

THE VISUALIZ

JAY SMETHURST'S
CONCEPT- AND DATA-
DRIVEN ILLUSTRATIONS
ENTICE ATTENDEES TO
THINK DIFFERENTLY.

BY LISA HEFFERNAN

EP



ILLUSTRATION BY JAY SMETHURST AND CHRISTOPHER FULLER

“HE MAKES THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

and helps organizations engage the unengaged,” says Sue Herzkowitz-Coore, CSP, a motivational speaker and CEO of High Impact Presentations.

Tell the story of a meeting or conference session graphically, integrating visuals with important content from speakers and group discussions, and engross attendees in the process. As co-founder of Illumination Galleries, that’s Jay Smethurst’s goal.



“W

hat we’ve found is that, by and large, people listen to the presenter more carefully when watching us draw because they’re trying to compare what we’re capturing to what they’re hearing,” Smethurst says. “So they get more out of it, because it adds to the dialogue between speaker and listener.”

The resulting illustrations, known as “IdeaBoards,” are then installed into a special “gallery.”

With the appearance of a museum exhibit and the activity of Socrates’ marketplace, Illumination Galleries transforms a lobby or foyer into a one-of-a-kind gallery that becomes the interactive hub of a symposium.

“The area outside the ballroom has been woefully underused and the interactions people have with other attendees are sometimes more important than what they’re hearing from the presenters themselves,” Smethurst notes. “In the gallery spaces we build, people interact with the illustrations and other attendees, reinforcing their understanding of the material and maximizing the conference’s water cooler time.”

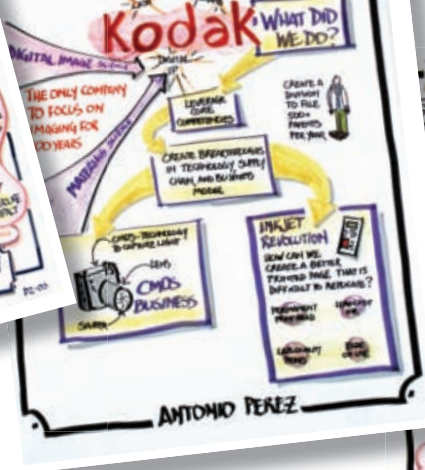
Having recently joined MPI, Smethurst has already connected with new clients and remains undaunted by the current economic crisis—he doesn’t believe it will have any lasting effect on Illumination Galleries.

“Meetings will continue, and people

will need to get more and more out of them,” Smethurst says. “We help businesses do that—get the most return out of every dollar they spend on the rest of their conference by helping participants engage and interact. And by making our clients’ meetings unforgettably useful and valuable, we’ll be helpful in any economic climate.”

GET GOING

“When I was young, a teacher criticized me for drawing a river that was brown, and



trees that were gray,” Smethurst remembers, laughing. “Trees are always brown and water’s always blue, and that’s that.”

Drawing hasn’t always been one of his strong points, but perhaps Smethurst’s grade school teacher didn’t recognize his underlying creativity—not only is he the lead illustrator for Illumination Galleries, he’s also the co-founder, managing partner and head of business development for the company.

Majoring in the arts at the University of Virginia, with emphasis in history and French literature, Smethurst never thought he would get into the business world.

“My parents were teachers, so I didn’t really have any experience with the business world,” Jay recalls. “My image of business basically involved wearing suits a lot.”

It wasn’t until Smethurst was looking for work in South Carolina that he started thinking about business as an innovative and creative process. While there, he met Bryan Coffman, and through fate and fortune the two ended up illustrating and writing for the same consulting firm before starting their own company, Sente Corp., in Orlando, Fla., which specializes in facilitated visual and strategic modeling for companies and conferences.

“Jay’s the sort of person that you immediately trust upon meeting, and that’s

CONTINUED ON PAGE 100



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 84

invaluable in our business,” Coffman says. “He calmly works out whatever problem is at hand so everyone can relax.”

In the Asian game Go, “sente” means to take initiative, forcing the opponent to follow-up—a good philosophy for entrepreneurs to follow.

“Bryan introduced me to Go, and we played a bit—until I started winning,” Smethurst jokes. “Go is a metaphor about market share—the goal is to surround more territory than your opponent, not to destroy the opposition. We settled on ‘Sente’ because the philosophy behind Go very much reflects our own.”

