

# design matters



May '99

---

## The Future of Information Design?

For this special issue, *Design Matters* contacted several renowned members of the international information design community by email and asked them to reply to the question "What is the future of information design as a profession?" They were asked to imagine responding to this question as if on a listserv and to avoid semantic discussions around whether "designer" or "architect" is a better term.

---

### Nathan Shedroff

Chief Creative Director  
vivid studios, USA

Well, all semantics aside, in my experience, what people usually imagine when they hear the word "architect" is closer in so many ways than what they imagine when they hear the word "designer" that it really is worth considering the change if you want to have a more meaningful discussion—especially with people relatively unfamiliar with either term. But on to the main question.

The future of information design is one of more prominence, more responsibility, more visibility, and more challenges. Information design is a discipline that has slowly been gaining speed and now has accelerated to quite a noticeable clip—at least in certain industries. It has become almost universally recognized in the area of website development and many other interactive media, such as software, network, and interface design. It is also gaining a bit of steam in areas examining workflow and organizational management. Some visual designers are hip to the term, though many quickly pronounce themselves information designers without really understanding (or possessing) the skills simply because it sounds more fashionable, noteworthy, and more expensive.

This said, I think that the notion of information design, while getting more airplay, is getting a bit

more limited. The kinds of practices employed and the paucity of examples and how-to information are combining to create a kind of ghetto around information design. What are now standardized procedures in online (and some paper) product development is often devoid of many of the rich and diverse understandings, experiments, and solutions that I witnessed ten years ago when almost nobody had heard of the term. Perhaps this is somewhat inevitable, that every medium and discipline waters down a bit as it gains acceptance (TV isn't as innovative as it once was or might have been, nor is architecture).

As interactive media grow and diversify, and as audiences do the same, information designers have a new level of responsibility to develop better solutions. Now that people (and not merely specialists) are trading stocks, managing their funds, communicating important, personal, and emotional messages, and making key decisions based on the interfaces they are provided in this and related media, we as a subset of interface designers (and close kin) need to be more careful and more diligent.

Lastly, by starting this issue rolling, we also have a responsibility for setting the expectations people have for it. What's out there is both terrible (in the grand scheme of things) and wonderful (when you think of what we have to work with and how far we've come) but we need to keep raising the bar for ourselves and challenging ourselves to excel further. These days, few products of information design are as important, lasting, or surprising as just about anything produced from the Eames' studio and that was decades ago! ♦

---

### Rune Petterson

Director of Research, Information Design  
Mälardalen University, Sweden

In the age of information we have an ever increasing need for information materials in order to perform our tasks at work and during our leisure time. Well-designed information material makes everyday life easier for people, and it grants good credibility to the

...continued on page 4

The newsletter  
of the STC  
Information  
Design SIG

---

# Our Roots...and Our Future

by Beth Mazur, Assistant Manager

If you aren't new to information design, I expect that the names of the participants in this special issue should be very familiar. They are some of those who are most active and visible in the field / discipline / craft that many of us are calling information design.

Why is this important? While information design may appear to be a new field to some, it has a history well worth discussing. Depending on who you talk to, this might even include the late 15th century (during what some are now calling the "first Information Age"). Note that some scholars speculate that 20 **million** books were printed **before** 1500!

In *Envisioning Information*, Edward Tufte talks about Euclid (1570) and Galileo (1612). In *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* he shares Minard's famous graphic of Napoleon's march to Moscow, which Tufte claims may be the "best statistical graph ever drawn." Six variables are plotted in a two-dimensional map (drawn in 1861).

In more recent years, information design has been the province of graphic designers. According to the founders of the Information Design Association (UK), the *Information Design Journal* was first published in the UK in 1979, "to consolidate a community of interest—an invisible college—that had emerged in the 70s among a number of designers, teachers and researchers." It was these founders of the IDJ (and the IDA in 1987-1991) who are reasonably confident that they actually coined the term *information design*.

Were it not for the Internet, information design might have remained the province of this smallish community. Yet the World Wide Web has brought information design to the forefront, and like the six blind men and the elephant, information design often becomes defined by the perspective of the practitioner. If it is true that information design has paid a bit too much attention to its graphic design roots, it is just as true that overcompensating by ignoring this tradition is likewise short-sighted. Information design needs all of its components.

The future of information design looks very promising. As Paul Sagan of *Time* said, "No want wants to sit at the bottom of Niagara Falls with a bucket, saying 'I can't keep up with all this.'" A future as an information designer is not just a good career choice; it can really make a difference in people's lives. And that is promising indeed.

---

Beth Mazur is Communications Specialist at AARP. She can be reached at [mazur@pobox.com](mailto:mazur@pobox.com).

## Design Matters

Volume 3, No. 3 ♦ May 1999

*Design Matters* is the newsletter of STC's Information Design Special Interest Group (SIG).

