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Visual Tools and Stories from 50 Experts Worldwide

THE WORLD OF VISUAL FACILITATION

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PEOPLE
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FOREWORD BY **DAVID SIBBET** DESIGN BY **VISUALITY**

Including **ONLINE BONUS MATERIAL**

Matthew Magain

BETTER COMMUNICATION WITH THE EMPATHY FORECAST

The most effective way to communicate with someone is to truly understand their point of view—to feel what they are feeling, to have empathy. Without empathy, our message is sure to go unheard.

Dialogue

BETTER COMMUNICATION WITH THE EMPATHY FORECAST

In the chapter *A Bulletproof Process for Creating Sketch Videos*, I recommend running a workshop at the beginning of a sketch video project—before you start shooting—to elicit key information from your client.

In this chapter, we'll explore the aforementioned workshop in detail as we discuss the *Empathy Forecast,* an easy-to-run activity to kick off a successful sketch video project—or any other communication activity.

By combining facilitation and some basic illustration, you, too, can help your clients build empathy, narrow the scope of a project, and create targeted messaging that will ensure the success of your communication project.

INTRODUCTION

At *Sketch Group*,[1] the workshop we run at the start of every video project is an activity called the *Empathy Forecast*. While this activity is invaluable for us when creating sketch videos for our clients, its use is not creating sketch videos for our clients, its use is not limited to video projects—any communication or design problem will benefit from running it with a group.

Once you understand how it works, I hope you'll find new ways to share this activity, and continue to benefit from the insights it delivers.

EMPATHIZING WITH THE VIEWER

Years ago I stumbled across an incredibly useful group activity called the *Empathy Map*, which was first developed by David Gray from *XPLANE Consulting*[2] (for an in-depth look at the Empathy Map, check out Dean Meyers' chapter, *Facilitating Human-Centered Design: People Come First*). The Empathy Forecast that we're about to discuss leans heavily on the original principles of the Empathy Map.

An *Empathy Map* is an effective tool to encourage clients, stakeholders, and team members to collaborate, contribute, and think about a product or service from the *end user's perspective*. This structured technique forces participants to put themselves into the shoes of the target audience.

The activity challenges participants to imagine what the viewer might be *thinking*, *feeling*, *seeing*, *saying*, *hearing* and *doing*, so that the message we communicate can be crafted to speak directly to those opinions, assumptions, and emotions.

Where an *Empathy Map* can fall short, however, is its focus on the *Before* state—*before* the person at the heart of the map has consumed your message (email, video, presentation, or other communication). Capturing this snapshot is useful, but it doesn't encourage the group to envision what might be possible in the *After* state—*after* the viewer has consumed the message.

At Sketch Group, we deliberately break the *Before* and *After* stages into separate activities. This way, we can explicitly encourage groups that we work with to ponder what might be necessary to make their projects a roaring success.

1 For more on *Sketch Group* and our services, visit: www.sketchgroup.com.au.
2 Visit *XPLANE Consulting* at www.xplane.com.

