

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT VISUAL CONTENT



COLUMN FIVE

Intro

Visual content is the new kid in school, and everyone has a crush on it. But it's more than just pretty pictures in blog posts and ever-popular infographics. It's a powerful medium that uses the human visual system to communicate information in a way that is easy to consume, understand and recall later.

Visual content makes your message stick, while giving you an opportunity to creatively connect with your consumers through great design. Of course, that all sounds great, but how do you know what visual content will work for your goals? How do you make sure people see it? How do you come up with the right idea? We have you covered. Here's everything you really need to know.

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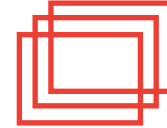
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What is Visual Content?

It is the graphics and images that you see, read and interact with as you consume media, including:



Photos



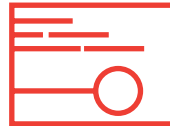
Slideshows



Infographics



**Interactive
Graphics**



**Motion
Graphics**



Videos



E-books

Why Visual Content Works for Brands

Whereas brand publishing was once relegated to traditional ads, sales collateral and the occasional press release, a visual approach to content marketing lets you tailor and deliver an interesting message at various stages of the buyer's journey, supporting your marketing goals.



Expand Your Reach

Old and new publishing platforms alike are increasingly focusing on visual content, attracting and engaging enormous audiences. Delivering your content through these channels expands your reach far beyond your company blog or traditional marketing efforts. Visuals are now the price of entry.



Spread the Word

Aesthetic appeal is not the only reason visual content is more shareable. It is easier to publish an image on media outlets and social platforms than to copy/paste an entire article.



Build an Authentic Relationship

Consumers are attracted to brands not just for their products/services but for their values and customer relationships. Visual content helps you showcase your company's personality, culture and values. Whether it's through Instagram or your blog, it provides a window into the way you work and the things you care about.



A month after Facebook debuted Timelines, infusing newsfeeds with photos and videos, brands saw a 65% increase in engagement (Simply Measured, 2012).

