Assessing Elements of Storytelling in Chinese e-Entrepreneur Giant Alibaba’s Business Information Graphics

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ABSTRACT

Alibaba Group is China’s largest e-commerce company and leader in e-business infographic publishing. This study attempts to understand how Alibaba’s infographics use texts, visual aids, and statistical graphics to facilitate understanding of their contents. A quantitative content analysis of its 460 infographics suggests that while Alibaba’s content preference aligns with its mission to education small business owners, the design and forms of its infographics have much room for improvement. To facilitate better storytelling and visual communication, the infographic design needs to make better use of introductory and conclusive texts, to use visual aids that facilitate interdependent storytelling and that serve more functional than decorative purposes, and to better utilize the power of statistical graphics to quickly convey patterns behind numeric values.

Keywords: Business Communication, Data Visualization, e-Commerce, Infographic, Information Graphic, Marketing, Visual Communication

INTRODUCTION

Information graphics (hereafter infographics) is becoming increasingly prevalent in e-commerce. Originally popularized by newspapers such as USA Today, the genre now appears in many business contexts, including company websites, marketing materials, newsletters, and annual reports (Toth, 2013). As a form of visual communication, infographics help businesses package great quantities of information for both internal and external audiences who prefer fast access to information and insights. With the help of social media, infographics are also playing big roles in promoting businesses by “going viral,” a phenomenon in which an infographic gets repeated social media shares and becomes extremely popular. The viral infographic can work as a powerful marketing tool as it stimulates interests and attention to a company and promotes viewers to further investigate its products or services. With its increasing potentials to be shared online,

DOI: 10.4018/IJEEI.2015010104

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Infographics have become an innovative communication tool for e-entrepreneurship marketing (Siricharoen, 2013).

In China, putting infographics online to market businesses is a new and rare practice for e-entrepreneurs and traditional businesses alike. A discussion of online marketing business infographics in China must begin with the Alibaba Group, China’s leader in e-commerce and technology reform. Alibaba is the company behind China’s largest online C2C (Consumer to Consumer) retail platform, Taobao.com, which ranks as the 8th most visited website worldwide (“The Top 500 Sites,” 2014). The company also owns China’s largest B2C (Business to Consumer) retail platform, Tmall.com. In 2012, the two portals together handled 1.1 trillion yuan (US$170 billion) in sales, more than eBay.com and Amazon.com combined (“E-commerce in China,” 2013). In its initial public stock offering (IPO) on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) in 2014, Alibaba raised 21.8 billion US dollars, making it the biggest IPO sales in NYSE history.

In 2012, Alibaba launched the print magazine Global E-Businessman and its companion site Businessman Online, dedicating both to serve over 40 million small e-commerce owners in China and over 63 million online businesses worldwide, and to educate them about e-commerce and capital growth (“About Global E-Businessmen,” 2014). In 2013, Businessman Online launched Graphic Media, an infographic section of the web magazine featuring originally designed infographics in Chinese language. Graphic Media is the first and still the only source in China focusing on creating original infographics on e-commerce and related topics that target small business owners as the primary audience. By the time this study concluded in the June of 2014, Graphic Media has published 460 infographics, covering topics in e-business marketing, operation, consumer-relationship, logistics, social media, and financing.

Whether used in journalism or as business communication and marketing tools, whether created for internal or external use, infographic design is about visual storytelling (Dur, 2014; Gershon & Ward, 2001; Krum, 2013; Smiciklas, 2012; Wojtkowski & Wojtkowski, 2002). Stories are vehicles for conveying information in an easily absorbed manner, and infographics do so visually. Good storytelling in infographic design entails a reliable structure with an introduction that contextualizes the content, an ending that promotes actions or changes in the viewer (Dur, 2014; Krum, 2013), and a main event that enables viewers to quickly comprehend messages though patterns, trends, or outliers in the information (Krum, 2013; Lankow, Ritchie, & Crooks, 2012). Good visual storytelling draw people in to infographics (Burmester, Mast, Tille & Weber, 2010,) and convey great quantities of information in a format that is readily assimilated by the viewer (Gershon & Eick, 1995).

In this study, I attempt to understand how Graphic Media infographics use texts, visual aids, and statistical graphics to facilitate better and quicker understanding of their contents. I examined its 460 infographics through a quantitative content analysis in order to address four research questions:

**RQ1:** What types of business infographics do Graphic Media publish? What do they tell us about content preferences of the company and its audiences?

**RQ2:** To what extent are texts used to engage viewers and to help them gain insights from these business infographics?

**RQ3:** To what extent are visual aids playing interdependent storytelling roles in these business infographics?

**RQ4:** To what extent are graphics used to present statistical information and to effectively show data relationships?
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