone's employing illustrations to humanize their offering and appeal to a wider audience. A few years ago, this was definitely not the case.

I recently saw there's a free tool to generate modular illustrations of people - a nice idea for marketers who can't afford illustrators, but we're likely going to get sick of seeing them really quickly. There's already too much editorial and marketing illustration out there that looks the same. Bespoke imagery will always win over template-based imagery because it's unique and closely tied to a brand's visual tone of voice. This year, I think we'll see a movement towards more abstract artwork, interactive elements, and motion in editorial content, as those formats will become easier and cheaper to create as well.

⑥ When design is happening at its absolute best, the words and visuals are very consciously put together

CLAIRE FALLOON
Creative Director at The Writer

Visuals tell stories, whether overtly with illustration or imagery, or more implied through the use of colors, particular shapes or other graphic elements. Giving visual designers something to really base that on is one thing that verbal design can help with. We can design our words to work in harmony with the visuals, and when we have the opportunity to work directly with design agencies or in-house designers, it's always particularly helpful in nailing down the tone and intention behind creating a certain feeling or experience.

After a recent voice training session with one of our clients, an experience designer came up to me to say how helpful it was in sparking ideas. And really, it's by consciously using every element you have available to you – from visuals, to words, to the materials you use in your retail fit-out – to produce the same feel, and tell the same story, that your brand will come together so much more powerfully. Those opportunities to collaborate as writers and designers are definitely a way to bring the work to life and make it start to sing. We're seeing this happen much more than we did five years ago, and it's a balance both sides have been craving. When design is happening at its absolute best, the words and visuals are very consciously put together, both aiming to create the same feel and experience, so that everything's telling the same story.

⑦ Once you understand your audience and your brand's voice, design can bring you to another level

SEAN BLANDA
Editorial
Director at
InVision

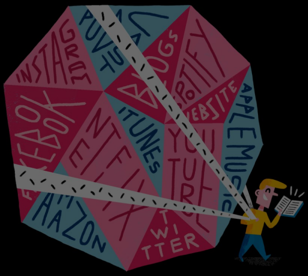
One of my favorite essays on content marketing is Stock and Flow by Robin Sloan. Essentially, stock is the stuff you keep forever. It's evergreen. From a writing perspective, it's your how-to articles, or your service pieces, or your really deep features on whatever you're writing about. And then there's the flow, which is the stuff that's ephemeral, like trends, or writing anything specifically for social shares. Content and marketing in general has always been a balance between those two things, but what I see in the coming year is more of a focus on the stock than the flow.

For long-term sustainable success, it's pretty clear that you need to focus on long-lasting content. Visual trends move so quickly and are so dependent on how you're viewing them, that to me, it's just an order of operation. Design can bring you to another level, especially when the landscape is so competitive. But if you don't have the audience down, and the tone down, and you don't know the things your audience likes to read about, you can't be focusing too much on the packaging - though it's still an essential part of growing a publication.

⑧ Audiences now move fluidly among varied content and channels, and expect brand experiences to follow

JULIE BLITZER
Digital UX
Manager at
Design Group
Italia

Brands and content sources are no longer perceived as



single destinations – the newspaper, the website, the radio station – but as cross-channel service providers. Representing a brand across platforms has always been important, but today's audiences move fluidly among these varied experiences and expect their preferred brand experiences to follow, fluidly. What might have been considered "creepy" a few years ago is not just today's norm, but what the audience expects. They believe: "Services should get to know me, my habits, and in exchange for this information about me, offer the best possible, personalized result for the device in which I'm interacting with this service."

This service expectation asks brands and content providers to explore how their content is consumed across various devices (i.e. smartphone, tablet, smart TV, in-airplane entertainment system, audio assistants, and beyond) in an ever-growing list of contexts. Even with TV media, users are simultaneously using smartphones. It's rich, dynamic, visually-driven content that can engage the user and keep their attention, specifically when it's written at the appropriate length and loads properly on the device at hand.

9 Publishers need to take risks – on their storytellers and on their visual language

PAUL DES MARAIS
Associate Art Director at Optimist Inc.

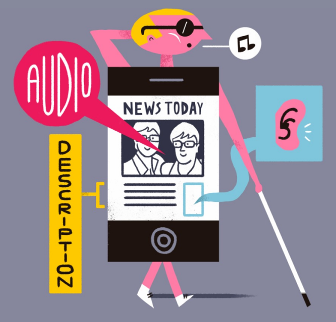
Design across all fields is often undervalued and misunderstood. Inherently, good design tends to go unnoticed, and for many designers that's the desired outcome. But the convenience of easy-to-use technology has increased our ignorance to good design. Modern humans are asked to accelerate production in the face of endless outlets for distraction, losing touch with our dynamism and ability to learn. In the coming year, I hope people gain a more comprehensive understanding of technological systems to utilize good design for social and environmental change.

While it's clear that beautifully-designed content stimulates readers, the experience begins with good journalism and storytelling. If brands seek to connect with consumers through content, they should start by taking a comprehensive approach to their brand identity. How can they integrate their product or service into a narrative, engaging way to connect with their consumers? Content is increasingly watered-down and vapid. Instead, publishers need to trust their readers and take risks – on their storytellers and on their visual language – believing that good content will always attract intelligent readers.

10 We'll see more companies using visual and verbal elements that reach audiences who may not consume content

EMELIE RODRIGUEZ
Head of Business Development at The Writer

in a standard format



Something interesting that I've seen recently is inclusive design in writing. Companies have lots of different audiences that they're trying to reach, which include people who may not be able to consume content in a standard format, for whatever reason. For example, instead of just a photo you might have to add a written description of the photo to reach those who are using a machine that's reading out loud to them because they can't see. You also have those that have English as a second language and just being clearer in the way you communicate can help you reach across cultural lines.

Building in visual and verbal elements that reach those audiences in effective ways is something we're going to see more often as companies start caring more about how people prefer to take in information. I've seen it a lot recently from more B2B brands with both a diverse workforce and audience to think about.

Get your own copy of "10 Insights on the State of Visual Storytelling in 2019" as a handy guide and reference

What are you excited to see in the world of editorial, blog, and content marketing design this year?

Let us know @SetkaEditor on Twitter + Instagram and learn more about the tool that made this post possible at setka.io.

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Last Name

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Job function

Company

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