■ <http://stc.org/pics/idsig>

### Assistant Manager, Managing Editor

Beth Mazur  
1114 S. Alfred St.  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
202-434-3365  
[mazur@pobox.com](mailto:mazur@pobox.com)

### SIG Manager

Cheri Taylor  
[taylorcw@compuserve.com](mailto:taylorcw@compuserve.com)

### Chair, ID SIG Advisory Panel

Karen Schriver  
[schriv@cmu.edu](mailto:schriv@cmu.edu)

### Membership Coordinator

Michael Albers  
[malbers@acm.org](mailto:malbers@acm.org)

### Submissions

We welcome submissions from SIG members for publication. Submissions via email are appreciated. Please send to [mazur@pobox.com](mailto:mazur@pobox.com).

### Reprints

You may reprint original material appearing in *Design Matters* as long as you acknowledge the source and send the managing editor a printed copy of the reprinted article.

© 1999, Society for Technical Communication. All rights reserved.  
Printed in USA.

  
society for technical communication

901 N. Stuart St., Suite 904  
Arlington, VA 22203-1854  
(703) 522-4114

■ <http://www.stc-va.org/>

# ID SIG News

by Cheri Taylor, ID SIG Manager

Greetings to the members of the STC Information Design SIG! Our SIG is still growing quickly and there are many new members to welcome.

## 1999 STC International Conference

STC is holding its 46th annual conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, on May 16-19, 1999. You can find updated conference information at [www.stc-va.org](http://www.stc-va.org). Here are the happenings related to the ID SIG. Please attend as many as possible and greet your fellow ID SIG members! Look for us (and our bright orange stickers) at the Welcoming Reception Sunday evening.

**Information Design Sessions**—ID has its own stem this year. Don't miss the many sessions where you can meet and learn from several leaders in the ID field. The ID SIG is especially pleased to provide the first ever Information Design Progression on Tuesday, May 18th, 8:30-10:00; don't miss it!

**SIG Luncheon**—The ID SIG will host several tables at the SIG Luncheon on Tuesday, May 18th, 12:15-2:00. The Luncheon is a great way to meet fellow STC members interested and active in ID. Come early and claim your seat!

**ID SIG Business Meeting**—The ID SIG will hold its annual business meeting on Wednesday, May 19th, 12:30-1:30. It's not just a boring planning meeting; we bring our lunches and have fun, too! We use our annual meeting to review the past year, talk about plans for next year, and catch up with fellow SIG members we often see only once a year.

## Orlando 2000

STC will hold its 47th annual conference in Orlando, Florida, May 21-24, 2000. I am pleased to announce that STC has chosen our own Beth Mazur to be the Information Design Stem Manager for the 2000 conference. Beth is the founder of the ID SIG and is currently Assistant Manager and Newsletter Editor.

## New Manager

I am also pleased to announce that the ID SIG will have a new Manager soon. Marissa Levin has agreed to replace me as soon as STC approves her appointment, either for this coming year or next year. Marissa is a member of the D.C. chapter. She will be attending the Cincinnati conference, for those of you also attending who would like to meet her in person.

---

*Cheri Taylor is the owner of TechWords and the manager of the ID SIG. She can be reached at [taylorcw@compuserve.com](mailto:taylorcw@compuserve.com).*

# ID Bookwatch

## Visual Language: Global Communication for the 21st Century

Robert E. Horn

MacroVU, Inc., ISBN: 1-892637-09-X

This book makes the claim that a new international auxiliary language is emerging that tightly integrates words and visual elements, a development that is radically increasing the ratio of visual elements to text. The author treats the phenomenon as a language by presenting an exploration of its syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The book contains almost 3,000 visual elements in 270 pages, exemplifying the radical alteration of the text to visual element ratio.

## Readings in Information Visualization: Using Vision to Think

Stuart Card, Jock Mackinlay, Ben Shneiderman

Morgan Kaufmann ISBN: 1-55860-533-9

This book defines the emerging field of information visualization and offers a collection of papers of the discipline, with introductions and analytical discussions of each topic and paper. The authors' intention is to present papers that focus on the use of visualization to discover relationships, using interactive graphics to amplify thought.

## Document Design

Jan Renkema, Editor

John Benjamins Publishing Company

*Document Design* is a platform for researchers and practitioners in organizational communication. The focus is on the internal and external communication of medium-sized to multinational corporations, governmental bodies, non-profit organizations, as well as media, health care, educational and legal institutions, etc.

*Document Design* includes articles in which aspects of (electronic) discourse—written, spoken and visual—are combined with aspects of text quality (function, institutional setting, culture). Contributions are problem driven, methodologically innovative, and focused on effective communication.

Subscription rate for 3 issues (ISSN 1388-8951, Volume 1, 1999): NLG 195 (approx US \$ 98). An individual subscription rate will be posted on Benjamins' website (<http://www.benjamins.nl>) shortly. This is valid when for private use only.