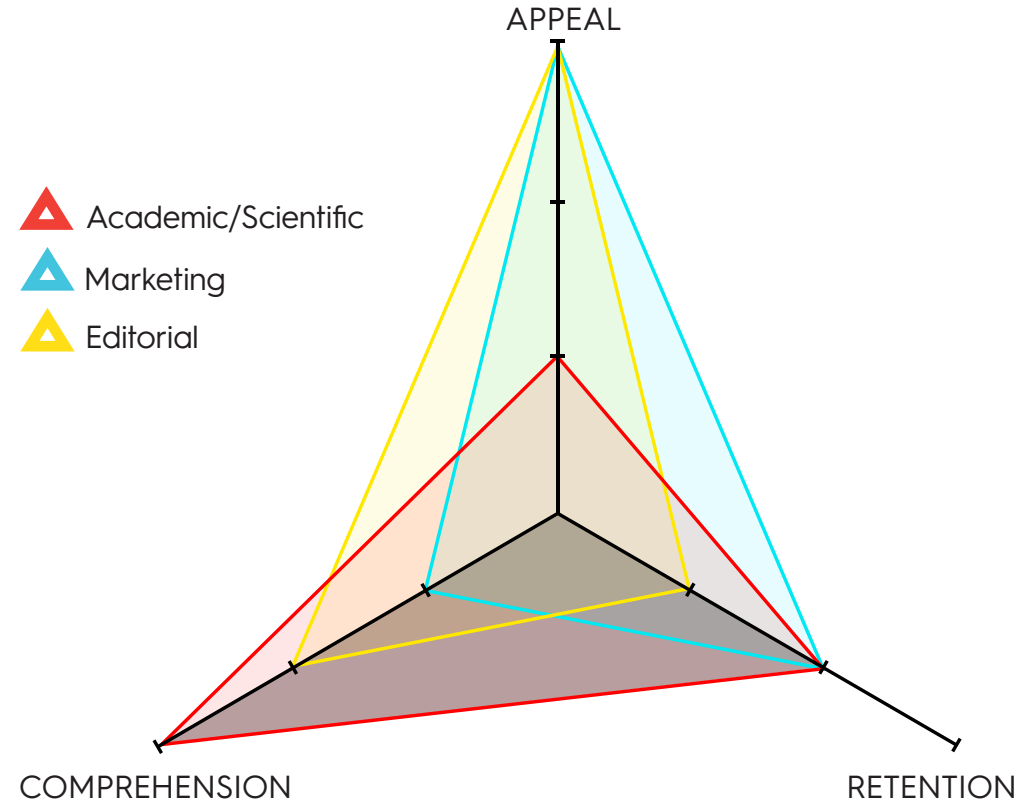
Elements of Successful Visual Content

Visual content is effective because it provides three advantages in communicating with your audience:

Appeal: Visual content uses design to present information in a format that is stimulating, attractive and engaging. This makes it easier to synthesize and piques interest immediately. In short, visual content grabs your audience's attention.

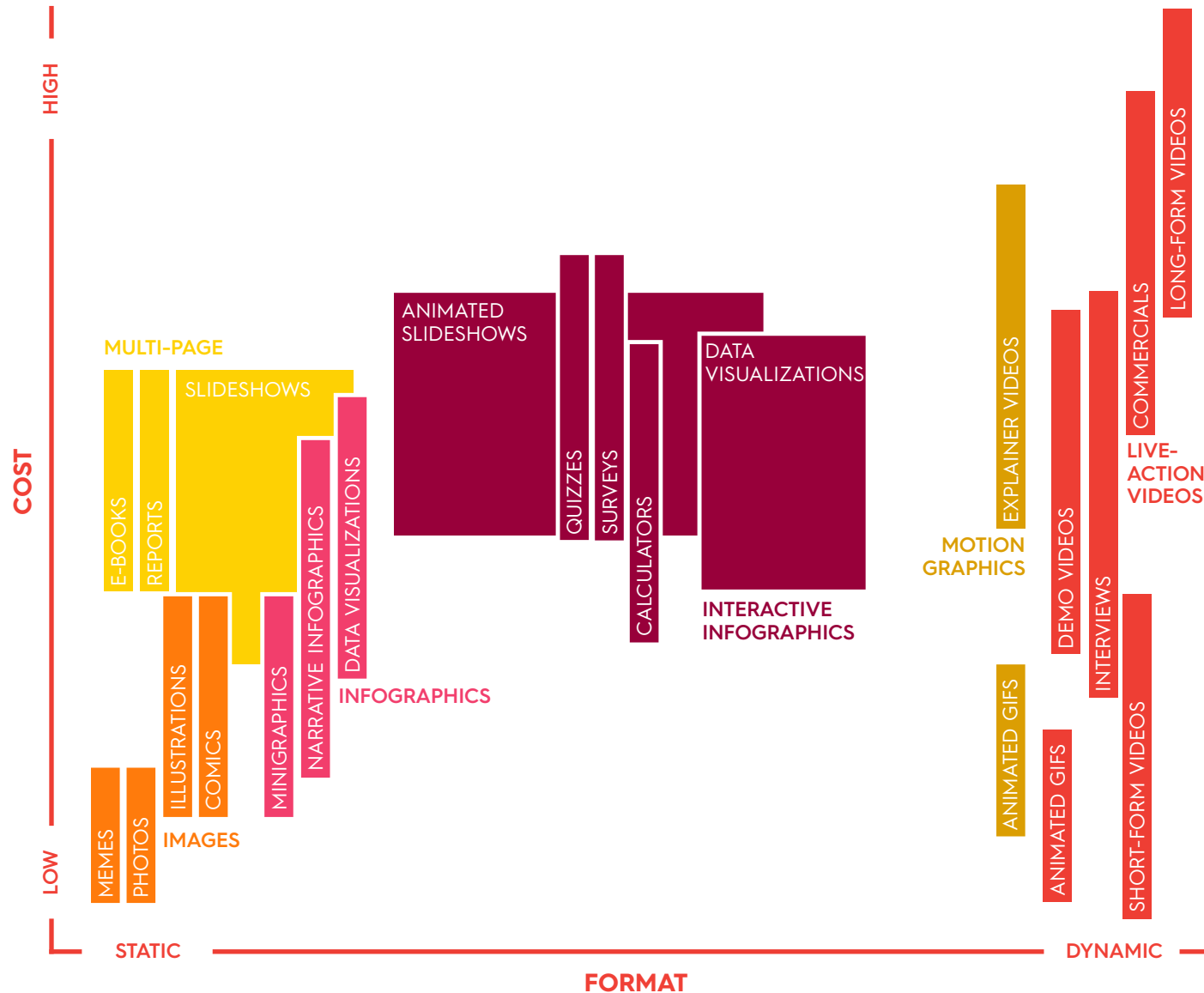
Comprehension: The brain's visual processing system is faster and more efficient than other communication systems, which means we are able to interpret visual information almost instantly and with minimal effort. Visual content is easier to understand, making it more enjoyable to engage with.

