



Found In Translation:
The Case for Pictures in Business
Dan Roam

When words aren't enough.

Twenty-five years of helping business leaders around the world develop ideas has taught me three things:

1. There is no more powerful way to come up with a new idea than to draw a simple picture.
2. There is no faster way to develop and test an idea than to draw a simple picture.
3. There is no more effective way to share an idea with other people than to draw a simple picture.

While good speaking is engaging and inspiring, we need to recognize the limitations of our words. Let's be clear: there's nothing wrong with words. What's wrong is that they're not enough.

This is where pictures come in. Whether drawing them, looking at them, or talking about them, pictures add an extraordinary amount to our ability to think, to remember, and to do. Let me give you an example.

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When was the last time you visited a new city—a place where you didn't know the local people, didn't know your way around, and perhaps couldn't even read the street signs? There is a simple yet powerful lesson that we're going to expose here: thinking about how we find our way around an unfamiliar location will help us think about how we can find our way around an unfamiliar idea. Looking at how we navigate a *place* gives us a great idea about how to navigate a *problem*.

To show you what I mean, I'd like to invite you on a walk around Moscow. It's a city I've spent some time in, and (in certain times of year) it's a wonderful place to walk. I vividly remember my first morning there—the thrill of setting off to explore a completely foreign city, mitigated by the terror of disappearing forever down a dark street somewhere—and I'd like to share the adventure with you.

Let's imagine that we're staying at the Saint George Hotel in central Moscow. We arrived the previous day and have awoken to a beautiful spring morning. We meet for breakfast and agree there's no better way to get a feel for the city than going for a long walk. Since I've been an astronaut geek my whole life (and you're tolerant of this foible), I suggest a visit to Yuri Gagarin museum, a memorial the first person to fly in space. I know from something I read years ago I know that the museum is in the city, but haven't a clue where.

After a filling breakfast, we approach the concierge desk and the ask how to get to the Gagarin museum. The first thing the concierge does is offer to book us a limo, since the museum is some distance away. But we say no, we'd prefer to walk.

"It's a long way," says the concierge. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," we say, "It looks lovely outside and we've got the whole day free."

"Alright," replies the concierge, "here's how to get there..."

Explanation option 1: **The Narrative**

The concierge tells us, “As I said, it’s a long walk, 2 hours or more, but here’s what you do: walk out the front door here and bear to your right. Pretty soon, you’ll find yourself at the river—that’s the Moscow River, of course—and when you reach it, turn left on the embankment. Follow the embankment for a few minutes as you pass by the Kremlin on your left. Once beyond the Kremlin, you’ll see a large bridge on your right and Saint Basil’s Cathedral on your left. Head towards the cathedral, but pass it on your left. Bear off right up the hill past the many old buildings you’ll see there—incidentally, those are the oldest buildings in the entire city.

“Anyway, pretty soon you’ll come to a wide road split by a garden—that’s Lubyanski Way—and turn left on that road, continuing up hill. Ten minutes more and you’ll find yourself in front of the Lubyanka, the old KGB building. You can’t miss it: it’s a big yellow neoclassical building with enormous iron doors with shields emblazoned on them—trust me, it’s not a place you want to go inside. Immediately past the Lubyanka, turn right up Sretenka Street. Now comes the easy part: you’ll stay on that same road all the way to the Gagarin Museum, although the name of the road will change as you walk along it. First it will be Sretenka, then after you cross the Garden Ring Road it will become Prospekt Mira, or ‘Peace Road.’

“Stay on Prospekt Mira for the next three or four kilometers or so as it takes you towards the northern part of the city. After maybe thirty minutes you’ll pass through an enormous intersection at the Rizhsky Train Station, but just keep going straight. Another forty minutes and you’ll find yourself at a fork in the road where Prospekt Mira bears right and Ostankinsky Way bears left. Stay on Prospekt Mira for just a couple more minutes, and you’ll see the Gagarin Museum on your left. That’s it. Enjoy the museum”

Explanation option 2: **The Checklist**

Now let's try something different. Imagine this time that the concierge picks up a sheet of paper and a pen and after thinking for a moment writes out the following checklist (using both English and Russian spellings of roads):

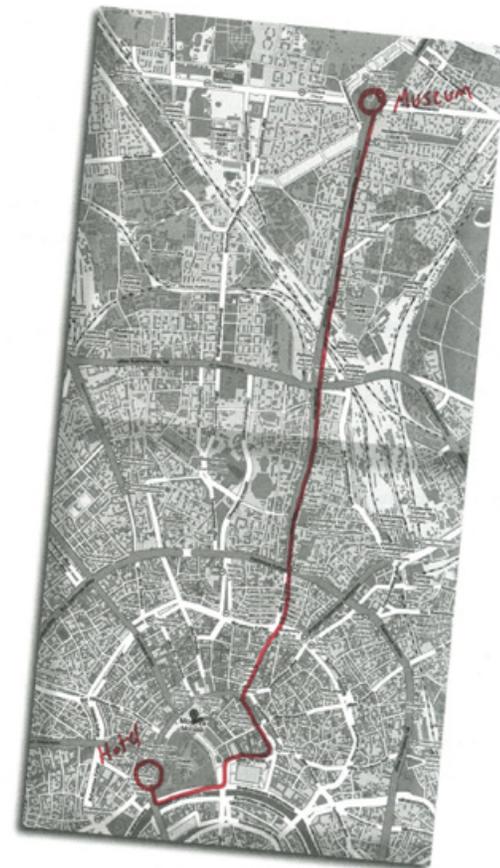
- ✓ Right on Mokhovaya Ulitsa
- ✓ Left on the Moscow River embankment, the Moskvoretskaya Naberezhnaya
- ✓ Left on Red Square road (Krasnaya Ploshchad)
- ✓ Right on Varvarka Ulitsa
- ✓ Left on Lubyanskiy Proyezd
- ✓ Right on Ulitsa Sretenka
- ✓ Cross the Garden Ring Road (Sadovoye Koltso)
- ✓ Continue on Prospekt Mira
- ✓ Pass Rizhskiy Voksal
- ✓ Continue on Prospekt Mira after it splits from Ostankinsky Proyezd
- ✓ Look for the Museum entrance on your left.

