

Visual Management for Libraries

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Take a quick look around your library. Is it bright and inviting? Is there a tangible sense of pride and institutional history? Do your co-workers appear energized and engaged? Is there a clear sense of purpose? If asked, can you easily produce the latest annual report? How about a list of current priorities and objectives? What about strategic goals? If your library has lost some of its drive and internal focus, Visual Management can help to realign staff with organizational mission and priorities. A visually dynamic workplace can eradicate information overload and replace it with a clear system of information exchange. Over time, it can re-engage employees, improve workflow, and stimulate innovation throughout the organization.

What is Visual Management?

According to Visual Management (VM) experts Stewart Liff and Pamela Posey, VM is a management system that adds “visual depth and consistency to an organization’s messages about its mission and goals.” It does this by “converting information about the company, its customers, and its performance into graphic displays which cannot be ignored.”¹

VM can take a variety of visual forms, including historical displays, information headquarters or “war rooms”, colorful banners, project boards, instructional posters, employee profiles, photographic exhibits, and digital signage. Visual management expands the scope of internal and external communication, engages employees, boosts performance, and brings an organization’s mission to life.

Evolution of Visual Management

The concept of VM did not develop overnight, and is by no means the latest “quick-fix” management solution. Rather, VM has developed incrementally since the 1980s, when modern management practices began to place increased emphasis on systems alignment, employee performance, and customer service. During that time, innovative corporate leaders, such as Colby Chandler at Kodak, Jim Adamson at NCR, and Jan Carlzon at SAS, emphasized robust internal communication - often creating innovative, visually intensive communication channels and devices. They experimented with centralized visual metrics and signage, aligned employees with creative internal publications, and reduced complicated corporate strategies to memorable catch phrases.² During this same period, Japanese Lean or 5S manufacturing principles were also gaining global notoriety. 5S introduced corporations to a new, systematic approach to workplace organization and efficiency through the implementation of lean and visual solutions.³ As Robert Hayes stated in his 1981 landmark article on Japanese factories, “The modern Japanese factory is not a prototype of the factory of the future . . . it is the factory of today running as it should.”⁴ Taken together, these management approaches slowly

coalesced over the past twenty years into the modern system of VM – a holistic and systemic approach to the improvement of individual and organizational performance through visual stimuli.

VM, Libraries & Change

If VM traces its roots to centralized communication, performance improvement, and lean manufacturing, how can it apply to modern libraries? The answer is quite simple: libraries are information factories. Through various production and service points, information is acquired, shared, and distributed to our customers. Some practical applications of VM in libraries include clarifying goals and objectives, aligning personnel, democratizing and simplifying information, energizing employees, building pride and ownership, and engaging customers.

Another exciting attribute of VM is its ability to support the integration and alignment of organizational systems, especially during times of change. As VM experts Liff and Posey note, “Visual management works in any well designed organization that is committed to aligning its operating systems and processes with its mission and goals, and it can be used to strengthen and support this alignment in organizations that are engaged in the design or redesign process.”⁵ As libraries continue to transition from analog to digital environments - from repositories of knowledge to active learning centers - management systems such as VM can help to realign our missions and personnel, and underscore our continuing institutional and societal value.

Getting Started with VM

So how do libraries implement VM and begin to align their mission, their workers, and their metrics? In their 2004 book *Seeing is Believing*, VM experts Liff and Posey relate six phases of actions that will help any organization successfully implement a VM strategy.⁶ These six phases can be synthesized into the following actions:

Phase 1 – Planning

- Review current vision, mission, and core value statements.
- Create a comprehensive timeline for implementing VM.
- Review available human, financial, and material resources.

Phase 2 – Build a Framework

- Educate workers on the principles and benefits of VM.
- Conduct an audit of current public and back-office workspaces.

Phase 3 – Create the Space

- Review current workflow and internal communication systems.
- Review current worker expectations, alignment, and performance.

Phase 4 – Focus on Customers and Data

- Place a visual emphasis on mission, public space, and customers.
- Place a visual emphasis on internal data and displays.

- Celebrate VM improvements and victories as they take hold.

Phase 5 – Focus on Employees

- Recognize and celebrate employee performance.
- Fine-tune all visual data and displays.

Phase 6 – Constantly Renew and Revitalize the Process

Over the past ten years, a number of very good books and articles have been published on the benefits of VM. As expected, many of these have appeared in the fields of manufacturing and organizational management. Several publications, however, have focused on applying VM principles to medical, government, and educational environments. In her 2007 article on VM in healthcare organizations, author Zoe Packman illustrated how implementing a variety of VM strategies improved hospital ward efficiency and patient satisfaction in the United Kingdom. In a similar 2012 article, government consultant Stewart Liff discussed the measureable benefits of VM when applied to regional offices within the United States Department of Veterans' Affairs.⁷

The Potential of VM in Your Library

After becoming familiar with the basic literature on Visual Management, take a good look at the following public and back-office spaces within your library:

1. Main Lobby
2. Circulation Desk/Area
3. Conference Rooms
4. Staff Break Room
5. Exhibition Spaces
6. Public Reading Rooms
7. Group Study Rooms

Do you see work or service areas that are sterile, unwelcoming, or confusing? Is the mission of the library evident? Do you see outdated furnishings and color schemes? Is there a visible sense of pride or organizational history? Are current goals and objectives being visibly communicated? Are employees or volunteers being recognized or celebrated by the library?

