

Infographics

Anything and everything there is to know about infographics.

(Excerpts from an interview with Neil Stewart, by freelance journalist Natalie Johnson, for an article in Advanced Photoshop User magazine on Infographics)

NJ: Give us a quick background bio on you, how and why you got started and describe your career path from starting out to where you are now?

NS: I went to art school and studied Fine Arts - drawing, painting, sculpture, photography. After graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Concordia University, in Montreal, I joined an agency that specialized in corporate multi-media communications. Over several years, I gained business experience in sales, production management, and direction of audio-visual and video productions. Taking opportunities to employ my artistic talents, I began designing graphics and artwork for use in various productions. I learned about commercial artwork, design and illustration as I went. Eventually, I was designing and illustrating for all aspects of corporate marketing and advertising. In the beginning, I taught myself and worked with traditional media, such as pen & ink and airbrush. With the advent of desktop publishing, I began designing and illustrating on the computer.

As someone who creates infographics, what is it about infographic design that you enjoy the most?

I enjoy the challenge of creating images that not only appeal to the eye, but at the same time, inform the viewer. You are, in essence, visually selling an idea, a concept, or a product.

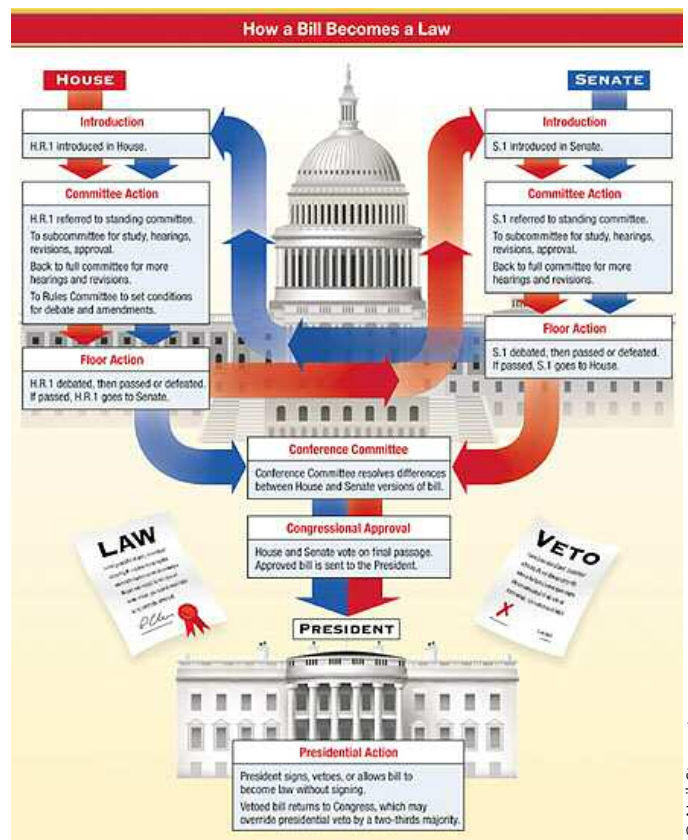
How would you sum up your style of infographics and what makes you different from the competition?

Many technical or 3d style illustrators come from a more technical or computer background. Being very skilled at Photoshop or understanding 3d modeling does not guarantee someone can create decent artwork. My Art School background is an asset when it comes to understanding visual language and being able to create strong images that communicate effectively. I don't feel I am locked into a particular style.

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Why do you think there is a need for infographics today? How has this genre of illustration changed over the years in your opinion? Do you know how and why it came about?

There has always been a need for infographics and, as long as we have sight and a desire to communicate with each other, there always will be. It is one of our oldest forms of communication, from early cave paintings to the first forms of writing with pictograms. Today, in the age of communication, the cliché certainly still stands - "a picture is worth a thousand words".



A subject as complex as the intricacies of government bureaucracy can be made understandable with a well designed and well executed infographic.

