

# A picture or a thousand words?

 By [Andre Fourie](#)

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In today's time-starved and information-rich world, we need more than a catchy headline and a well-written story to break through the clutter.

According to the latest statistics, every day 150 billion emails are sent, half a billion tweets are posted, and more than 350 million photos are uploaded to Facebook.

IBM estimates that we create 2.5 quintillion bytes of data every day - that's roughly 25 million terabytes, or enough data to fill more than 5 billion DVDs, which if stacked on top of each other would create a 6000km tall tower.

If you want your message to be heard, you have to be a little more innovative than simply sending an email with "Hey Mr Media, please read my 500 word press release on the latest product/news from Company X" in the body copy and hoping for the best.

## The rise of PR's new weapon of choice

While experts around the world are championing a range of new PR skillsets, including SEO, analytics, and programming skills, for me no new PR tool holds as much potential as visual storytelling.

This doesn't only mean photos: the modern PR pro has a vast array of tools at his disposal, including video services such as YouTube and the trendy Vine; presentation tools such as Slideshare; virtual storyboards such as the phenomenally successful Pinterest; and infographic generators such as Visual.ly and Infogr.am.

According to a study by digital user experience agency Zabisco, 40% of people will respond better to visual information than plain text. Old stalwart Facebook has seen a huge increase in interaction since it implemented the new Timeline feature - social media analytics and measurement firm Simply Measured, claims that engagement with brand-created photo and video content on Facebook pages has increased by 65% since Timeline's arrival.

Photo-sharing service Instagram has tripled its user base to 130 million users since Facebook acquired it in 2012. Its CEO even claims the service could overtake Facebook as the world's largest social network if it keeps up its current rate of growth.

Pinterest has grown from a small user base of 5000 in 2010 to more than 70 million in 2013, in the process becoming the third largest social network in the US behind Facebook and Twitter.

## Easy does it

You don't have to be a graphic designer to do basic photo editing, nor do you need to be a Photoshop expert: free services such as Instagram and Pixlr enable PR pros to create dramatic and eye-catching photos with a few clicks of a button. Instead of a laborious and often expensive product demo video for YouTube, why not grab your smartphone and create a looped six-second demo video with Vine?

Visual storytelling is about more than photos and video: forego the standard copy-driven annual reports, and replace the tedious paragraphs with striking photos, and boring pie-charts with interesting infographics.

Say no to a statistics-laden press release announcing the results of a survey, and develop a visual storyboard with easily-digestible facts and statistics, the kind that people quote at dinner parties and boardroom tables to come across as interesting and well-read to their friends.

With dwindling traditional media platforms to rely on to carry our clients' messages, PR pros need to transfer the content creation and messaging skills they've honed during the course of their careers to the new arena of visual storytelling.

It's an invaluable skill to add to our competencies at a time when we potentially have to bid farewell to our favourite tool - the written word.

## The death of diction?

The near-universal adoption of technology has brought with it the rise of a new language: txtspk. It's the lingua franca of the social world, especially among younger users, but that doesn't mean it's not bound for the business world - in Africa, 50% of the total population is below the age of 20. What happens to language norms when millions of youngsters enter the adult world as consumers and, to put it bluntly, as target audiences?

How do you tailor messages to an audience group that "spks like dis"? I have been a lover of beautifully crafted copy, a reader of classic works and an admirer of literary greats from an early age, a love that attracted me to the world of PR. But why prepare a beautifully written thank-you note after a productive meeting with a young entrepreneur when all they're looking for is "Tx 4a gr8 mtg, look 4wd 2 wrking wit u & hope 2cu soon"?

When written communication becomes a game of bingo that I can never win, how do I make sure my client's message comes across in the way I want to, is received positively and effects the change in perception that I am aiming for?

By utilising the universal language of the visual. By using pictures, videos and graphics to tap into this new world of communication. By supplementing my understanding of the written language with knowledge of iconography, tone, mood, lighting and the key components of a visual that has lasting appeal and can break through the clutter of millions of other similar messages.

Will the written word ever truly die? No. But if you want to have a successful PR campaign, placing all your eggs in the copy-driven press release basket will bring you no joy.

Instead, the successful PR pro of today will know how to manipulate visual elements in the same way as they have traditionally manipulated letters and words to tell a compelling story. All the tools are at our fingertips - it's up to us to determine our value in this shifting media landscape.

## ABOUT ANDRE FOURIE

Andre Fourie has worked in the field of public relations and strategic communications for the past ten years, managing the strategy formulation and campaign implementation for clients in the ICT, leisure, government, political, academic and business sectors. He is the founder of South Africa's first on-demand strategic communications consulting firm, Fury Strategic.

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