



PDF of this article // 

print this article // 

A Clearer XPLANATION: Q&A with Dave Gray

By Cliff Atkinson

*Many people dream of a day when words and pictures will come together to make complicated ideas easier to understand. Dave Gray has been turning that dream into reality since 1993 when he founded xPlane, the 'visual thinking company'. xPlane has since illustrated the most important strategic ideas of big and small companies, and has advanced the field of informational graphics with its ongoing work at Business 2.0 magazine and other publications. Besides being chairman of xPlane, Dave is an award-winning visual journalist and author of **Selling to the VP of NO: Secrets of the Selling Stars**, a visual learning book.*

Cliff Atkinson: *Dave, what is your assessment of the state of organizational communications today — are things getting easier to understand, or harder? Why?*

Dave Gray: It's a complete mess. Each day, we are bombarded with more information than ever before. For example, spam is now 60% of the average person's email. We simply can't process all this information. So we shut down, just like an overloaded circuit-breaker. We go into a sort of survival mode, where we continue to maintain the status quo but don't try to do anything new, because it's just too difficult. For a typical example, see the attached 93-page guide I recently received on how to use my voicemail **here** (download PDF/1MB).

CA: *What is a typical problem your clients face, and how do you help them solve it?*

DG: Smart managers know that business success is achieved through people. We help our customers determine WHO must DO WHAT in order to get them the business result that they want. Then we help them visualize this critical information, to break through the clutter, so people instantly understand what they need to know in order to make better decisions. Decisions mean action and action means results. For an example, click **here**.

CA: *Your XPLANATIONS are a fusion of verbal and visual communication elements. How and why do they work?*

DG: Human beings are biological entities. There are limits to the amount of information we can process at any one time. However, it so happens that we process information that is visually depicted faster and with greater understanding than any other kind. Visuals can convey a rich and complex universe of information that people understand intuitively and instantly. Adding text makes your meaning more precise. For example:

Visual language in action



A person



A person reading a book.

A reader

The act of reading



A person getting an idea from reading a book.

CA: PowerPoint can also be described as a fusion of verbal and visual elements. Why do many of them not work?

DG: As the name implies, PowerPoint is powerful, both as a thinking tool and a communication tool. For example, on an airplane I once saw an architect designing an entire house in PowerPoint. You can use PowerPoint to visualize your thoughts, and when you are done you can use it to communicate.

This power is also its downfall. While people are quite sophisticated at “reading” visual information, it’s much more difficult to “write” visually. Because visuals are organized spatially, there are many more variables and the whole process is much more complex.

For an example, click **here** (download PPT/100k). It shows both the wide array of possibilities and also the dangers. Ideas are presented in a flexible and non-linear way, yet can you discern what is intended by the author? It is a typical example of PowerPoint in action — there is nothing unusual about it — many of us see presentations like this every day. Does it work or not work? I leave this to the reader to decide.

CA: What is your opinion of the negative media coverage PowerPoint has received lately?

DG: Most of this coverage is unfair to PowerPoint the program while being perfectly fair to the way it is broadly (and unintentionally) abused. However, I do feel that there is a great need out there for a leaner, cleaner version of PowerPoint – a “simplified” PowerPoint that makes it easier to communicate well, and difficult or impossible to communicate poorly.

For example: We improve our laptops and mobile phones by making them smaller and lighter every year. Why can’t we do the same for our software?

CA: How do XPLANATIONS and PowerPoint relate to one another?

DG: PowerPoint is software. XPLANATIONS are content. We use PowerPoint extensively at XPLANE for thinking as well as communicating. It offers great flexibility, especially when it comes to communicating complex or non-linear information. Our customers often incorporate XPLANATIONS into their PowerPoint presentations. Sometimes an XPLANATION is that “single slide” that a speaker uses as a primary aid for an entire talk.

For an example of what Kevin Ashton, Executive Director of the Auto ID Center, used to explain the benefits of RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) to Fortune 1,000 executives, click **here**.

CA: *When do you think XPLANATIONS will 'cross the chasm' and become something that every organization needs and demands?*

DG: Effective communication is the most important business competency – nothing is accomplished without it. It is no accident that the most effective CEOs make simple, clear communication a top priority.

XPLANATIONS are a powerful way to cut through the overwhelming sea of information and get the key concepts to the people who matter. Right now, many of our customers think of us as a "secret weapon." The more they win, the more their competitors will sit up and take notice. Eventually I think they will demand the same thing for themselves.

CA: *In the meantime, how can any organization help its people to distill ideas down to their essence?*

DG: Focus on metrics. Decide what you want your communications to achieve, and determine a way to test and measure their effectiveness. What are the RESULTS you want? Through WHOSE actions will you get those results? What must they UNDERSTAND differently so that they will ACT differently? How will you know that they understood?

Then focus on making those ideas so simple and clear that they cannot possibly be misunderstood.

CA: *What is the secret to clear and simple communication?*

DG: Keep it short, keep it simple, and focus on the things that are important to your audience. Give concrete examples so people can see how they can translate your ideas into action.

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant who helps organizations solve problems related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at www.sociablemedia.com, read more articles and interviews [here](#), or email him [here](#).

© 2004 Cliff Atkinson

sociable media®