As he hands us the list he says, "Follow those instructions and you will reach the museum in just over two hours."

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Explanation option 3: **The Map**

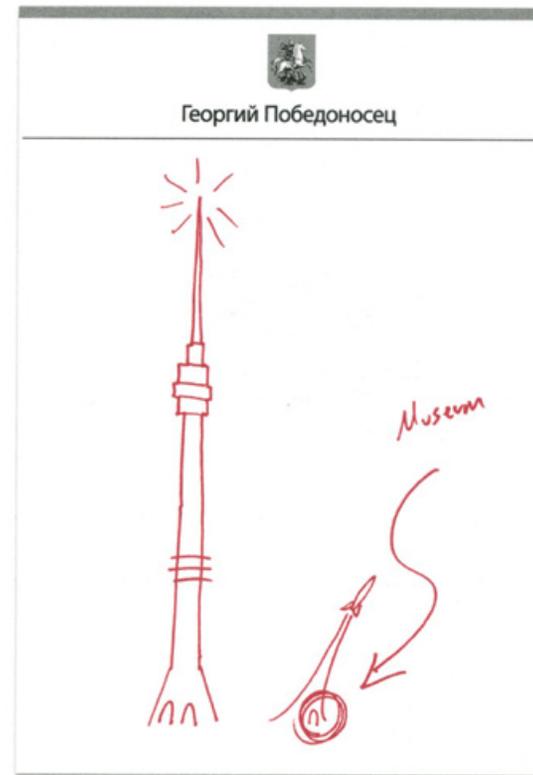
Here's another possibility. The concierge picks up a map of Moscow and draws a dot near the bottom. "That's where we are now." He then draws another dot at the top of the map, and connects the two with a line. "That's the museum." He hands us the map. "It should take about two hours".



Option 4: **The Landmark**

Here's our last option. The concierge picks up a pen, and on a sheet of hotel stationery draws a picture of two towers:

The hotel stationary approach ➡



He says, "When you step outside, you'll see this tower far off on your left. Walk that way. The museum is there."

Which way?

All four of these sets of directions are correct. Following any one of them should in theory get us to the Gagarin Museum in the same amount of time. But here's my question: I'd like you to look over the four options again, really think about it for a moment, and then ask yourself this: if we actually were in Moscow, which option would you prefer?

There is no right answer, but here is what I've seen:



Option 1: The Narrative

The narrative is fun to listen to, gives a lot of detail, and makes the trip sound interesting, but unless we've got an extraordinary memory, we will forget which way to go after the second turn. (This is a typical executive's speech.)

Option 2: The Checklist

The checklist is straightforward and easy to follow, but doesn't give us any overall sense of where we're going. As a linear series of steps we really have no idea where we're headed until we get there. As long as all the steps are correct and we follow them in precise order, we should be fine. But without broader context, if just one instruction is wrong or if we miss one, we'll be lost without any way of getting back on course. (This is the typical PowerPoint.)





Option 3: The Map

The map gives us a complete overall view of the entire city (all the context in the world) and a clear path to follow through it. It contains far more detail than we need, but as long as we don't lose the map itself we should be able to find our way no matter where we are—as long as we know where on the map we are. (This is what I call a “where” picture, and we're going to see—and make—a lot of these.)



Option 4: The Landmark Sketch

Lastly, the landmark approach seems absurdly terse, but gives us the best view of where we're going. It leaves it entirely up to us to choose our twists and turns along the way—but assuming that we're able to keep that goal in sight, offers the best assurance that we won't get lost. (This is what we're going to call a “vision” picture, and we're going to use lots of these as well.)

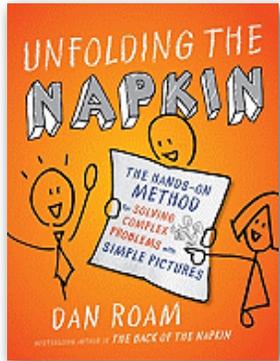
There is no right answer. It's how you react to the four options that gives this exercise its value. Your preference tells us a lot about yourself, about the way you like to solve problems, and about the best way for you to use visual thinking.

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Now that I've been diplomatic, I want to share with you my preference. I believe that for practical, business-oriented problem solving—when you and your team need to address something right in front of you right now, the visual options—the map and the landmark sketch are without question the way to go. The fact that we so rarely see these kinds of pictures used in business is why I write my books.

My new book, *Unfolding the Napkin*, is about why I believe in such pictures, why it is always worth the effort to create them when approaching a problem, how to create the right picture, and how to do it quickly.

I invite you to take a look—and see what you can see. 



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Dan Roam's [Unfolding the Napkin](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Roam is the founder of Digital Roam Inc, a management consulting company that helps business executives solve complex problems through visual thinking. Dan developed his understanding of the power of pictures as a business problem-solving tool when he founded Red Square Productions in Moscow in 1990, the first marketing communications company in the (then) Soviet Union. When he arrived in Russia, his lack of Russian language skills forced him to use his visual skills to share ideas with colleagues and clients, and that is when he began developing the visual thinking tools introduced in *The Back of the Napkin* and expanded upon in *Unfolding the Napkin*. He now lives in San Francisco.

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