Retention: The visual processing system also works with our long-term memory, connecting the images we see to information already stored in the brain. This makes visual content more memorable than other mediums.



A Taxonomy of Visual Content

Visual content comes in many forms, each of which helps serve a specific purpose. It is important to first consider your message and your objectives. Once these are established, you should select the best format to tell your story to the world.



Publishing

You can help your content reach an audience and gain exposure through a variety of distribution channels. Based on your budget and goals, choose the platforms that serve your needs. When deciding which outlet to use, consider the audience it reaches, as well as the content formats it supports.

PLATFORM

BENEFIT



————— **Website**

Free; guaranteed placement

Social Media



————— Brand accounts

Free; guaranteed placement



————— Social influencers' accounts

Credibility; expanded reach



————— Sponsored posts

Targeted thought leadership; elevated exposure

Publications



————— Media pickup

Credibility with publication audiences; expanded reach



————— Sponsored content

Highly targeted; elevated exposure, guaranteed placement

KEY



Owned



Earned



Paid

How Visual Content Serves Your Marketing

Visual content can help support efforts at every stage of the customer journey. Content should be optimized to reach specific audiences, helping move them along the path to purchase.

AWARENESS



Informative or entertaining:

This content appeals to the broadest segment of your target audience. It captures attention and provides something of value to the viewer.



CONSIDERATION



Product or service information:

This content builds the viewer's trust and establishes your brand's credibility.



CONVERSION



Thought leadership and useful resources:

This content educates viewers on the benefits of what you are selling and provides clear calls to action for purchase.