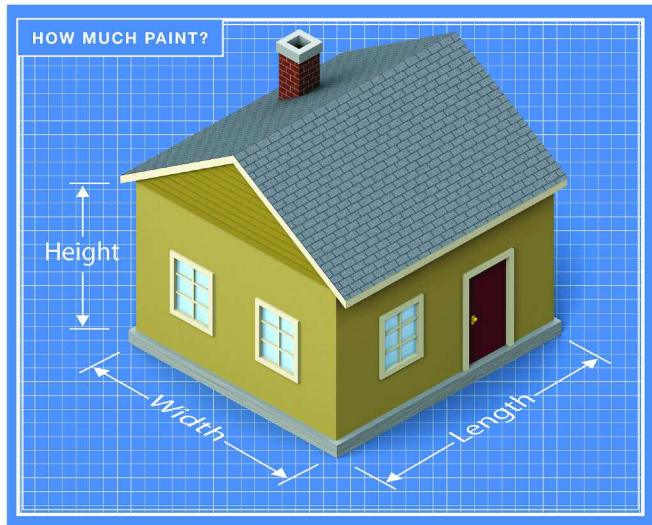
What do you think is the point of infographics? What affect do they have on consumers/public and why?

People generally assimilate information from a good infographic with far less effort than is required with the written word. A effective infographic can quickly grab a viewer's

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attention and deliver a message or make something be understood. Good infographics work by "showing" and not simply "telling". Because the information is being "shown" and then understood, it is often more likely to be believed and/or remembered. This is significant when the ultimate goal is to sell a product or an idea.



An illustration for "How much paint do I need to paint my house?" shows how easy it is for a customer to do the math. The artwork achieves the goal of being attractive and informative.

How do you balance the piece - i.e. is it more important to get the information across or is there more of a need for it to look good?

From the simplest bar chart to the most detailed illustration, if the information is not evident in the artwork, then it cannot succeed as an "info"-graphic. It has to be balanced. A good looking illustration will be more effective at communicating information, but if the information is not clear, then the illustration will end up being just another pretty picture.

How do you get work in this field? Do companies contact you? Do you pitch to clients? Is it important to have an agent?

When I started out, I was more assertive in my self-promotion. I called on prospects and knocked on doors with my portfolio. Now, with the internet, companies generally contact me. I advertise in source books and illustration websites and I rely on my reputation, repeat clients and word of mouth. I have never had an agent.

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What is the best way for designers to get work in the infographics sector and survive against the competition?

If you don't have good business sense and/or cannot sell yourself, then you might want an agent. Beyond that, deliver high quality work, deliver on time, and persevere.

Can you explain your workflow to us? For example are you given a brief and the information and then how much freedom do you have; is there a lot of passing it back and forth, what do you do at the conception stage, what tools and apps do you use to create the project, how long will a project take etc.?

That really depends on the particular job. The three programs I work with most are Illustrator, Photoshop and Carrara. Some more complex jobs will start with pencil roughs and go through several stages of approval, while some simpler jobs may go directly to a near finished state. The main thing is to be clear with the client, up front, about budget and about how you are going to approach the job, thus avoiding false or unrealistic expectations (on behalf of the client or yourself).

Can you give us your three top tips for designers practising the art of infographics and three top tips for breaking into the industry?

- 1- Make sure both you and your client understand what needs to be communicated in the illustration and to whom you are communicating (know who the target audience is).
- 2- Try to make sure the information part of an infographic is correct the first time. Get as much good reference material from your client as possible. Avoid the frustration of wasting time because of needless revisions.
- 3- A good infographic will be focused, so that the information is as clear and uncluttered as possible. Steer your client away from wanting to portray too much at once.

As far as breaking into the industry goes, I only have one tip. If you plan to work freelance, you must have talent and desire, but you probably won't survive without some good business sense. Many artists are very talented but do not know how to run a business. They may view being an artist and being a businessperson as being diametrically opposed (the starving artist syndrome). So, if you are just starting out in art school (and assuming you are not interested in starving) it would probably be beneficial to take a few basic business courses.

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Can you explain to us about one particular highlight project - or memorable project. How did this particular project come about? How did it progress? What were you commissioned to do? How many consultations did you have? How well would you say the final result was received?

The illustrations on this page are from a project - "Office Building Infrastructure". This work might be considered more info-illustration than info-graphic, but the importance of visually conveying information remains. The two roughs along with the final artwork show an interesting progression from initial crude pencil sketch, to project midway, and then the finished result. While there were a few more steps involved, the early steps are used to establish all the elements necessary for the final piece. In an illustration that contains a lot of technical information, it is important to get the client's input and approval at each stage. The goal of this illustration was to show the type of infrastructure that CommScope, a provider of data infrastructure and connectivity solutions, provides within a typical office working environment. They were very happy with the result.