---

*InfoDesign Bookwatch is compiled and edited by Piet Westendorp and Karel van der Waarde. It is a regular item on the InfoDesign discussion forum. To subscribe to InfoDesign, send an email to: [majordomo@wins.uva.nl](mailto:majordomo@wins.uva.nl) saying subscribe InfoDesign. This item reprinted with permission.*

As of April 1999,  
the ID SIG has  
2215 members!

## Future of...

...continued from page 1

senders or sources. We need information designers. There is a promising future in information design.

However, information design is much more than one profession. Like architecture, dance, fine arts, music and theatre, also information design has practical as well as theoretical components. Like the two faces of a coin, infography and infology are the two main parts of the discipline information design. In my view (Pettersson, 1998) information design may be described in the following way: "In order to satisfy the information needs of the intended receivers, information design comprises analysis, planning, presentation and understanding of a message—its content, language and form. Regardless of the selected medium, a well designed information material will satisfy aesthetic, economic, ergonomic, as well as subject matter requirements."

An information designer (or infographer) needs to have skills in writing comprehensible, clear and consistent texts, in creating clear illustrations, and in creating a clear, transparent typography and layout that aids understanding and learning. Usually a team of people with skills in the different areas are working together. The task is usually too overwhelming for a single person. In the future there will be several academic professions in information design. There is a promising future in information design. ♦

---

### Conrad Taylor

Secretary and Deputy Chair  
Information Design Association, UK

My understanding of information design is that it is an emerging practice and area of study, which seeks to make information more useful and accessible to people. It is in part a reaction to previous design methods which focussed too much on styling, and forgot to consider the people for whose benefit information was intended. In trying to understand the diversity of people's needs, aspirations, backgrounds and approaches to making sense of things, information designers have trampled down the barriers between a number of formerly distinct approaches to information and communication, making incursions into linguistics, anthropology, and semiotics, for instance. This trampling process is still going on, so the discipline still doesn't have very clear boundaries.

This approach would be valuable even if we were still creating only manuscript books, and I have a

lot of sympathy with the view that there have been information designers practicing their craft for thousands of years. It so happens that the current, more self-conscious movement that is using the label "Information Design" is evolving at a time when information is presented through more and more channels, based on rapidly evolving computerised information technologies.

Therefore, when as I consider what I need to learn

---

*I feel the real future of this discipline is an expanded focus on the analysis that precedes the design and the knowledge we gain about the product, client, and end-user throughout the design process.*

— William Gribbons

---

to become better at information design, my eyes scan two horizons. On the one hand, I must find ways of better understanding people: both in general, while taking into account all our cultural, linguistic and other diversities, and in particular contexts of communities of people who use the information products we create.

On the other hand, I must be technically proficient in creating the forms of media that I work in. At the very least, I must understand enough about how publishing software, litho printing, computer systems, the Web,

multimedia, video etc. work to be able to make valid, sensible and practical design choices within them. (In practice, I enjoy using those craft skills, and I like to work close to the technology.)

The term "information design" has its inadequacies, since we are often designing systems and processes and not just information. But it's not a bad handle, and has the advantage of breadth: it includes the design of documents, paper and electronic, but also spills out much further, to examine such diverse areas as air traffic control displays, indicator lights, maps and graphs, vehicle and appliance controls and of course software user interfaces. ♦

---

### Bob Jacobson

Principal  
Bluefire! Consulting, USA

Information design is the future of design generally. The thoughtful and systematic crafting of *experience*—the essence of information design—is gradually subsuming all other forms of design. In the future, the information designer—now evolved into the "experiential designer"—will reign supreme.

In the process of editing *Information Design* for the MIT Press, I asked the 16 contributors—leading theoreticians and practitioners of information design—to describe for me what they considered the most crucial aspect of their work. Across the board, despite their differing domains and methods, the contributors emphasized the need to get "inside the

head" of the audience: to fully identify with the audience and then craft a message that generates openness and receptivity to the critical information that follows. In other words, capable information designers strive first to understand the relevance of a communication to the audience, in very subjective terms—and then, after carefully choosing a medium, shape the communication to fit. Often, this requires iteration: the message becomes more powerful if it interactively solicits responses from its recipients.

This admonition applies to information artifacts, of course, but it also applies to other interfaces between the communicator and the audience, including the subsequent design of products and services, before- and after-sale customer service, and indeed the communicator's entire corporate persona. The experience of the communicator is all-encompassing—and who better to specify the requirements than the information designer, who most intimately knows the audience?

In the field of construction, the architect and contractor traditionally have occupied the high ground. The architect envisioned a building, the contractor built it, and environmental designers were then brought in to make it useful and livable. Lately, however, environmental designers have been taking the leadership role. Their methods enable them to specify how best the users' interests can be served. Consequently, buildings are being designed and built to specifications that the environmental designers have first drawn up.