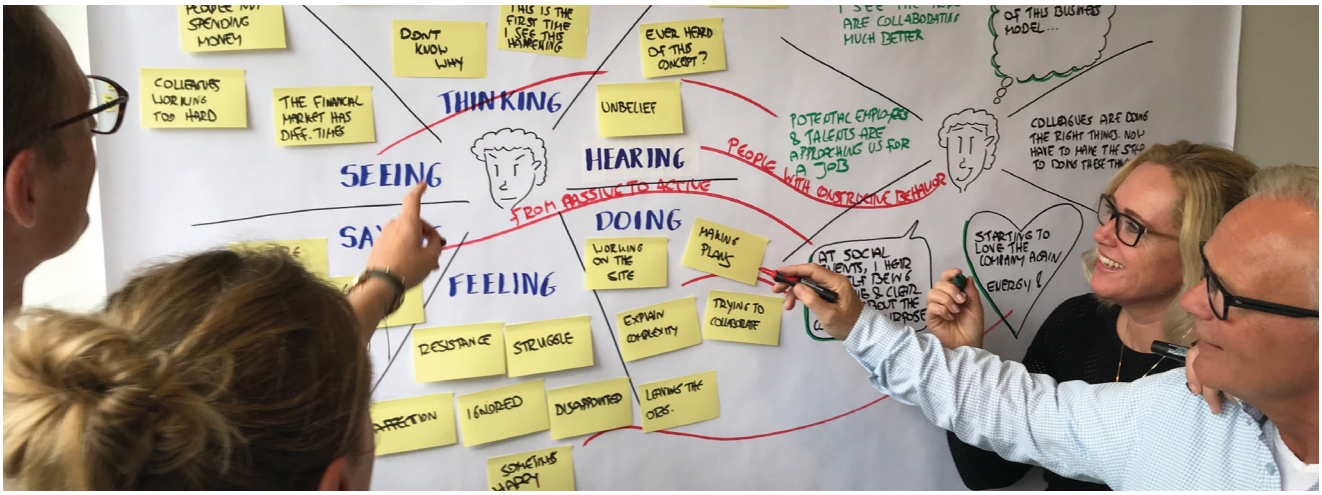


Image 1: Running an *Empathy Forecast* is simple, fun, and often delivers invaluable insights.

HOW TO RUN AN EMPATHY FORECAST

Here are the steps to follow when facilitating an Empathy Forecast activity.

1. Run a Modified Empathy Map for the *Before* State.

Draw the diagram as shown in *Figure 1* on a flipchart or whiteboard, and arm everyone in the group with markers and sticky notes. Ask the group to identify the target audience of the communication, and draw a face of this persona at the center of the map (I like to draw him or her with a frown, or looking confused).

Use a large canvas, and draw the diagram as big as you can, so your group has plenty of space to add their contributions.

The group then fills out each part of the map with their ideas for what the target audience might be *thinking*, *feeling*, *seeing*, *saying*, *hearing* and *doing*, until they've run out of ideas.

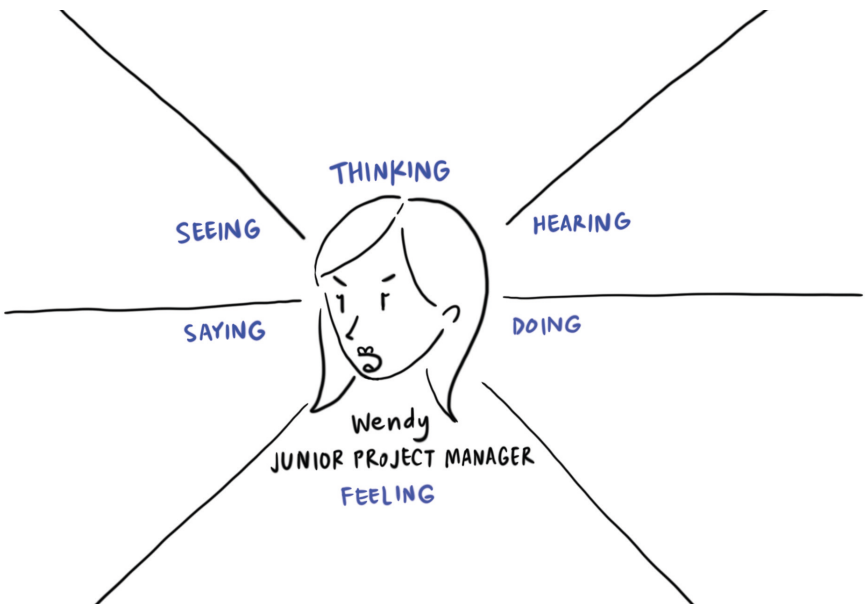


Figure 1: The *Before* state.

Focus on a Real Person

When narrowing down the target audience, try to get as specific as possible. Sometimes I'll ask the group if they have an actual person in mind, and then caricature that person for the activity. Of course you'll want your communication to resonate with more than one person, but it's often easier for the group to think of a single person who may be particularly difficult to convince. If they persuade *that* person, others will also be swayed.

It goes without saying that when doing this, it's important to get agreement within the room that the diagram should remain confidential—you don't want the subject of your caricature to learn they were being talked about in this way!

