

Putting Pencil to Paper – Making The Case For Illustration

Henri Matisse said, “Drawing is putting a line around an idea.” I’ve always liked that quote, but step inside any ad agency, design firm or interactive shop these days and the chance of seeing drawing, illustration, hand work, etc. being used in a project is slim to none. Sure, there’s lots of it to be found on the t-shirts being worn or the posters hanging in cubicles and the skateboards in the corner, but rarely in any of the work. If the key to effective marketing is positioning your products or services so they stand apart from the competition, especially in a world dominated by bad stock photography, illustration is an excellent option.

It seems as if clients and creatives automatically default to photography. It’s familiar, what they understand and what they know. Many people only think of illustration as being humorous or childish and nothing could be further from the truth. Good illustration is conceptual, makes strong connections and often translates an idea faster and more effectively than a photograph. Even stock illustration conveys more character and personality than your average piece of stock photography. And illustration is always a good choice when you need images of something that’s impossible to photograph.

Several years ago, I worked on a big project for a quasi-governmental agency that administered financial aid programs for college students. By law they were required to produce a booklet, similar to an annual report, that summarized all kinds of financial information and was distributed to everyone who had a loan with them. It also had to be state specific for each of the three states in which they did business. Since they made loans to all types of students, they wanted the images in the booklet to reflect diversity. The booklet from the previous year had used stock photography to achieve this and honestly, it was a mess. Sixty pages of copy, graphs, charts and bad mismatched photos.

Our solution was to use illustration. We hired an illustrator to do about 30 simple sketches. The images were very loose drawings but clearly indicated the gender, race, age, etc. of the people pictured. There were also images of books, pencils, coffee cups and other random elements of student life. Since the drawings were loose, we used a single line to connect each image from page to page. The line started on the cover and ran through the entire book to the back cover, implying the loan you borrowed took you through your entire college experience. To differentiate from state to state we simply changed the color of the line from blue to green to red. The end result was a huge success. The client even received positive feedback on the piece - something that had never happened before. Best of all, the cost of the illustration was less expensive than if we’d had to buy a bunch of stock photography and Photoshop the images to try and make them look consistent.

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white paper

Budgets and timelines are a factor with any project. And illustration doesn't have to be expensive. There have been times in the past where we've contacted local colleges and art schools and met with students to see their portfolios. In several cases, we hired students to do work for an assignment. It's a win-win situation.

Another option to consider is maybe you don't need to use imagery at all. Good typography is imagery in its own right, and can make for a strong visual solution. Many illustrators will do some sort of hand-lettered type which serves to not only get your message across in words, but visually, as well.

There's an old business adage that says, "When everyone else is zigging, why not zag and stand out from the crowd?" Illustration isn't right for everything and many times the project will dictate when it's appropriate. If the challenge is to get your clients products and services noticed, put pencil to paper and consider illustration rather than stock photography as a great way to make an impact.



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