The same thing is happening with information products, which means any product that conveys a meaning—in other words, every product. Information designers are moving to the fore. Experiential design, the concrete application of information design principles to the world of meaning, is the coming thing. ♦

---

### **Peter Simlinger**

Director

International Institute for Information Design, Austria  
As information design should complement information technology, I find it easy to understand Richard Saul Wurman's vision of the information designer as a "creative information technologist" (from the December '98 issue of *Design Matters*).

Sure, information design must be complementary to information technology as architecture (you may equally well call it architectural design) is complementary to building technology.

The analogy helps to understand the situation of the profession. Much depends on the volume and complexity of a project. From a certain level you need to plan and if you cannot do it yourself you must commission a planner. Design by definition is a planning process.

Businesses and their representatives are aware of the capabilities of the information technology and find it easy to imagine what it could be employed for.

Once they have overcome the problems installing the information technology they may want to see its positive effect on customer relations, sales, and profits.

The future of information design as a profession will be glorious if information designers become experts in transforming data into attractive, understandable, multi-sensorial, interactive, and easily transmittable information.

The International Institute of Information Design is working to contribute to the development of the profession to a standard which should enable it to meet this goal. ♦

---

### **Wes Ervin**

Managing Director

Information Design Associates, USA

By way of introduction, I should say that my firm, Information Design Associates, is focused on corporate clients, primarily financial services firms and telecoms. For us, information design is a business, and our opinions about the "profession" and its future must be taken in that context. That does not mean we are crass Philistines. Speaking for myself, I love the subject and I've donated my time and money to organizing support here for the International Institute for Information Design, which sponsors the VisionPlus conferences every year in Europe. But the bottom line is that if we want to practice, we had better make money.

In my experience, no client has ever hired my firm because we claim to be information designers. We are hired because we offer solutions to specific problems. Research confirms that clients value two kinds of experience and expertise above all. One is *category experience*. Have you ever designed a mass-transit wayfinding system? Have you ever designed a public-space kiosk? How many? The second is *industry experience*. What have you done in the pharmaceutical industry? In financial services? Category experience may cut across many industry sectors. For example, kiosks are used in museums, corporate

...continued on next page

## Future of...

...continued from previous page

office lobbies, and bank branches. Category experience is “horizontal,” whereas industry expertise is “vertical.” Where they intersect there is tremendous strength.

For better or worse, ours is an age of increasing specialization. That’s what is driving the profession right now: making the ever more complex and specialized more understandable. For example, even though my firm specializes in finance, we are often asked if we have very specific financial experience, say in explaining complex products like credit derivatives. Even though we’ve designed lots of bills, we recently were asked if we have ever developed a consolidated utility bill that includes electric, water, natural gas, drainage, solid waste, and waste water services!

So, from my perch today, I see a growing need for information designers to enhance their information design skills with category and industry expertise. That means learning about the application or the business in some depth; e.g., going to conferences, reading the industry trade press, etc. I think we get into trouble when we try to generalize and elevate information design into an autonomous practice. That’s why debates rage over the very definition of the term.

Actually, the idea that information design is domain-specific, or at least domain-driven, is not new. At last summer’s VisionPlus conference in Austria, Krzysztof Lenk—the RISD professor, founder of Dynamic Diagrams, and a leading light in our field—gave a wonderful presentation tracing the intellectual roots of modern information design back to scientific drawings in the Renaissance. The point is that each discipline explored and evolved visual solutions to specific problems. I don’t think it is accidental that so many of today’s practicing information designers come from very different and unexpected backgrounds—architects, doctors, accountants, academics, artists, and even investment bankers (like me).

I am not suggesting that our profession fragment into many specialities, nor that information designers can only succeed if they become specialists in something else. It is just as important for us to be well-rounded generalists, in the best tradition of the Liberal Arts. A lot of what we preach and do is in support of **good**

standards, values, techniques, etc. that have been around for a long time, as Krzysztof Lenk and Edward Tufte have shown so beautifully. We can learn a lot from the Information Architects of the 15th and 16th centuries. Good editors have always “done” information design. Writers have been clarifying the complex for ages.

How this profession, or phenomenon, of information design will evolve is anyone’s bet. But it’s probably safe to assume that the skills and expertise that we associate today with “Information Design” should continue to fill real economic and social needs, given that our societies seem destined to become ever more complex, technology-driven, technology-dependent, and divided along social, cultural, and class lines. As we are pulled along in the wake of rapid technological change, I hope we do not lose our humanistic moorings. ♦

---

### David Sless

Research Director

Communication Research Institute of Australia  
I start from a different position. I tend to think of Information Design as a craft rather than a profession.

