Information Design: The Understanding Discipline

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The term information design is the integrator that brings other disciplines together to create excellent information solutions.

Information design (ID) is a topic of some confusion and uncertainty among practitioners involved with information solutions. This is, in some part, a result of the rise and evolution of information architecture (IA), which evolved with the explosion of the web. Information architecture has increased both its momentum and its critical role in successful web solutions, to the point of general confusion (and is further complicated by the similarity in the terms information architecture and information design).

As recently as 1998, Richard Saul Wurman (who coined the term information architecture) and other leaders in the information design/information architecture field treated ID and IA as synonyms. At the same time, other people were taking the moniker information architecture in a different direction—very rapidly—to specifically address issues of content and structure in web development. Today, while the key people involved in the IA community have stretched into more diverse interests, it is still widely accepted that—at its core—information architecture is a discipline grounded in issues of structure and content (particularly for websites), with a strong connection to the library sciences. Information Design, meanwhile, has not enjoyed a similar evolution.

Which leaves the question: What is information design?

About information design

There is not consensus on exactly what information design is. Definitions of the discipline from stakeholders who associate themselves with the field are consistent only in that they are typically high level, not very concrete and do not offer much in the way of direct practical application.

Consider these definitions of information design taken from a broad cross-section of authorities associated with the field:

- Complex ideas communicated with clarity, precision and efficiency
- The point of intersection between language disciplines, art and aesthetic
disciplines, information disciplines, communication disciplines, behavior and cognition disciplines, business and law and media production technologies

- “Sense-Making”
- The structure through which visual disciplines are expressed
- Contributed to by writers, researchers, aestheticians, popularizers, collectors, inventors, systematizers and analysts, as well as universalists
- The defining, planning and shaping of the contents of a message and the environments it is presented in with the intention of achieving particular objectives in relation to the needs of users
- How we interact with and represent information
- A design that supports the goals of the user and the creator

Another notable characteristic of information design is the broad range of fields that associate themselves with it. There are meaningful groups within graphic designers, writers and information architects that all make some claim to the term information design. Typically, disciplines are easy to define in at least a basic tactical way. Graphic designers provide visual solutions. Writers provide written solutions. Information architects provide structural design solutions. Information design ostensibly comes down to a broad set of information deliverables, not any single type or particular component of other disciplines.

Information design as integrator

In the past I have written that information design is the director of other disciplines, borrowing the metaphor of a movie director that Beth Mazur and a number of others have used in this and related contexts. In retrospect, I do not think that analogy is correct. Rather, information design is the integrator that brings other disciplines together to create excellent information solutions.

Information design addresses high level information problems to provide the most possible clarity, understanding and effectiveness. It is not important what tools are used to achieve it, but rather that the final deliverable provides the greatest possible degree of understanding. In order to achieve that ambitious end, information design must be open to any and every discipline or field of thought. It must also encourage the implementation of systemized processes for the design of successful information, synthesizing the established processes in the myriad of information disciplines.
Even more, information design must actively encourage and participate in research that increases our understanding of information and the effect that it has: how and why people respond to information, how the human brain processes information and builds knowledge, as well as how humans organize knowledge and convert it into improved behavior and operation. Better understanding of these factors will enable us to create the best possible information, interfaces and communications.

Information design serves as a resource for other disciplines engaged in the creation of better understanding and the building of human knowledge. By identifying relevant disciplines, networking with thought leaders and tactical practitioners, and participating in the creation of a body of knowledge, information design informs the activities and improves the capabilities of anyone engaged in creating information.

Think of it this way: graphic design (or information architecture or technical writing, etc.) is to information design as geometry (or algebra or calculus, etc.) is to mathematics. Each of the different disciplines is important and advanced in their own right, but they are also part of a greater, integrated whole. Mathematics is not more important than geometry; it is simply the area of endeavor that geometry falls within. Information design is a macro approach that clarifies relationships between different disciplines participating together as part of a powerful chorus. It provides valuable causality and helps clarify relationships between the areas that fall within its domain.

**Information designer as consultant and tactician**

Given that information design is the integrator of other disciplines, who is an information designer? The role can manifest in either a general or specific way:

- **As a consultant**, an information designer is someone who evaluates information problems in order to recommend the best possible solutions. A generalist with a broad yet solid understanding of human and social factors, information, communication, experience, organizations, systems and delivery platforms, this person guides people and organizations toward appropriate solutions.
- **As a tactician**, an information designer is anyone with a deep, specialized knowledge of one or more tactical disciplines that individually (or as part of a team) creates information solutions. They use the title because they
consciously embrace information design as a guide for maximizing understanding through the communication of their deliverables.