Take note of areas of dissatisfaction, and make change a priority. Begin by identifying what is missing or unclear, then consult fellow staff and volunteers to create innovative visual solutions for the following types of questions:

- How can the mission and core values of the organization be visually articulated to staff and patrons alike? Would a permanent display of institutional history achieve this? How about a creative photographic display or lobby banner?

- Can current goals and objectives be more clearly communicated and centralized? Can a high-traffic staff area, such as a meeting room or break room, serve as a headquarters for posting library metrics and project updates? Shared information could include monthly circulation and

gate counts, new databases, graphic identity plans, quarterly budget expenditures, board meeting minutes, grant and project updates, annual reports and statistics, strategic plans, fundraising achievements, and consortium newsletters.

- How can staff and volunteers be publically acknowledged for their ongoing contributions and expertise? Can staff and volunteers be featured on trading cards, posters, or public displays? Can employee training, conference participation, and professional awards be visually recognized and celebrated?

Leading By Example

The power of VM is often best expressed through examples. Many of the resources cited above are packed with descriptions and photographs of creative and inspiring VM solutions. Some illustrate centralized and transparent communication, while others highlight core mission, values, and institutional pride. Galleries of additional VM examples can be found on the web by visiting the Visual Management Blog, or by Google Image searching the phrases “visual management boards” and “visual management workplace.”⁸

While often not formally recognized as VM solutions, many examples of VM are already being practiced by academic and public libraries. The University of Virginia Library and Chicago Public Library have produced a host of visually engaging annual reports over the past several years.⁹ These reports are widely distributed to internal and external audiences, and stand out as visual celebrations of the mission, values, and achievements of the two library systems.

Organizational history is another area in which libraries have already implemented numerous VM solutions. Many public, academic, and special libraries have constructed permanent historical displays that instill a sense of personal identification and institutional pride among staff, volunteers, and patrons alike. One such example can be found at Franklin and Marshall College. In 2009, the college library worked closely with a talented alumnus to create a visual “timeline of history” throughout the campus. The first phase included a number of permanent historical installations in the college library showcasing major donors, former library buildings, and unique collections.¹⁰

Intranets, Social Media and VM

Given the evidence so far, it may appear VM solutions apply only to print materials and physical environments. However, as libraries increasingly embrace digital forms of workflow and communication, a variety of “virtual” VM solutions continue to emerge. Many organizations now rely heavily on some type of intranet or cloud-based internal communications system. Popular collaboration suites such as Google Apps, Zimbra, and Office 365, offer centralized email, calendaring, document sharing, and videoconferencing – all features that lend themselves to achieving the basic goals of VM – expanding the scope of internal and external communication while engaging and aligning employees in new ways.

Organizational blogs, wikis, and websites can also act as virtual “war rooms,” offering a variety of new VM solutions. In his 2012 book, *Managing Social Media in Libraries*, author Troy Swanson discusses the many benefits of internal blogs and wikis. These include capturing,

sharing, and stockpiling internal knowledge; facilitating collaboration; spurring innovation; and increasing visibility. As Swanson notes,

“Wikis are extremely useful for organizing and editing policies and procedures online. Wikis can be hidden behind a password so they are not open to the public. They are easily edited so they can be updated over time. The fact that they live online means there is no worry about which version is current or where the file is located on someone’s hard drive. Additionally, formal policies can be given context by being placed next to guidelines, best practices, or a bit of history.”¹¹

Additional VM opportunities also lie with many popular forms of social media. As social media becomes increasingly visual, platforms such as Pinterest, Instagram, and Vine can afford organizations new ways to communicate with staff and patrons. In a recent column on digital marketing for the hotel industry, author Adam Leposa noted, “As with many social media platforms, hotels can build a strong reputation on visual-dominated social media by involving their guests in a new sense of community.” As one example, the author cites a recent online art event that was created by a hotel and its customers using Instagram.¹² Recent articles in *American Libraries* and *Public Libraries Online* also discuss creative applications of both Pinterest and Vine in a selection of academic and public libraries.¹³ As popular social media platforms continue to develop and emphasize visual content, a host of new VM opportunities will present themselves to library organizations.

Going Visual

Visual Management is much more than centralized internal communications, updated physical environments, and “visual solutions.” It is a system designed to stimulate the eyes as well as the soul. VM improves both the physical and emotional workplace environment, reinforcing (and often times re-establishing) a culture of dedication and commitment.

Through VM, employees are able to understand how their work relates to the larger picture. By centralizing and sharing information, employees see how organizational goals and objectives fit together. Over time, this builds trust, and employees at all levels feel included and connected. This active and positive culture translates into increased productivity, organizational pride, creative problem solving, and improved customer service.

Consider “going visual” by implementing a VM system in your library. As Robert Hayes observed with his study of Japanese factories, you may discover that VM “is not a prototype of the library of the future . . . it is the library of today running as it should.”¹⁴

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¹⁴ Hayes, 57.

Published: May 2014