

Can Graphic Design really save your life?

1802747

BA Graphic design

2395 words

Donna Williams

Graphic design is an important tool used throughout history to help overcome tough social situations and drastically change lives for the better.

There are many people who believe that graphic design is 'just art'. Although, it is much more than that. Many people overlook the importance of graphic design. With today's pandemic and the controversial advertisements posting good and bad health habits, it would be easy to overlook graphic design, but perhaps "The same design that fuels mass overconsumption also holds the power to repair the world" (Berman, 2013 p2). Our brain has evolved to store the majority of information taken in through the eyes, so it is an important tool used to solve a specific business or communication problem. Graphic design is used in a variety of different businesses and organisations and in addition, it has also been a key tool to help solve and overcome complicated social issues and disasters. Throughout history graphic design has been used as a key tool to work with health organisations to communicate data and information to the public. So it would be no surprise if graphic designers today could "embrace the responsibility that accompanies that power to help repair the world." (Berman, 2013, p2).

One-way graphic design took up responsibility to repair the world to fix a social problem was with the introduction of the plain packaging of cigarettes. Everyone knows now that smoking cigarettes causes damage and cancer. However, before 1950 there wasn't any evidence to suggest that smoking was bad for you, which led to the advertising and publication of misinformation that cigarettes were healthy for you. Many people were smoking cigarettes at that time especially doctors which enabled cigarette companies to then use the doctors' authority to make their claim about their cigarettes. It wasn't until the 1990s until precautions were made to prevent smoking. Australia was the first country to make these precautions by banning smokeless tobacco e.g. chewing tobacco, then moved on to a total ban of advertisement on cigarettes, banning smoking on international flights and the introduction of improved health warnings on tobacco packaging. Two years after Australia introduced more proposals to take greater control over the tobacco packaging. In 2012 Australia brought out more regulations which resulted in the change of tobacco packaging. These changes included changing the cardboard packaging, coloured with either lime green or pantone 448c and from a designer's point of view these colours are very unattractive and not very appealing. These changes claimed to "reduce the appeal of tobacco products to consumers... increase the effectiveness of health warnings on the retail packaging of tobacco products... and to reduce the ability of the retail packaging of tobacco products to mislead consumers about the harmful effects of smoking." (Jarman, 2015 p42). Personally, I feel that the packaging changes have been very effective. Taking away the brand identity of each packet strips away originality not leaving much to look at or desire. Each package gives you enough information so you don't need to research a lot to know it's bad for you. In addition, the graphic picture that comes with it can be enough to put people off. Buying cigarettes no longer feels like a 'cool' thing to do anymore, it feels more of a bad choice to pick and it is almost embarrassing to smoke. Graphic design managed to help cut down on tobacco consumption rather effectively as the "research on plain packaging, stating that there is 'strong evidence' that it helps to reduce smoking rates, reduces the appeal of tobacco products, increases the visibility of health warning, and reduces the use of misleading design techniques." (Jarman, 2015 p45) This shows me that the implementation of plain packaging for tobacco products was a key factor to reducing the amount of tobacco consumed. With the bland designs and

supplying the correct information about cigarettes it has made a move in the right direction with the problem of misinformation and helped people make better health choices.

Not only has graphic design helped convince people to change and make healthier lifestyle choices, graphic design has also helped solve the cause of a pandemic and help overcome the pandemic. In 1854 London suffered from a terrible cholera outbreak. At this time, it was believed that cholera was passed on through 'dirty air'. It wasn't until 127 people had died in Broad Street in the matter of three days that it caught the attention of a physician named John Snow. His belief was that cholera was passed on through dirty water after all most of the Londoners were receiving their water from dirty handpumps throughout the city. His opinion was however ignored by his colleagues. John Snow's final attempt to convince his colleagues that the cholera pandemic was caused from the water in that area was to plot "cholera cases from an epidemic of 1854 on a street map of London, hoping to see a pattern. Each dot in Figure 6.28 represented a household struck with disease."(Skiena, 2017 p191)



(Snow 1854)

This spot graph reminds me of the covid cases map and other outbreak maps which all work very effectively. Although it may not be as colourful or show the much information compared to today's infographics, I feel like this example proves that visual representation is crucial in getting a point across to the public and sometimes to help solve a problem. After Snow drew up this map, he "noticed a cluster of the cases centred on Broad Street. Further, at the centre of the cluster was a cross, denoting a well where the residents got their drinking water. The source of the epidemic was traced to the handle of a single water pump. They changed the handle, and suddenly people stopped getting sick. This proved the way towards preventing it." (Skiena, 2017 p191) Using his spot graph Snow managed to find the cause of the cholera outbreak by tracking down a family that lived near the main pump in Broad Street. Snow tracked down a mother whose infant had recently passed away from diarrhoea, the time of death indicated that it was at the start of the outbreak. Through questioning the mother revealed that she had been disposing of the sick infant's waste through the cesspool that was immediately adjacent to the main water pump. After the infant's death there was no more contamination in the well. John Snow's work shows me that graphic design had played an important part on solving the cholera outbreak in 1854, it also shows me that representing data in a visual way is more effective than blocks of text.

