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Book review

The back of the napkin: Solving problems and selling ideas with pictures

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BOOK REVIEW

The back of the napkin: Solving problems and selling ideas with pictures, by Dan Roam, New York, NY, Penguin Books, 2009, 282 pp., US \$28.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-59184-306-1.

In today's fast-paced world of instant communication, where written words can blur together and completely lose their meaning, it is reassuring to know that visual imagery can still convey concepts and ideas, even complex ones, in ways that are easily understood by their intended recipients. This is the message delivered by Dan Roam in his expanded edition of *The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures*.

Roam proposed the use of visual thinking as a powerful way to tap into the human brain's natural ability to receive and interpret complex visual imagery. While the concept of visual thinking is not a new one, the author maintained that an image-based approach to thinking may simply be the best one since it capitalizes on what he sees as one's "latent, innate way of looking at problems and seeing solutions" (xii).

While *The Back of the Napkin* is written primarily for a business-minded clientele, the concepts and ideas that Roam presents can hardly be contained within a single field or occupation. By applying Roam's model of visual thinking and breaking down the process into its component parts, it is easy to see how one could use this approach to remove barriers to information and present data points to decision-makers. Roam argued quite convincingly that the goal of visual thinking is not to make the complex understandable by making it simple, but rather by making it visible (p. 105).

Roam invited the reader into his narrative through a series of stories and hand-drawn pictures that describe his early experiences with visual thinking and his attempts to communicate with others, quite often through hastily drawn pictures on the back of a napkin. By visualizing ideas first through pictures and then sharing them with others, the author contended that the process can provide both clarity and immediacy to the message and prompt individuals to discover previously undiscovered connections within a given dataset. Since pictures transcend language, Roam further asserted that the ability to effectively communicate with others in an increasingly global and complex society becomes tantamount to success.

The author introduced the process of visual thinking by describing four simple tasks that individuals do every day: look, see, imagine, and show. According to Roam, these basic functions help to orient every situation, and

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