(I will briefly paraphrase some of the things I have written on this subject, but I urge those of you who are interested in the arguments and evidence to consult some of the references to my work given at the end of this article.)

Like many, I came to information design in the mid sixties from other disciplines: in my case a mixture of visual arts, design, psychology, social science, and philosophy. This is probably an unusual mix of origins for an information designer. People from STC who have come to information design have probably done so from a background in professional writing. (I have no ‘training’ as a professional writer. For me writing is a compulsion rather than a set of skills.)

But like many, I was doing information design before it was so named, and—importantly—before the people I worked with and for recognised that what I was doing was a real and legiti-

mate activity.

I suspect that many of us in the field have had, and continue to have that experience. It happens when people ask:

“What is it that you actually do?”

---

*I think good information design is a huge feat of imagination. Not so much in producing a creative solution that has never been seen before, but in being able to see the communication from everyone’s point of view; ... to make the communication seem to speak with a single voice, even though it has come from a committee.*

— Rob Waller

Once one attempts an explanation, the reply is often: “But surely it’s just common sense, what’s the problem?”

It is at moments like this that it would be splendid to say that there is indeed a problem and that it takes three years training, two years internship, and one year in junior practice in order to qualify as a “Professional Information Designer” (Architect, Planner, Strategic Design Consultant, add your own favourite term here).

On the other hand, would it be so splendid? I think not.

I think it takes between five to eight years for someone to master the practical and intellectual skills that would enable them to become a good information designer. (For anyone contemplating a curriculum in information design, these thoughts and their elaboration might be useful.) But I seriously doubt that doing information design well is just a matter of acquiring skills and experiences.

My doubts stem from a personal sense of a ‘mission’ for information design—a mission which was articulated by the pioneers of modern design—I’m thinking particularly of the Bauhaus, Moholy Nagy, and to some extent the 19th Century arts and crafts movement, William Morris etc. The essence of what I read from their works is that design of any kind—product, graphic, architectural, information—is concerned with making a difference to the lives of ordinary people, lending a dignity, value, and joy to the quality of daily lived experience by creating well designed artefacts.

This mission is in part an aspect of social reform, and is in part an aspect of social critique; it is concerned with reforming and improving people’s lives by offering them information which they can use and enjoy; it is also concerned with critiquing the existing order and way of doing things by offering alternatives. It is this central concern with improving and critiquing the opportunities that our society offers to ordinary people that is for me the driving engine of information design.

I think our mission is to bring about useful change, making information more accessible and usable than it is today. Implicit within such a mission is a belief that information in our society is **not** well designed today. This, as I have said, makes information design a reforming activity and at the same time an activity which is critical of the way in which our society does things today.

This suggests that information design is in some senses radical in its intentions. Let me give a concrete example. In Australia the **normal** bureaucratic method for developing public use information is for the various bureaucratic stakeholders to convene a committee, seek input, discuss, and then resolve any disagreements through normal committee processes. One of the consequences of this **normal** procedure is

that it politically excludes the public for whom the documents are being developed.

Since the 1970s, I have been recommending to Australian bureaucracy, as an information designer, that they include the public within the decision making process—usually by recommending some form of document testing. ‘Testing’ sounds like a scientific process—something that bureaucrats warm to. But it is in fact a political act. It involves including a formally unrepresented constituency within the decision-making process. Put another way, this is an act of social reform. Moreover, the initial recommendation—to undertake testing—is itself based on a critique of the social structure of contemporary bureaucracy, namely that these are insular, and very inward-looking

organisations intent on protecting their own power and privilege.

Further, by redesigning information one may be acting subversively to undermine the organisation for whom one is doing the work. For example, in the financial services industry there has been a strong push for ‘user-friendly, customer-focused’ information. One of the consequences of introducing good information design into this context is that it enables customers—often for the first time—to see the full range of charges and fees that this industry levies on its customers. In Australia this has led to a growing public debate about the ways in which these organisations work and make money. Thus in this context you can see information design in a subversive role.

You may now see why I have some concerns about information design being a profession. Professions are socially and economically valued groups **within** society—part of the mainstream. Radical and subversive activity tends to occur on the margins—outside the mainstream. Professions are part of the status quo and believe in the legitimacy of the present order. Radicals and subversives fight against

---

*[We] have a responsibility for setting the expectations people have for [information design]. What’s out there is both terrible (in the grand scheme of things) and wonderful (when you think of what we have to work with and how far we’ve come) but we need to keep raising the bar for ourselves and challenging ourselves to excel further.*

---

— Nathan Shedroff

...continued on next page

the status quo and regard the present order as unacceptable. You may now see why I regard my own sense of the mission of information design as inconsistent with it being a profession. Indeed, there are good reasons for remaining discreetly covert. I can do my work far more effectively when my role is not so clearly defined by professional practices and codes.