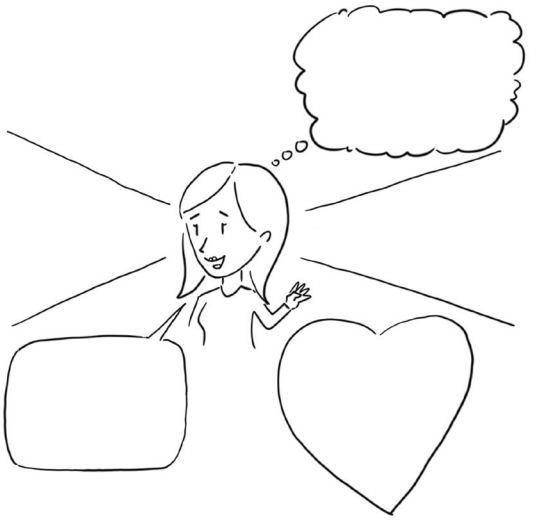


Figure 2: The *After* state.

2. Run Another Empathy Map for the *After* State.

When the group has exhausted their ideas in the *Before* state, explain to them that you will be repeating the activity for *after* the audience has consumed your communication. Whether your message is to explain, educate, or promote, for the client to feel your work has been a success, there must be a desired shift in the mindset of the viewer. Now is the time to flesh out what that shift will entail.

This time around, you'll run the activity slightly differently:

1. Draw a modified version of the map, as shown in *Figure 2*. Leveraging techniques from comic books, such as speech and thought bubbles, will pique the group's curiosity and renew their engagement in the workshop.

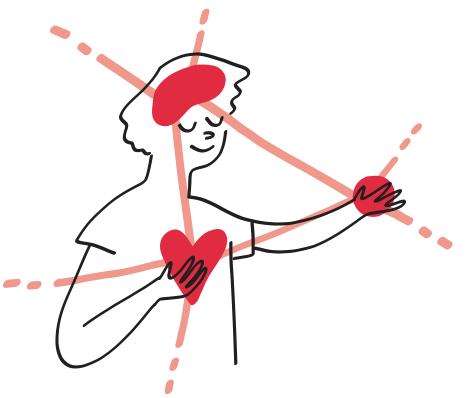
2. For this phase, take control of the whiteboard marker. Instead of another brain dump onto sticky notes, ask the group to call out phrases for each section on the wall. With you doing the writing, they'll find the task less of a chore—plus you'll get to control the scope of the phrases that are volunteered.

Add Humor to Your Sketches

Give your workshop participants a chuckle—draw the target persona at the center of your *After* map looking happier than in the *Before* map, to reflect the positive impact your communication will have on the audience.

Reframe Your Questions When They Feel Awkward

Depending on the context of the problem your group is trying to solve, some of the *After* questions may feel a bit out of place.



Thinking, *feeling* and *saying* often come easily, but the other three are frequently less obvious. Here are some sample questions you may find useful:

- **How do you want your user to see this problem after they've consumed your communication? Do they see it in a new light?**
- **What will your user hear others say about this issue after receiving your message? What will the conversations around the water cooler sound like?**
- **What do you want your user to do after they've digested your communication? What's the *Call to Action* you'd like them to take?**

Draw Your Call to Action

I save my question about what the group believes their target viewer is doing for last. This question will reveal the client's desired *Call to Action*.

Instead of writing about this action, consider drawing the persona performing the action—for example, holding a mouse next to a computer screen and clicking on the 'Sign Up' button, or, if they'd like to encourage the viewer to make a phone call, holding a phone to their ear.

3. Connect the Dots Between *Before* and *After*.

The final step in the *Empathy Forecast* activity is to connect the lines between each of the corresponding sections in the *Before* and *After* maps. Use a different color marker to clarify the associations

between the two maps. For each connecting line, ask the group, "What does the audience need to hear from us to shift them from where they were *before* to where we want them to be *after*?"

In each section, the answer to this question will provide you with valuable messaging, language, and specific phrases upon which to base your communication script. Take the best phrases that come from this discussion and write them along the connecting lines that you've drawn.

