

New research, ideas and techniques in the knowledge management field

BRIEFINGS

“Mind the Gap” – Using images to bring staff and customers together

London Underground identified a communication problem with customers and found inspiration to solve it from an existing asset, the London Underground Map, using images to provide Tube users with information. As Victoria Ward explains, this process also enhanced the company’s internal knowledge management.

As I was wandering through Barbican tube station last year, I spotted a perfect knowledge artefact; a guide to using the London Underground called *Using the Tube: Helpful Information and Advice*. Intrigued, I rang London Transport and tracked down the department who had created the guide. This article is based on an analysis of the guide and an interview with Mike King, who I thank for his permission to tell the story.

Using the Tube

It is widely acknowledged that you cannot improve on the London Underground map. It’s recognized as a major asset by London Underground, who fight to retain the integrity of its simplicity. It plays a hugely unifying role in the

brand and communications of London Underground, as well as being an income generating asset in its own right.

The creation of *Using the Tube* in April 1998 was a conscious move to enhance the information available to Tube users, but how did the team who created this go about it?

Let me give you some statistics. Every day, around 200,000 people

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travel on the Tube who have never (or hardly ever) used the system before. Because so many of these people are from overseas, there’s a great deal of pressure on the team to provide information in foreign languages. But staff have fought against this because it makes things so much more complicated (how many languages do *you* use?)

The provision of foreign

language information can give customers false expectations – see a poster in French and you might assume that one of the staff in Piccadilly Circus station speaks French. And, unlike British Airways, London Underground has never had a policy of recruiting, or encouraging, language skills.

With this problem in mind, a team in the communications department decided to use European Standard pictograms as a device to signpost users with little or no English to the information they need.

There are benefits to English customers, too. London Underground employs 10,000 staff, and long-serving employees have acquired a vast body of knowledge about the system. But staff can find it difficult to communicate with customers because they have developed a colloquial turn of speech that is unlikely to correspond with the English in overseas visitors’ phrase-books. The use of pictograms overcomes this problem with a simple, graphic system of wayfinding information that gives employees the tools to communicate effectively.

So why is this of relevance as a knowledge tool? There are several valuable lessons to note from the whole project.

Consciousness of interpretation

London Underground is acutely conscious both of the widely varying linguistic skills of its users, and the more subtle complexities of the way that its staff communicates.

At the heart of the design brief for this “helpful information/advice product” was the need for London Underground to create a common language. This is an essential attribute for any project or program of activity where common values or goals need to be established, and is frequently overlooked inside large enterprises. The forced simplification and interaction which comes from making a shared language is a powerful cultural device.

Image is all

The design team consciously adopted image (pictograms as they describe them) as a communications device and had the declared intent of creating a “complete system of wayfaring information.”

The guide uses image in several ways. The six pictures on the front cover are color-coded and are also used as a key to the index. Each section then reproduces the colored index page opposite a page of text, and adds small insert pictures which either contain more detailed information or an instruction.

For example, in the section on traveling with pushchairs, buggies and bicycles, the insert picture shows an adult with its arm around a standing child, holding onto a folded buggy.

There are also symbols which indicate where to go for further information – either to written guides and policies, or contact numbers to use for more information. And then, of course, there’s a reproduction of the map itself.

Treat the project like a product

The project was managed as a product. This was, of course, partly because it was for external consumption. The expertise of the team was pooled, a design brief created and a designer commissioned.

The only significant thing London Underground did not do was explicitly capture the learnings from this project for wider use. Implicitly, a sub-project on picture libraries emerged – but having a journalist or observer on board to write-up the project’s story and make it available would have increased its value.

Evaluating at the outset what you might learn from a project – and debriefing at the end to see what you have actually learned – might be common sense, but it rarely happens. It builds a beginning and an ending into the narrative of a project and is a useful device, both in creating the team and in its creative input, as well as for establishing patterns of effective re-use.

What the Tube is really about

The “productization” of internal information projects changes the game and makes it possible to observe and adjust in the light of action and reaction more effectively. Increasingly, in a knowledge economy, the process is the product, even where this is not obvious. Ostensibly, London Transport is about providing services which transport you from one place to another. In fact it’s more about providing access to well organized information and advice, through its information assets and its employees, who will help individual commuters to use the system effectively.

Applying the method

How about looking at your telephone directories, policy manuals and user guides? Would they benefit from this approach?

How about using the creation of a booklet like this when rolling out a major new strategy, policy or campaign?

For London Underground itself – and for the Government as it reviews transport policy – examining communications best practice like this, and using it more widely across an integrated system of transport (whose foundation must be an integrated system of information about transport), would be a wise move.

The transport system is founded on an understanding of maps, effective representation and signposting. This understanding can be applied to the expertise in the heads of employees as effectively as it can be applied to rolling stock.

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BRIEFINGS

KEYPOINTS

- London Underground recognizes that its tube map is a major asset that plays a key role in its branding and communications.
- Many Tube users are new to the system and/or from overseas; staff are not multilingual.
- London Underground adopted European Standard pictograms as a simple, universal method of communicating information.
- Companies can benefit from adopting a “common language” internally. London Underground made use of imagery in its internal team project.
- The principal of using maps and diagrams as an aid to communication is one that can be applied in many situations.