But why then a craft? I use the term craft in contrast to art and science (this is possibly an English set of distinctions). I am not suggesting that information designers do not use either the methods and findings of science, or the rhetorical and creative processes of art, but rather that what information designers do is most like a craft in that they use their skills to create things that people use now.

Historically, design grew out of craft when mass production overtook the production of single unique products. This happened in information design in Europe in the Fifteenth Century with the invention of the printing press. In product design it happened with the invention of factory production in the last century.

In information design we have come full circle, at least in some respects. Much of our work is now done in small groups working as a cottage industry. Our machines are small, relatively cheap, and fit into our homes. I think sociologically and culturally we have more in common with the craft workers in previous centuries than we have with professionals in our own century.

Sorry for the long preamble, but I think it's important that you have some sense of where I have come from in my thinking so that you can understand where I think we might usefully go to in the future.

In a paper I gave at Vision Plus 1 in 1995, I suggested that "information design is now a mature craft concerned with making information accessible and usable, a craft that generates artefacts enabling people to conduct useful conversations with the information in their environment."

Information designers have available a relatively stable and powerful set of techniques for developing these artefacts to the highest standards, whether in the traditional media or in the new electronic media.

However, I am all too aware that many people who have recently taken an interest in information design from other disciplines, are unaware of the many achievements in the field. I am also painfully aware that education in information design is, at

best, patchy. Some of you may know of the project that our Institute and Reading University are undertaking to publish annotated bibliographies in the field: bringing together a highly scattered and fragmented body of work. This will help those who have recently joined us become familiar with the work that has already been done, and it will provide access to the intellectual corpus of the field for pedagogical purposes.

So, turning to the question that was asked: what is the future of information design as a profession? My first answer is that **we have no future** if we do not share a common past, a common body of experience and history. Putting this in a context that many of us understand, I would like to go to information design conferences in the future where the majority rather

than the minority of the papers are about new practices and achievements in our craft. Most of the substance of our current conferences are either recapitulations or 'reinventions'.

Second, I think we will only have a productive future if we take a much harder and critical line on what counts as good information design. Through a number of studies of information design in institutional settings, our Institute developed a set of criteria for benchmarking and diagnosing good information design practices.

I will mention one issue in detail: usefulness. There is much recent talk and research on what is called usability and user-centred

approaches to information design. This, in my view, is only one of a number of criteria by which we should evaluate information design, but it is one that has attracted the most attention. What is curiously absent from much of this discussion is any evidence of benchmarks or performance standards. There is lots of discussion on what methods lead to **good** design, but few people seem prepared to say what is **good enough** and what is **excellent** in usability terms.

I think anyone working in a professional capacity rather than as just a dedicated amateur should be able to offer their clients specific outcomes of a guaranteed nature. To give you a concrete example, in our Institute we routinely require designs created for our clients to achieve a minimum 90% / 90% level of performance. This means that we expect anyone using designs we create for them to use to be able to find at least 90% of the information they are looking for, and be able to appropriately use at least 90% of the information they find. These are minimum acceptable levels of performance. Anything less than this is

---

*An information designer  
(or infographer) needs  
to have skills in writing  
comprehensible, clear  
and consistent texts, in  
creating clear illustrations,  
and in creating a clear,  
transparent typography  
and layout that aids  
understanding and  
learning.*

---

— Rune Pettersson

unacceptable, and for many purposes, such a level would be far too low.

Implicit within such criteria is actual measurement and testing of information materials. It therefore follows that part of the 'much harder and critical line on what counts as good information design' involves the full range of activities that are associated with participatory design methods. See for example *Participatory Design: Principles and Practices* or recent interviews with Edwin Schlossberg and John Seely Brown in *New Thinking in Design: Conversations on Theory and Practice*.

This means an open-ended and ongoing conversation with those that we design information for and with. This is referred to in communication theory as a constructionist approach which has at its heart the simple but important idea that we mutually construct our social realities through conversations.

This type of direct engagement with those who use the information we create is not an option but rather a necessity which is ongoing from the beginning of any information design project. It is not as many advocates of good information design in the last two decades have suggested, something that's nice to do where possible and after the other important things are done. For example, Joseph Kimble—a well-known advocate of clear legal language—recently summarised this outmoded position with great clarity in *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing*: "Plain language is not just about vocabulary. It involves all the techniques for clear communication—planning the document, designing it, organizing it, writing clear sentences, using plain words, and testing the document whenever possible on typical readers."

I find the order in which such a list of actions is placed quite revealing, not to mention that one is supposed to test documents **on** readers. But **only** at the end, and **only** when possible.

I don't want to single out plain English. Much the same could be said about any of our contemporary fashionable information stylists who offer 'solutions to communication problems' on the basis of principle-guided desk-bound or studio-based activity. Such practitioners can be found in technical writing, graphic design, information architecture etc., and, of course, plain English.