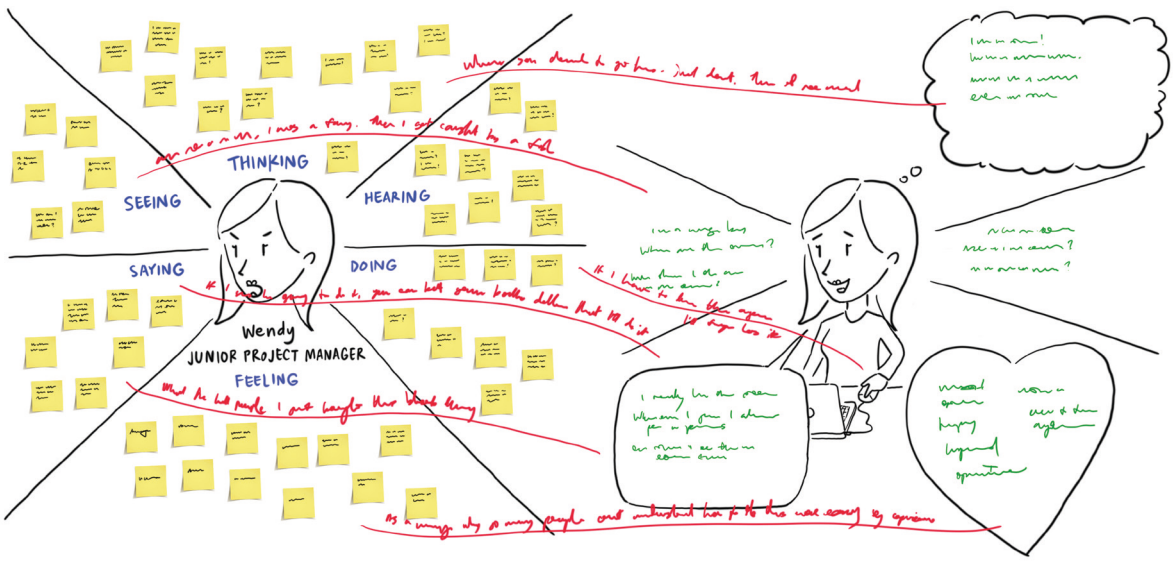


Figure 3: The completed *Empathy Forecast*.

That's it! Once you've completed the Empathy Forecast activity, photograph the entire sketch, and share the images with participants *after* the meeting. There may be quite a lot of detail, so be sure to include close-ups of each section.

Go Forth and Forecast

While it's not a substitute for real data on what viewers might think, feel, see, say, hear, and do, an Empathy Forecast is a powerful tool. Use it to:

- Narrow the scope of your messaging
- Give participants the opportunity to engage in a creative and fun activity, something beyond their regular work
- Encourage empathy amongst participants for the viewer
- Create a buy in between clients and stakeholders
- Quickly understand both the problem and your client's goals
- Demonstrate your professionalism and process as a consultant
- Discover targeted messaging and the key phrases that are most likely to resonate with your target audience

It's an easy activity to run, and will deliver valuable insights and targeted, useful language. I hope you find it as useful as I have!

Author note: *I'd like to extend a word of gratitude to Kerstin Norburn from Sketch Group, whose input on shaping this activity was invaluable.*

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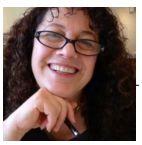

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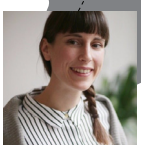

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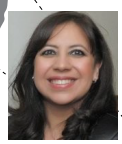

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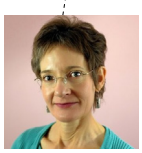

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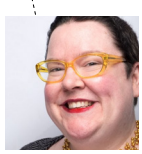

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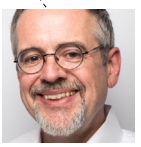

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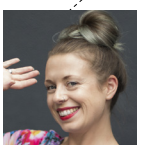

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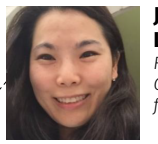

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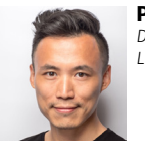

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