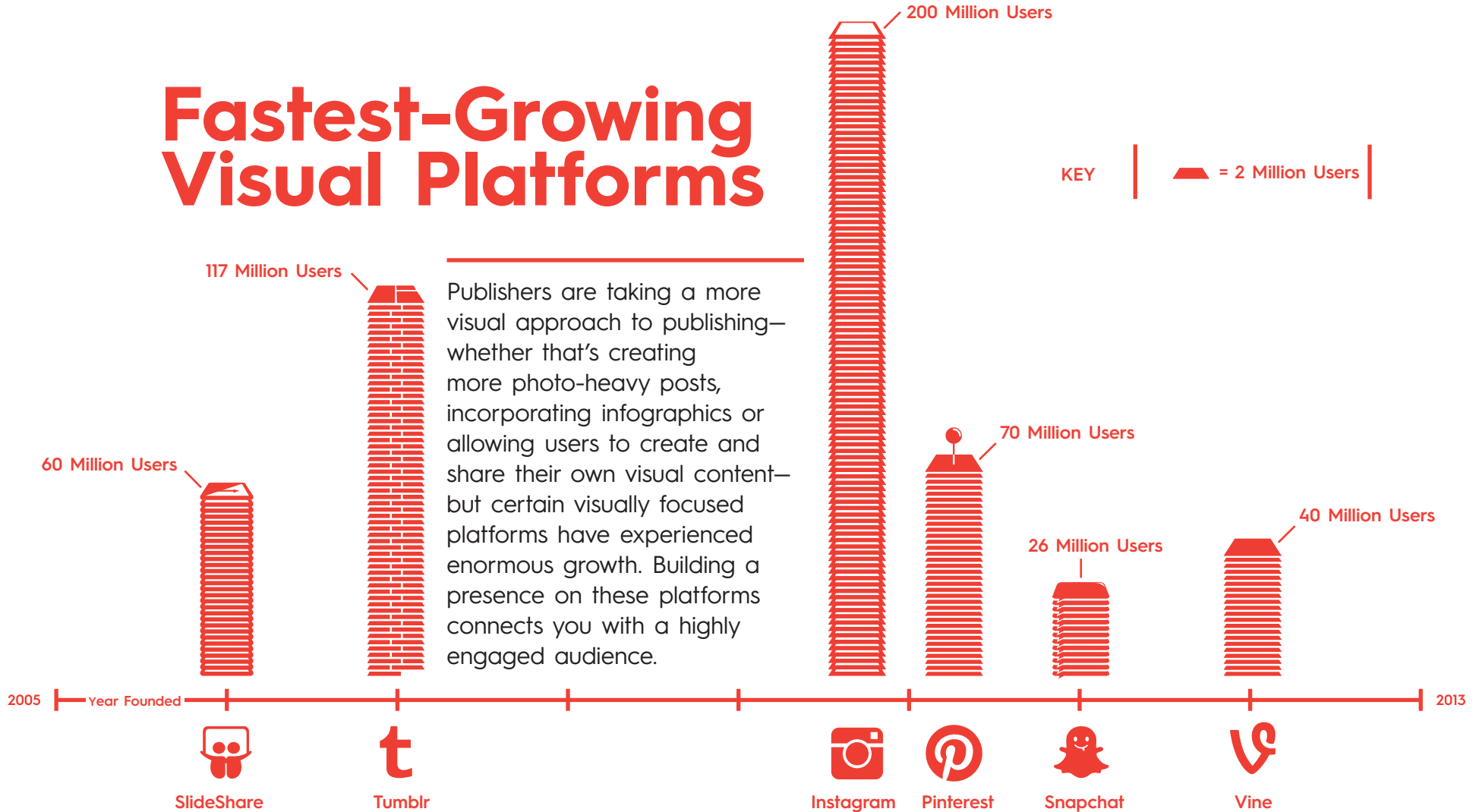
LOYALTY + ADVOCACY



A healthy mix:

This content is a mix of all three, providing value to the audience and including CTAs that encourage spreading the word.

Fastest-Growing Visual Platforms



Publishers are taking a more visual approach to publishing—whether that’s creating more photo-heavy posts, incorporating infographics or allowing users to create and share their own visual content—but certain visually focused platforms have experienced enormous growth. Building a presence on these platforms connects you with a highly engaged audience.

The ROI of Visual Content

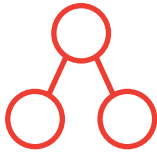
Online marketers have long focused primarily on the volume of visitors they can attract to a site, relying on the almighty page view as the most significant metric to gauge ROI. But that measurement is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Audience interaction with the content is no longer a given; a one-off piece of content can receive millions of hits, but it won't necessarily help nurture a relationship with your brand. Genuine interactions and engagement—the true value to a brand—can be measured by other more meaningful metrics.