Vice president and co-owner of Sente, Smethurst is possessed by a hungry entrepreneurial spirit and spends about half his time in a consulting role, sometimes for InnovationLabs, a company he started in 2001

with four partners, including Coffman, that boasts clients such as Yahoo, Stanford University and NASA. And while Sente Corp. concentrates more on graphics and illustration work, InnovationLabs focuses on the strategic aspects of collaboration, facilitation and innovation.

When one of Smethurst’s clients asked if Sente could do the visual note taking for a conference, sans the consulting, the idea for Illumination Galleries was born. A joint service offered by Sente Corp. and White Oaks Design, Illumination Galleries goes beyond graphic facilitation to make storybooks of conferences that unfold as meetings progress.

Two or three illustrators are usually strategically placed in the conference rooms to visually record key points in real time. Using pencils, paints and architectural markers on

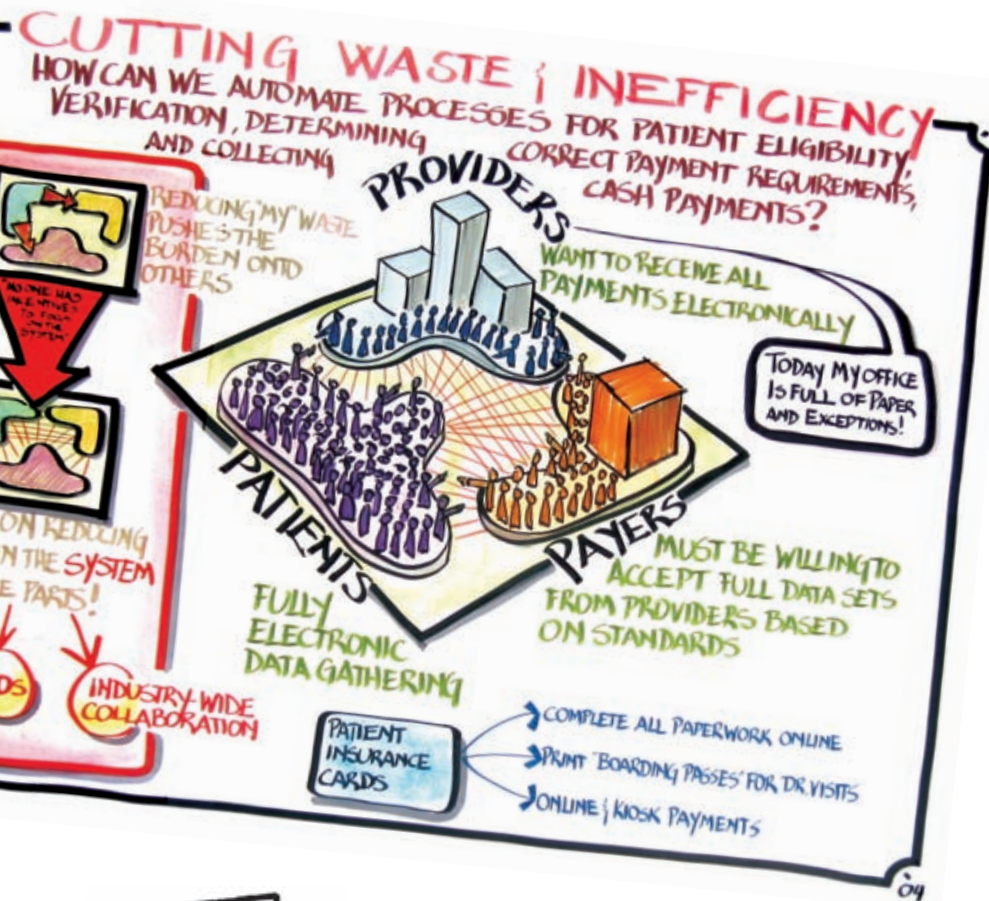
foam boards, the illustrators create the IdeaBoards. As the colorful IdeaBoards are completed, each is photographed for post-event use on Web sites or notecards (Hershkowitz-Coore sent postcards of an IdeaBoard from one of her presentations to her entire contact list) before being brought into the gallery—often the foyer in hotel settings.

