

See the Content for the Trees

The consolidation of vast amounts of data and information into simple visual representations is one of the best ways to cash in with content. Charts and graphs make our online lives easier. Remember the U.S. map after the 2004 Presidential election? The red or blue states signifying Bush or Kerry with the lone Ohio still in white told us more than thousands of numbers or words ever could. Smart marketers who use visualization tools have the potential to alter the way we navigate information—and the way we purchase. Taking the words and numbers of content and turning them into pictures, these new offerings make grasping content relationships much easier.

As an incoming freshman at a small liberal arts college, I had no clue what I wanted to major in. A major was like your whole life, dude! My methodology for choosing involved chatting with friends at 2:00AM and looking through hundreds of cool record covers for inspiration, divine or otherwise. What's a visually-oriented kid, who's OK at math, can write somewhat coherently, and has a decent grasp of history to do? As I was sitting in Economics 101, my major struck me like a proverbial lightning bolt. I really like drawing all these supply-and-demand curves; maybe I should do this for four years! Economics appeared to be a perfect way to make use of my visual brain and the consolidation of vast amounts of information into easy-to-understand visual representations became my preferred way of seeing the world.

Online brokers lead the way

For decades, Wall Street and the new wave of online brokerage sites have been one of the most developed users of content-visualization tools. Taking complex tick-by-tick pricing and other data for stocks, bonds, and commodities and turning that data into charts makes seeing patterns a snap. Many online brokerages compete on the visualization tools, charting and other value added content that their site provides. Innovative online brokers with great charting packages cash in with more customers who open accounts and who make more trades.

Interesting examples of content visualization at work can be found on the latest marketing sites for big-ticket items. Check out the Mini Cooper site: www.mini.com, where you can dynamically "trick out your Mini" with your own personalized color, wheel set, and trim. You see the results on-the-fly and can mix-and-match quickly.

Amazon and Ticketmaster cash in

Consider how Amazon.com organizes a great number of books into categories. You can browse the Web marketing category with ease, because the visual category structure makes it easy to find what you are looking for. And Amazon's five-star rating system instantly aggregates all of the review information submitted by readers, another form of visual information.

I also like how Ticketmaster has developed a calendar function for particular venues. I can look of Boston's Orpheum Theater, for example, and see the schedule of concerts in one place.

Online stores have long dealt with user frustrations and high shopping cart-abandonment issues. Drilling down to find what you want at your average ecommerce site (especially if you don't exactly know what you want) just isn't that much fun. But consider some of the latest generation of shopping sites that make use of product visualization. The Yankee Candle Company has a nifty custom candle section of its site, www.yankeecandle.com. There, users build gift orders visually rather than using the old multi-click linear approach. Yankee Candle offers dynamic real-time changes in the product's color, shape, messaging, packaging, gift-wrap, and other options—all of which can be visualized, which makes it easy and fun to create that perfect gift for Aunt Gertrude. The Yankee Candle site, built by Internet solutions company Molecular, has produced a significant increase in the average candle order and a big drop in call center volume due to much better user experience. It turns out visualization pays for online shopping sites.

It seems to me we're just starting to ride this new wave of content visualization. Sure, we've made amazing progress since I first drew a supply-and-demand graph with a swell multi-colored pen, but I suspect there are plenty of cool things right around the bend. I'd love to visualize relationships between real-time online news stories and the related historical data. Is anyone doing that? If not, I can hardly wait to see it