Similarly graphic design has managed to help with another pandemic issue, AIDS, by using controversial campaigns rather than spot graphs. The next piece is known as “The most forceful early use of the graphic medium was the 1987-piece SILENCE = DEATH with the words on a pink triangle... evoking the symbol used by Nazis to single out homosexuals.” (A.Smith, 2014 p808) This to me seems like a risky choice to reference the tragedy of the holocaust which would provoke a lot of emotions from the viewers. However, I feel the design was deliberate to stimulate a public response. The design was intended to imply authorisation, to raise questions and stimulate curiosity to the public. The creators of SILENCE = DEATH were originally uncomfortable with the design as it could be linked with victimhood, segregation, quarantine, and interment of HIV- positive people. The original design was changed to a more vivid colour such as fuchsia and pantone 212 c. Surprisingly a printer accident caused another modification, which was the upwards triangle. The artists were happy with this change because it further distanced itself from the death camps. The triangle was used to connect to all audiences with hopes of conveying different meanings such as maleness to some, homosexuality to others and historical meaning of genocide to the audiences who are familiar to it. The next phase of design for the AIDS campaign was then to design the slogan. The original idea was to use a holocaust analogy the final step of the process was adding the equals sign. I feel the creators of this campaign were trying to take the seriousness of past events and use that emotion to provoke responses to help the cause. Other thought on the equals sign is that it also symbolises the deadly effects of passive crisis, communal and political silencing, scenarios where bystanders become participants without intending to be and silence as complicity. The SILENCE = DEATH campaign opened up another exhibit at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, this displayed the SILENCE= DEATH slogan in neon colours also a photomural of the Nuremberg trials of “nazi war criminals, and an electronic information display – the ‘rogues’ gallery- which included life-sized photos of public figures whom activists had branded AIDS criminals, including president Reagan and Senator Jesse Helms”. (A.Smith, 2014 p808) I believe that the SILENCE= DEATH campaign was very effective by using A controversial idea and using a tragic event as a tool to prevent HIV. The symbolic reference to the death camps was a significant representation of how dire the situation was with aids. Through these campaigns it helped people seek medical attention and avoid infection but most of all it helped reduce the stigma around aids to make it a better environment for people to live their lives with aids shame free.

Lastly, the most relevant example on how graphic design can save a life is with the current situation of living with covid. With numbers of new infections and deaths still rising it is still a concern for the public; Covid has affected the whole world. It has been clearer during this pandemic of how much graphic design is relied on to communicate with the public and how much it has helped us overcome this current crisis. The government and the NHS have taken inspiration from WWII graphics to create their own such as the effective “catch it, bin it, kill it.” Poster that can be seen in public places to prevent the spread. Health organisations are now spreading infographics to “communicate their ideas and information have an opportunity to bridge the knowledge gap with their audiences.” (Smiciklas, 2012 p11). Visualising this information would help the reader understand ways to prevent spreading disease, how to keep themselves and loved ones safe. The uses of these infographics would spread information about new cases, ways to prevent the spread, what to do if you catch it and how to stay safe. Not only is it used in the pandemic to just pass information it is also used to in public to subtly remind us to be more aware. For example, in Britain simple floor vinyl has been put in places, with standing markers to help the social distancing issues with over crowding and queuing. These vinyl’s have been designed to help remind us to keep a healthy distance between people to prevent the spread. With this tool being available to communicate most reputable sources are now relying on visuals to spread their messages. With the introduction of technology and the internet

“There is no doubt that our attention spans are becoming more compressed as technology and digital media become more prevalent in our personal and professional lives in the age of information overload, data crashes over us like a tidal wave.” (Smiciklas, 2012 p12) This shows me that we have evolved to understand more when subjects are broken down into information that can be relayed short and to the point. Infographics have proven how effective they were as studies have shown that they increase the ability to retain important information. There have been more studies to show that pairing visuals with text helps people comprehend and remember information more effectively than just listening or reading. In addition, with text that included images it was shown that people will perform a task better than those who read the instructions without the visuals. With the use of infographics and simple designs graphic design has managed to help us all get through covid through clear information and understanding on what needs to be done to overcome the current pandemic.

Overall, I feel that graphic design has been used throughout history to combat hard times and help the public overcome those situations or live a more comfortable life with it. Graphic design has managed to solve hard situations in many and surprising ways. For example, the simple packet change of cigarettes that helped correct years of misinformation being spread and helping cut down the tobacco consumption, with the use of bland colour, correct information, and graphic images. Which lead to more people making healthier lifestyle options and increasing their life expectancy and happiness. Graphic design has also helped save lives even before the digital age when infographics and data visualisation wasn't commonly used. Design managed to help overcome a cholera pandemic and understand the cause of it. By just creating a dot graph John Snow was able to come to conclusions such as the cholera pandemic starting from a hand pumped water well. The graph was a key tool to help his colleagues and public understand and prevent further damage from the pandemic. With more health issues but a different approach Graphic design helped the public understand more about HIV AIDS. With a disease that became hard to live with both physically and socially graphic design helped break down the stigma through the SILENCE = DEATH campaign through controversial design and symbolic references. This campaign and many others have managed to make people lives more liveable with aids becoming more socially acceptable and people able to go seek medical advice and help without feeling ashamed.

Lastly graphic design is helping us overcome our current pandemic with the use of infographics and simple visual designs to remind the public about safety precautions regarding covid. Information about covid is being spread usually on infographics to help get the information to as many people as it can.

I feel graphic design has been overlooked a lot especially with the roll it plays. It is more than just 'pretty pictures' it has proven itself countless times of how effective it is. I personally feel that graphic design has saved many lives especially with its power to easily relay information.

As the saying goes a picture says a thousand words.

Bibliography

David B. Berman. (2013) How Design Can Change The World. San Francisco, California.

Holly Jarman. (2015) The politics of Trade and Tobacco Contro.I University of Michigan school of public health

Steven S. Skiena. (2017) The Data Science Design Manual. Stony brook, NY

Raymond A.Smith.(2014) Encyclopedia of aids. Third Avenue, New York

Mark Smiciklas (2012). The power of infographics. Indianapolis, Indiana