Finally, I think information designers need to abandon most of the implicit and explicit theorising that they have adopted from communication theory, semiotics, linguistics, psychology, or rhetoric. Infor-

mation designers need to move beyond the pervasive and lazy methodological and epistemological pluralism. All methods and all ways of thinking are not all worthy of consideration. I am mindful of Marx's critique of theory and the observation that he made which is inscribed on his grave: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it."

Information design grows out of a profound respect for people and a strong desire to help them. Information designers know quite a lot about how to do that well and want to share that practical knowledge with others. The question for the future lies in the choices information designers make either as a craft or as a profession. ♦

---

## Brenda Dervin

Professor of Communication  
Ohio State University, USA

For me, in a current context of high volume and extraordinarily uncontrolled transmission of symbolic materials, described by some as "information," everyone and anyone is in the information packaging business (individual citizen, government, corporation, educational institution, media, library). There are emerging as many constructions of the possibilities of information design as there are fields /

disciplines / professions / individuals / institutions who think they have some interest in the things they call "information."

Many are involved in putting this "information" on the web so that somehow it will get transmitted to intended recipients. Most attention (with some important exceptions) to date has been placed on how the "information" can be packaged for maximum impact. In this framework, information design becomes another branch of marketing / advertising.

While I see this as the most probable future, I would rather take a more "utopian" stance, not

as an impractical idealist but rather as an appropriate methodological step. The missing link in the rush into cyberspace is communication, genuine two-way dialogic exchange. I do not envision the best of information design as a profession that focuses on packaging information for high communicability, persuasion, image presentation, or the host of other one-way "communication" terms that pervade the emerging practice. One-way transmission is not communication. Communication to be communication

---

*Information design is the future of design generally. The thoughtful and systematic crafting of experience—the essence of information design—is gradually subsuming all other forms of design.*

— Bob Jacobson

...continued on next page

## Future of...

...continued from previous page

must invite, foster, nourish, protect dialogue—genuine exchange. This is as pertinent to companies which wish to foster customers with lifetime loyalties (if any still exist) as it is to democratic governments which wish to engender the citizen participation vital to their survivals (if any still exist) to education systems which wish to encourage creative and critical problem solving for a new millennium for which the only sure dimensions are change and multiplicity.

The best of information design as a profession, then, would be concerned with linking dialogic practices of communication with information transmission. While at this particular juncture in time interest in dialogue has taken a back seat to the seemingly uncontrolled and unstandardized rush to “web,” communication research has consistently shown that in the long run information transmission without genuine dialogic communication is akin to designing a home without regard to its occupants. ♦

---

### Rob Waller

Principal

Information Design Unit, UK

There’s a number of ways to approach your question. I could doubt that there is yet a profession, but I expect someone else will have picked up on that. I could try to define information design—ditto. So I’ll air some thoughts on why there are professionals at all.

There will never cease to be a need for information design—life gets ever more complicated. But it nevertheless amazes me I can earn a living from it. It seems so much like common sense that everyone should be able to do it. But it seems they can’t. And as long as they can’t, there is a future for the professionals.

Something most ordinary people can do well is to have conversations. They make their thoughts and needs known to another person, and through direct feedback and negotiation they come to some conclusion—a transaction, a new understanding, or just passing the time of day. Good information design seems like common sense when it emulates a simple, easy conversation.

The difference is that information designers are usually managing dialogues between large organisations and a great number of different, often unknown, people (or between organisations and

organisations). The client organisation is not one but many personalities and brains—different departments, with different goals and pressures. Even if the readership (or whatever term you want to use) is known to some degree, they cannot easily reach you with their feedback. The information designer designs/architects/engineers a dialogue, using any resources of technology, psychological principles, linguistic models or whatever that they can muster.

Actually I think the ‘whatever’ is often more impressive than the technology, psychology, linguistics, etc.—I think good information design is a huge feat of imagination. Not so much in producing a creative solution that has never been seen before, but in

being able to see the communication from everyone’s point of view; to empathise with the different personalities who will be using it, anticipating their feedback and giving them alternative routes or interpretations; to make the communication seem to speak with a single voice, even though it has come from a committee. The problem for the future of the profession is how to turn what is currently the unarticulated skill of a few into something accessible by many. That is something for a future discussion. ♦

---

### William Gribbons

Director, Information Design Program  
Bentley College, USA

First, let me begin with my concerns. The major problem we face is the lack of a commonly agreed upon definition of the field. Lacking this definition we cannot truly call ourselves a discipline. Quite simply, information design means whatever people want it to mean, from low-end page layout to the high-end visual modeling of data. Further, because we are a reasonably new field, we lack a theoretical foundation and principles that would guide and further our practice. Finally, I have grave concerns that our field is rapidly becoming defined by the tools we use and a narrow focus on the product of the design process.