Of course, one does not need to call himself an information designer in order to benefit from the discipline. Anyone engaged in the creation of meaningful information, of any title or disciplinary background, can gain value from it. The title simply underscores a focus on multi-disciplinary, information design-based methods to solve information problems. Calling oneself an information designer is a tacit statement that, regardless of the tools you use, your focus is on creating the most effective possible communication. That is why so many people, from such diverse disciplines, use the title. What binds them together is a focus on creating understanding.

**Information design: practical application**

Anyone involved in the creation and communication of information can glean immediate benefit from learning more about information design. While the basic approach is rather intuitive—staying mindful of the big picture, using any approach or tool that would best accomplish your goals—the specifics of integrating it may not be.

To utilize information design when solving your own information and communication challenges, try integrating these simple techniques and principles into your process:

- Remember that information only has value when it is successfully communicated. If it cannot be accessed or understood it does not have value.
- Identify and stay true to the goals that your information is intended to support. Setting and achieving the correct goals is the very purpose of the eventual information and the reason why information needs strong design. Take the time to make sure your goals are sound, and remain focused on them throughout the process.
- Be mindful of how you create and disseminate information during development. If the information and communication with the client or internal team is not well designed, you are more likely to end up with an information deliverable that does not promote the most understanding. The design of good information is not limited to the final product.
- Understand how the information you are creating will be experienced or communicated by the participants. Who is the intended audience? Which of their senses will/should/could be engaged? How will the context of
that experience, or the situational variables involved, influence the information itself? Knowledge of the interaction and exploration of different experiential factors will make the information as meaningful to the eventual participants as possible.

- Understand the information domain. Valid and thorough context is critical to providing strong information solutions. There is a lot of focus and scholarship on usability but precious little attention given to the rest of the relevant domain in the design process. Participants are influenced by history, by the market and by cultural factors. Some information disciplines actively account for these, but many do not. Information design insists that they must.

- Seek out the information that you need. No one synthesizes everything that goes into well-designed information. The Internet provides us immediate access to information on every topic germane to information design. Be aggressive in learning more, asking questions and seeking out answers. While the Internet is the easiest medium for answers, you should also read books and—best of all—seek out and cultivate relationships with others who have the knowledge and background that you need.

- Make certain the information promotes understanding. Be sure that, as much as possible, it is:
  - Relevant: immediately valuable and appropriate. Consider relevance not only from the perspective of what your participants want, but also from the perspective of what they need in order for your overall goals to be realized.
  - Clear: easily integrated and understood. You must eliminate as many barriers to understanding as possible. Clear information successfully addresses the needs of the participants and as many of the operating factors within the information domain as possible.
  - Memorable: makes an impact and leaves a lasting impression. In a world of true information overload, the information you design needs to stand out. It needs to get attention and it needs to promote memory and recall. There is so very much information (or, more accurately, data) competing for limited attention and interest that you must rise past the noise surrounding you.

These steps are appropriate for everyone engaged in the creation of information, regardless of discipline or approach. You probably incorporate some or many of these steps already, but approaching the process in a more formal, procedural way will help you stay focused on what is important and remain mindful that the different tactical components that contribute to successful information solutions are part of a larger, more complex whole. It is difficult to create information that successfully
accomplishes its goals with definite relevance, clarity and memorability, but incorporating information design makes it far more likely that you will achieve that success.

By participating in the general information design community, as well as the communities of our own specific disciplines and media, we gain access to a network that will enlighten our work.

The understanding discipline

Information design is not the same as information architecture; it is not merely an “enlightened” version of graphic design; it is not somehow a niche component in interface or experience design; it is not technical writing. It is a broad and exploratory discipline that encourages research and development, understands that a galaxy of disparate tactics are bound together in creating successful information solutions, endeavors to understand people and the world as thoroughly as possible to enable better design and endeavors to identify and synthesize any discipline that contributes to better understanding.

Given the complicated information problems that we will face increasingly in the years ahead, the need for information design could not be more profound. By establishing a shared recognition of what ID is and how it contributes to the work we do, we will continue to make progress in our efforts to bring clarity and understanding, and perhaps even more broadly to improve the state of, the world.

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Our eleventh annual conference is being held October 9-12, 2006 in Cambridge, MA. We’ve lined up fantastic speakers giving full-day seminars on today’s critically important design topics.

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