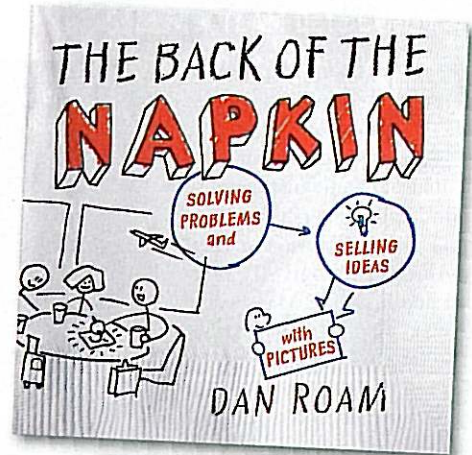


The Back of the Napkin:

Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures



Reviewed by Wendy Soucie

Have you seen the TV commercial, “Let Brown help you”? The long-haired guy draws a picture of boxes that turn into the solution to freight problems — a UPS truck. I love that guy. He can draw and even I get his visual! He is showing us, with no text, how to solve a problem. That is visual thinking.

I selected this month’s book, *The Back of the Napkin* by Dan Roam, because it discusses developing visual thinking. Roam’s book explores the concept of visual thinking with a plethora of examples, and then carries it further by providing concrete steps to understand the process of thinking visually. Finally, it discusses and shows how to apply it in business.

As a consultant, I often give presentations on strategic uses of the Internet, such as search engines and social marketing. Getting a variety of people within an audience to understand these concepts is a challenge. Depending on their level of interaction in this medium, what and when you show them is critical to helping them understand the overall concept and application in their business. I never could draw much better than stick figures. The example of the recent UPS ads, where the guy (actually the art director of the ad firm responsible for the campaign) is drawing pictures on a white board, shows that simple pictures can work.

To understand how I got here, it might be helpful to know that I have an identical twin sister. I got the math and science talent, while she received the artistic genes. To put it simply, I could balance a linear equation but she could draw, paint and write a poem about it.

Giving public presentations forces me to create strong visuals myself, without the aid of a graphic designer. This is dangerous based on my aforementioned lack of artistic ability, unless I can do simple and effective pictures to get my points across. Intrigued by the reviews of this book on several blogs and several YouTube.com videos, I decided that this book was what I needed.

For a neophyte like me, this book was very helpful by providing a self-assessment tool to help me figure out my starting point; that is, what kind of visual thinker I am. Roam defines the “types” as: “Black pens are for visual thinkers who can’t wait to draw themselves. Yellow pens are those who are happy to add to someone else’s work, and red pens are those who question it all right up to the moment they pick up the red pen and redraw it all.” Clearly, I am in the yellow category since I cannot draw well but do like highlighter pens.

The author also aids the reader by showing visual thinking as a guide rope, which makes for a simple visual. There is a four-step process (look, see, imagine, show); three built-in tools we each have to improve upon (our eyes, our mind’s eye and our hand-eye coordination); and six fundamental ways of seeing which are recognizable to anyone (the six Ws: who, what, when, where, how and why).

I think the last third of the book is the best. It allows you to take a problem or concept you are actually working on and work through the four-step process to identify the issue and the solution. Roam then provides suggestions on

different types of visuals to help show that type of problem. In my case, I was developing a presentation on local search and needed to help people understand the interconnectivity of the top five search engines and then how everything else feeds off of that. This turns out to be both a “where” problem and “how” problem, which are best shown with a map and a flow chart. I used both in my presentation, which was well-received by the organization to which I gave the presentation.

Many business books I read hold a place of esteem on my bookshelf. Just a few stay on the honor roll and on my desk for continual reference. I feel this book is a constant companion, at least until I can instill the visual-thinking process deep in my brain so it works effectively. I suggest this as a solid read to improve anyone’s skill in solving a problem or selling his or her ideas. ■

Wendy Soucie is a consultant for Sortis LLC, a Madison-based, full-service marketing firm.

»» *The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures*

By Dan Roam

ISBN-13: 978-1-59184-199-9

Format: Hardcover, 288 pages

Publisher: Portfolio, March 2008