Time on Page/Completion Rate:



It isn't just about getting an audience to your site; it's about providing that audience with a meaningful experience that will form a lasting connection. The longer a consumer spends watching a video, scanning through photos or interacting with your content, the closer you are to forming a bond. Metrics such as time on page and completion rate help track this engagement. But new, more refined metrics such as page scroll and article completion offer more insight.



Shares:

Word of mouth is the most powerful form of marketing. When consumers share your content, they are putting their own stamp of approval on it. Although a share does not necessarily guarantee that consumers have read all content, this credibility is tremendously valuable, helping expand your reach through your audience's personal networks.



Interactions:

When you compel your audience to interact with you, you are creating true engagement. This interaction cements your relationship, allowing you to nurture it over time. Interaction can be gauged by things such as comments, likes or new followers.



Conversion Rate:

Effective visual content compels action. As visitors explore your content, they encounter related CTAs that nudge them to take the desired action, whether that's a newsletter sign-up or product demo download.

How to Get Started: Visual Content Strategy

Successful content is created with intent, based on strategic thinking. Before you begin to create content, define the following.

INPUTS



Audience

The first thing you need to understand is the audience you are trying to reach. Creating content without knowing who you're creating it for is a recipe for failure.



Engagement

Identify exactly what goals you are trying to achieve with your content, and define how you will measure success. This may be in traffic, shares, media pickup, views or conversions. Regardless, all content should serve that goal.

How will you reach your audience?

What content will engage them to take the desired action?

Who are you trying to reach?

What type of content do they consume?

What level of knowledge do they have?

What unique value can your content provide your audience?

What do you want them to do or know as a result of seeing your content?

OUTPUTS

Distribution Strategy

With your audience and end-goal in mind, determine the best channels for distributing the content you create.



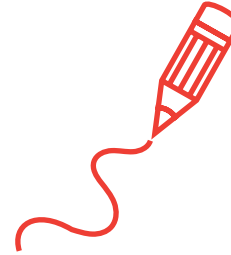
Creative Strategy

Once you understand how to engage and reach your audience, your task is to develop captivating content that addresses both your audience's need and your own goals.



How to Get Started: Visual Content Creation

It takes more than a great idea to produce great visual content. There are many moving parts, including multiple roles and phases. Follow these steps to create effective visual content.



1) Write a Creative Brief

The creative brief clearly outlines the relevant information for a project, including:

- 1. Background Information:** Project, department, initiative, campaign
- 2. Objectives:** Specific action, such as an e-book download or site visit
- 3. Goals:** Ultimate goal, such as increased brand awareness
- 3. Audience:** Who you are looking to reach
- 4. Specifications:** Formats, distribution channels, dimensions, branding guidelines, etc.

Creative Brief Checklist

Project Name:

Project Format:

Design Hours:

Project Overview:

Objectives/Audience:

Dimensions and Orientation:

Style:

Inspiration:

Timeline:

How to Get Started: Visual Content Creation

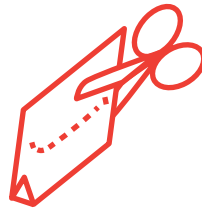


2) Ideate Around the Brief

Once you have completed your brief, it's time to brainstorm your creative idea. This stage relies on successful collaboration, creative inspiration and critical analysis of your ideas. Assemble a group of individuals from different disciplines to increase your pool of thought. Every idea you generate should be able to achieve the objective designated in the creative brief.

3) Craft Your Content

After your idea is vetted, begin creating your content. Create a timeline to guide the process, and decide whether you'll use internal resources or outside vendors or freelancers. This phase may require research, source materials, outlining, copywriting, or scripting, depending on the type of content you are developing. Make sure content is approved by required teams at each stage.



5 Questions to Vet Your Idea

- 1) Will it be interesting to your audience?
- 2) Can it be distributed effectively to reach them?
- 3) Does it align with your engagement goals?
- 4) How original is this idea?
- 5) Does it fit your brand?