With that said, I feel the real future of this discipline is an expanded focus on the analysis that precedes the design and the knowledge we gain about the product, client, and end-user throughout the design process. If we are to advance as a discipline, we must learn to leverage the value we add to the product through our analysis of both the problem and the range of possible design solutions.

---

*[Information Design] is in part a reaction to previous design methods which focussed too much on styling, and forgot to consider the people for whose benefit information was intended.*

---

— Conrad Taylor

Now, back to my concerns. If we are to re-cast ourselves as both analyst and designer, we must move beyond the intuitive judgments that traditionally guided members of the design community. I personally believe that we will find the framework we've been looking for in the field of Human Factors. Within the cross-disciplinary world of human factors we will find the perceptual, cognitive, cultural, and ergonomic theories that will guide and inform our design practice. Working from this foundation, we can finally break the chains of the more traditional fields from which we emerged. We will not forget our past. Instead, we will enrich past traditions with a new foundation. A foundation that will, hopefully, give birth to the new discipline we've all been anxiously awaiting. ♦

---

*Design Matters welcomes your responses to the opinions printed in this issue. They will be collected for a feature on our website to appear in August. Send your comments to mazur@pobox.com.*

## Online Instructors Needed

UCLA Extension seeks experienced information designers to teach in its online technical communication program. Applicants should have prior teaching experience, although this experience need not be in delivering courses online. Compensation is approximately \$405 per unit of instruction, or \$1620 for a 4 unit course. If it is a new course, the instructor is eligible for a one-time-only \$500 development fee. Online courses designed to familiarize the instructor with the software platform and to provide guidance in teaching an online course are provided. For an application packet, please contact

Patricia Hunt, phunt@unex.ucla.edu  
UCLA Extension, Suite 515  
10995 Le Conte Avenue  
Los Angeles, CA 90024-2883 USA  
(310) 825-0094

---

## Future of ID: References and Resources

### References

- Pettersson, R. (1997). Verbo-visual Communication - Presentation of Clear Messages for Information and Learning. Göteborg: Valfrid Publishing Association and Research Centre for Library and Information Studies, Göteborg University.
- Pettersson, R. (1998). What is Information Design? Presentation at Vision Plus 4. Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- Sless, David. (1978) Definition of Design: Originating Useful Systems, *Design Methods and Theories*, 12, (2), 123-130.
- Sless, David. (1981) *Learning and Visual Communication*. London: Croom Helm.
- Sless, David. (1992) What is Information Design? In Sless, David. & Penman R. (Ed) *Designing Information for People*. Canberra: Communication Research Press, 1-16.
- Sless, David. (1996) Better Information Presentation: Satisfying Consumers?, *Visible Language*, 30(3) 246-267.
- Sless, David. (1997) Theory for practice. *Communication News* 10(4) 1-5.
- Sless, David. (1998) Building the bridge across the years and disciplines. *Information design journal* 9(1) 3-10.

### Resources

- Bentley College's Human Factors in Information Design Program  
<http://www.bentley.edu/graduate/mshfid/index.html>
- Bob Jacobson's announcement about *Information Design* (coming this month!)  
<http://www.well.com/user/bluefire/>
- Communication Research Institute of Australia diagnostic kit:  
[http://www.communication.org.au/can\\_we\\_help\\_you/\\_diagnostic/diagnostic.html](http://www.communication.org.au/can_we_help_you/_diagnostic/diagnostic.html)
- Information Design Association  
<http://www.ideography.co.uk/IDA/index.html>
- International Institute of Information Design  
<http://members.magnet.at/simlinger-iiid/English-2.html>
- Nathan Shedroff's *A Unified Field Theory of Design*  
<http://www.nathan.com/thoughts/unified/>

# Information Design

The field of information design applies traditional and evolving design principles to the process of translating complex, unorganized, or unstructured data into valuable, meaningful information.

The practice of information design requires an interdisciplinary approach which combines skills in graphic design, writing and editing, instructional design, human performance technology, and human factors.

Although its reach extends far beyond traditional boundaries of technical communication, the essentials of information design profoundly affect our work. The products of information design occur in any domain in which clear communication is essential, from those familiar to technical communicators, such as reference manuals and online help systems, to those outside the traditional realm of our work, such as public signage in public buildings, insurance and tax forms, and user interface design.

# Our Mission

The mission of our SIG is to meet the professional development needs of our members and to act as a vital conduit between STC and information designers at large. Our objectives include:

- advancing awareness of information design among STC members;
- assisting members interested in acquiring information design skills;
- encouraging information design research and making available information design resources;
- examining the roles and practices of the information designer;
- and providing a forum for the discussion of relevant topics.

*Please visit the ID SIG website at <http://stc.org/pics/idsig/>*



The Information Design SIG  
c/o Beth Mazur  
1114 S. Alfred St.  
Alexandria, VA 22314