



Animating Your Return on Investment Workshop

October 18, 2013

Facilitator: Ryan Stubbs, Research Director, NASAA

Presenters: Alex Aldrich, Executive Director, Vermont Arts Council

Nicholas Paleologos, Executive Director, New Jersey State Council on the Arts

Allison Tratner, Director of Communications, New Jersey State Council on the Arts

See the [presenters' bios](#) under Friday Morning Workshops.

Good design can bring your data to life and communicate compelling ideas about the impact of the arts in a short amount of time. This session showcased effective data visualizations from state arts agencies and facilitated a conversation around how state states currently engage in this work and how they can communicate data in compelling ways. The session began with an overview of data visualization from Ryan Stubbs and included presentations of work being conducted by the Vermont Arts Council and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

Data Visualization Defined

Data visualization allows us to make meaning out of data. Sometimes, data can be dry and come to us in the form of large spreadsheets. Data visualizations help us communicate what is interesting about data in meaningful ways. It is a different way of accessing the same information that can allow for a deeper understanding of data relationships. The adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words" comes to mind. For example, a map of state grants going to rural locations easily conveys a point about accessibility that would not easily be recognized in a database of state arts agency Final Descriptive Reports.

The Power of Data Visualization

Visualizing data can help people to understand complex numbers and concepts in a short amount of time. Policymakers, arts funders and the general public have little time or attention to devote to understanding complex situations. Visualization can be one tool to convey important messages in small pieces. This is especially important in the age of big (and growing) data.

Humans are hardwired to make visual connections. People have been making visual interpretations of data forever, for example interpreting the stars through constellations. Part of the resonance of visual communication is cultural, though part of it is biological. Cognitive science and human visual perception research underscores that visualizations can be effective teaching and learning tools in a variety of settings.

Effective Data Visualizations

An effective data visualization must immediately, memorably and compellingly tell your story, with the ultimate goal of influencing the viewer's behavior or views. It should reduce the anxiety of taking in large amounts of data.

Edward Tufte, a longtime leader and innovator in the field of data visualization, gives us these principles of graphical excellence:

- Graphical excellence is well-designed presentation of interesting data—a matter of substance, statistics and design.
- Graphical excellence consists of complex ideas that are communicated with clarity, precision and efficiency.
- Graphical excellence is that which gives to the viewer the greatest number of ideas in the shortest time with the least ink in the smallest space.

State Arts Agency Exemplars

Vermont Art Council: As the only state arts agency structured as an independent nonprofit, the Vermont Arts Council (VAC) has a unique advantage in being able to lobby the state legislature directly. It recruits knowledgeable and articulate constituents of key legislators to help make its case.

Going into fiscal year 2014, the Arts Council was in danger of losing a portion of its National Endowment for the Arts partnership grant due to a lack of matching funds from the state. The challenge it faced was to explain this complicated state-federal issue in a short amount of time, and to make people and legislators care about it even as the state faced a raft of other issues. VAC came up with the idea to do a whiteboard-style video, [The Vermont Art Council Budget in under Three Minutes](#), to explain the need for an increased appropriation.

The video was a success. The script took a couple of weeks to finalize and the film was produced in three days. It energized advocates, who sent it to their legislators, which spurred a conversation about VAC's budget. The Arts Council emerged with the first increase to its appropriation in more than two decades.

New Jersey State Council on the Arts: The New Jersey State Council on the Arts has one of the largest budgets among state arts agencies, and therefore has many stakeholders through the number of organizations and artists it is able to support. It wanted to create a tool to help these stakeholders become more effective advocates. When advocates only have small amounts of time to make their case to

decision makers, it is important that they be well equipped to describe the value of the arts clearly, quickly and effectively.

The tool the arts council created, artsmattersnj.org (the website is under development; for access to the beta version, contact [Allison Tratner](#)), is intended as a one-stop shopping website where advocates can find visual displays of data and stories from around the state. A map of the state anchors the site and conveys the presence of the arts in multiple regions of the state. Key data points are updated as the agency receives new information from grantees. A carousel of short videos shows the impact the arts are having in a variety of important areas, such as health and education. Artists and arts organizations will be able to add their own videos, and the arts council has been drawing video from the archives of State of the Arts, an Emmy Award-winning television program it has coproduced since 1981. Having all this information collected onto one website makes it easy for advocates to be able to access it from anywhere at any time.