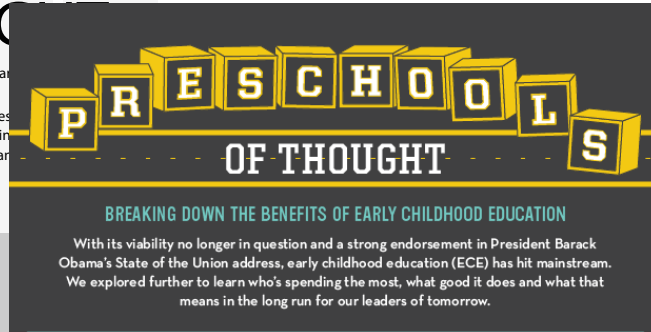
How to Get Started: Visual Content Creation

PRESCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

The who, what and why of the case for early childhood education

With its viability no longer in question and a strong endorsement in President Obama's State of the Union address, early childhood education (ECE) has hit mainstream. We explored further to learn who's spending the most, what good it does and what that means in the long run for our leaders of tomorrow.

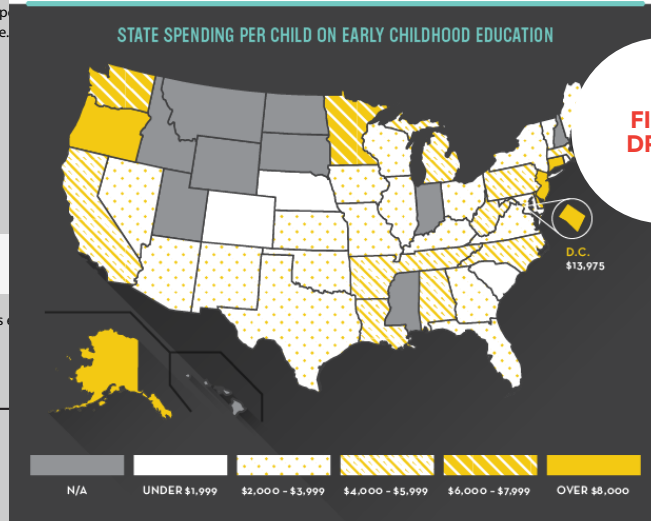
A NATIONAL SNAPSHOT



A NATIONAL SNAPSHOT

this is where we will have the heat map of the United States. Temp determined by the spending per child by each state.

Data is in the State ECE Data shared spreadsheet.

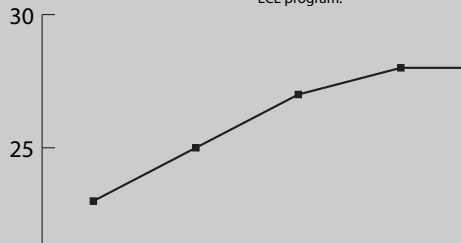


FINAL DRAFT

WIREFRAME

ECE THROUGH THE YEARS

a line graph showing the national, average percent of 4 year olds in ECE program.



ECE THROUGH THE YEARS



4) Design Your Content

Good art direction and design is the foundation of successful visual content. Having a professional (whether that's an art director, creative director or lead designer) oversee the project is essential to ensure the end result is both beautiful and effective. Whether you use an in-house designer or hire a freelancer, make sure the designer is familiar with best practices for the specific type of content you are creating.

Column Five is an industry-leading visual communication agency, specializing in infographic design and data visualization, with offices in Newport Beach, Calif., and Brooklyn, N.Y. The company was founded in 2009 by Ross Crooks, Jason Lankow and Josh Ritchie, professors of Visualization of Information at Columbia University and authors of *Infographics: The Power of Visual Storytelling* (Wiley, 2012).



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We are always happy to help you solve any visual content challenges. If you have a project in mind, let's talk about it.

For more on creating effective visual content, download our free e-book, *A Business Guide to Visual Communication*.