



The Big Picture: The Holy Grail of Business

By Cliff Atkinson (published January 28, 2003 at www.MarketingProfs.com)

The next time somebody tells you they see the "Big Picture," ask them to show you a copy of it. Then ask them why they haven't provided copies to everybody else in your organization. Because what's more important than everyone in a company sharing the same strategic vision?

The truth is, as much as organizations talk about the Big Picture, few have fulfilled their quest to actually make it a physical reality. And sorry, the following don't count: 100-page business plans, wordy white papers, and PowerPoints filled with bullet points, complex flow charts, and cliché images of people in suits shaking hands.

Nice try, but that's not going to work in a media-savvy business world.

If you have something important to say, you're going to have to tell it with the right images. And then back it up with text and numbers. Now more than ever, people expect you to get right to the point, and for you to do the hard work of figuring out what's really important to them.

Yesterday, it was important for executives to be able to take complex ideas and distill them down to bullet points. Today, executives have to translate their most important strategy into images.

If you want to break through the clutter and communicate clearly, you're literally going to have to deliver what you said you would: a Big Picture. That's right, a single picture that communicates everything you want to say. It would likely include your organization's strategic focus, revenue models, financial goals, project timelines and resources.

You and everyone in your organization could easily look at such an image to focus your work on meeting your goals. You could quickly observe how everything works together, and see a source of ongoing inspiration and innovation.

If Big Pictures actually existed, there would be much less confusion, complexity and contradiction in the business world.

That's why illustrating the Big Picture is today's Holy Grail of business communications. The smart companies that figure out how to make the Big Picture real, will achieve their quest and the riches they have long been seeking: clarity of purpose, shortened sales cycles, minimized communication problems, and a focused team singing the same strategic song.

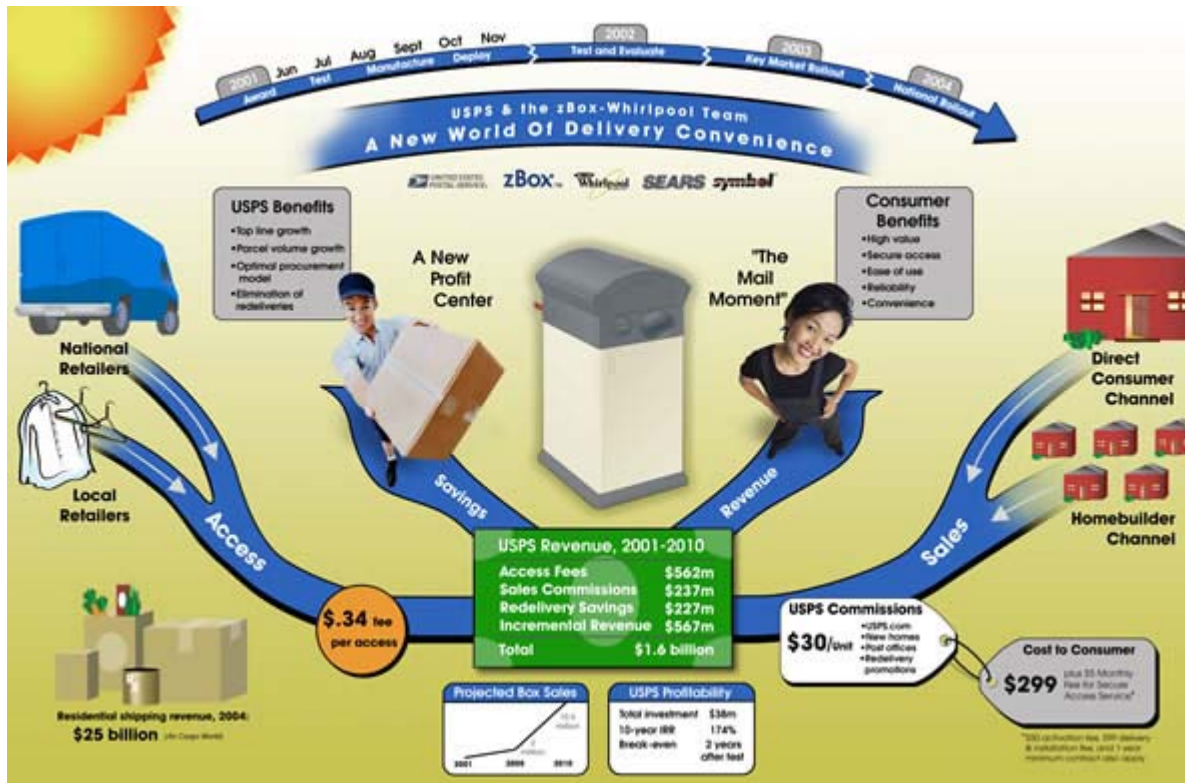
Of course, nobody promised that the road to illustrating the Big Picture would be easy. As you send your bravest strategists, graphic designers and consultants out on their quest to find your Big Picture, make sure they know the four mysterious clues inscribed on the Great Stone where the stylus pen called Excalibur is embedded, to guide them on their way.

The inscription reads: Ye Will Know the Big Picture by these Signs:

It is simple, yet complex

In order for a Big Picture to succeed, it has to appear simple and accessible. It can't be cluttered, dense, and difficult to grasp.

Web designers and information architects struggle with this every day, because it's such an important and difficult challenge. But finding simplicity amidst complexity is the hardest work of all. When you are able to distill the complicated into a single image, as in the accompanying visual business plan, you've made a significant strategic communications breakthrough.



It is still, yet dynamic

The Big Picture can be appreciated as a still, beautiful visual in and of itself. It is a single visual interface for all the knowledge your organization holds, and is therefore fascinating to view, and thought-provoking.

It is driven by the real-time data and information that shapes your strategy, from internal and external sources. Remember that constructing your image doesn't require complex technology--very effective Big Pictures can be built simply and inexpensively in PowerPoint using hyperlinks. You can always hook up the XML later.

It is shallow, yet deep

The visual interface to your intellectual capital should be designed so that in spite of its simplicity, its depth can be accessed. Nothing an executive team produces is more important than the company's strategy.

Make sure the depth of this significant investment in your intellectual capital is accessible. You should be able to click on the finance section and open up spreadsheets in your database that contain the source data, or click on the competitive analysis section and view research findings on your competitors.

It is straightforward, yet mysterious

The great art of the world draws its power from ambiguity. There's an internal tension, and the deepest questions are unanswered. The same is true of any good strategy--it's appropriate for its present circumstances, but flexible enough to change along with its environment.

When a Big Picture is built from an elegant core, it allows for scalability and change. It admits that it doesn't have all the answers, and presents open-ended questions at the same time as a clear direction.

Just as any adventure starts with the first step, simply deciding to begin the quest for the Big Picture will start moving you in the right direction. With the focus of this mission in hand, you'll be able to rally the right resources to accomplish the task.

Just keep in mind that this quest will take time, energy and patience. The strategic stakes are high, but the rewards of finding the Holy Grail of communications are enormous. A wealth of understanding, savings and inspiration awaits those who choose to embark on this challenging and exciting visual journey.

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