Chad Hostetler, co-founder of Illumination Galleries and president of White Oaks Design, focuses on the design and implementation of the physical galleries, usually designed in relation to the space itself—from serpentine to block, structural or wallside layouts. And Hostetler draws inspiration from art exhibits, including the striking, if controversial, Bodies exhibition, for design inspiration.

“I’m influenced by just about every exhibit I see,” Hostetler says. “I really enjoy studying how people interact with information, and I do a lot of observation to understand how people behave in different environments—like where they look when they first walk into a room. We regularly use principles from many disciplines such as retail design, marketing, educational exhibitions and way finding.”

Smethurst and his team of illustrators have worked on IdeaBoards for clients such as Credit Suisse, Legg Mason and VF Corp., which includes brands such as Nautica, Lee Jeans and The North Face. Covering topics as diverse as healthcare, climate change, investing, fashion and even the psychology of ant colonies, the illustrators are more than able to satisfy their own intellectual curiosities. And clients seem to appreciate how adept they are at selecting what’s important in any field, while using insight and humor to tell the story.





FASCINATION AND THE FUTURE

“By working with us, our clients can learn to see the board in new ways that will allow them to play their game of business with initiative,” Smethurst says.

Michael Mauboussin, chief investment strategist for Legg Mason Capital Management, saw Sente’s graphic facilitation in action a decade ago at an Ernst & Young conference.

“I was amazed at how much they added to the experience,” Mauboussin says. “I arranged for them to join one of my conferences in 1999, and we’ve worked together ever since.”

Some of the most interesting topics Smethurst has covered stem from the Santa Fe Institute, a multidisciplinary research laboratory that has helped Legg Mason perfect its investment philosophy. Mauboussin is also a member of the board of trustees for the institute, which studies complex systems theory (e.g., how ecosystems work and how that compares to the

way the stock market works). Legg Mason’s annual Thought Leader Forum has covered areas such as risk-taking in horse bets, the mysterious workings of beehives and one of Smethurst’s favorite topics, how the brain works.

“Michael is a fascinating guy that’s really excited about ideas,” Smethurst remarks. “He brings in speakers to talk about how the brain works in times of stress and connects this to how people make decisions through his investment process. It’s really fun to draw these IdeaBoards about the brain, and they really challenge us because the scientists put up functional MRIs (brain scans) and we have to refer to them.”

And Mauboussin values the high level of engagement from Smethurst and Illumination Galleries’ other illustrators.

“It’s really refreshing to work with folks who are so intellectually engaged,” Mauboussin says. “They’re not just doing a job, they’re participating in a learning process—greatly enhancing it along the way. And by having their works exhibited

⊕ Plus Point

When not illustrating corporate concepts, Jay Smethurst, along with his wife Kristen, a physician assistant, spends quality time with almost-2-year-old daughter Emme—playing at the pool, going to the library and finding new parks to explore.

in common areas, they turn coffee breaks into intellectual jam sessions.”

The gallery is also becoming increasingly interactive, and Smethurst says it is now being thought of as an “interaction lounge” where participants can sit and have discussions.

“We’re thinking about building places where people not only exchange ideas, but respond to questions, answer challenges and puzzles related to the content of the sessions and post content with their ideas and suggestions,” Smethurst says.

Aside from ever-increasing interactivity in the lobby, the future may also include digital drawing tools for the illustrators. Drawing on screen allows for immediate digitization, but using a digital camera to capture the IdeaBoards imagery works well in the meantime. One area that won’t likely change, however, is the company’s client base.

Yet, Smethurst has ventured into odd territory before—Coffman says a Fortune 500 company CEO asked Smethurst to draw an IdeaBoard for his wedding to show the paths that the CEO and his bride had taken in life to finally meet. Illumination Galleries was working a major conference at the time—and the CEO needed the IdeaBoard within two days—so Jay worked late and, with Hostetler’s help, the framed illustrations arrived in time for the wedding reception.

“We’ve actually been asked to do children’s parties,” Smethurst remarks, laughing. “But we’d rather focus on non-profits and big corporate meetings with critical messages and important things for people to learn.” **one+**

LISA HEFFERNAN is a freelance writer based in New York.