

# The power of visual thinking

Go diagrammatical and reap the dividends, writes **Kevin Duncan**

Even expert consultants find it hard to express ideas and solve problems purely with words. Those whose job it is to convey messages quickly and simply – and that means most modern professionals – will usually find it easier to use diagrams. The diagram is a form of visual thinking. It can help distil analyses, hone marketing strategies and identify important points – vital tools of the successful marketer.

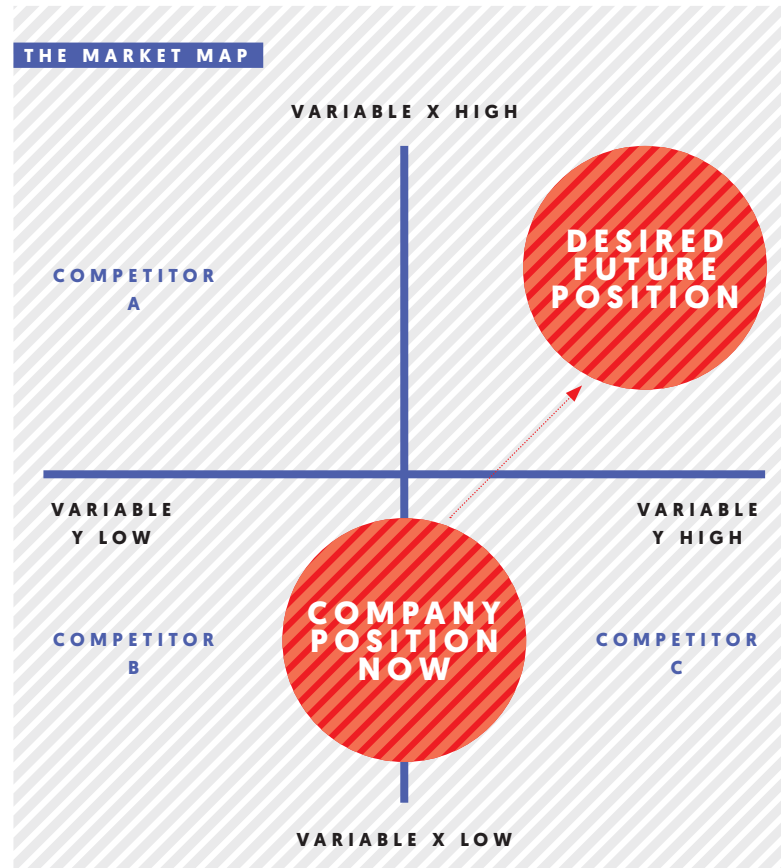
Here are seven of the most popular and useful diagrams that can help marketers convey their views, express them pithily, and get to the point fast – which can mean the difference between winning new business and losing it.

## The Market Map

The Market Map (right) is a highly effective and flexible way of establishing clarity and strategic authority when looking at any market. Start by selecting two important factors in the market in question. For example, in the automotive market, these might be price and safety reputation. Plot two overlapping axes from high to low, always placing the high ends to the top and right.

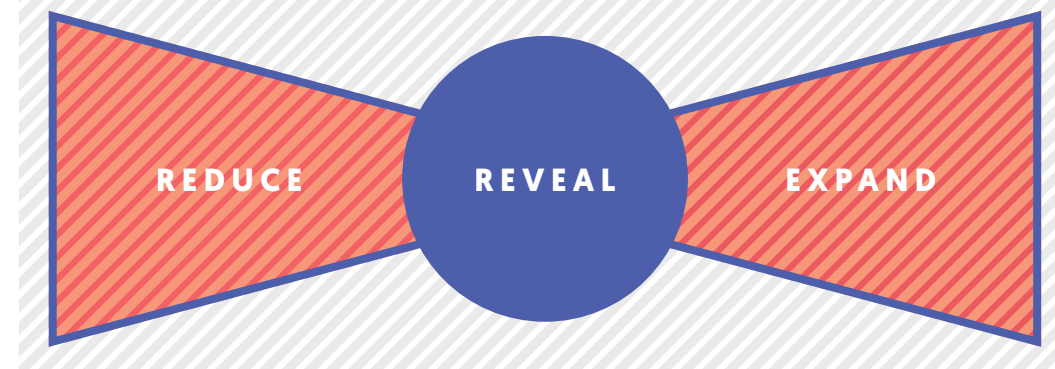
Place your company, and any competitors, on the grid. So, in this example, a car with a good safety reputation and a high price would appear top right. Use the results to identify any gaps in the market, or significant overlaps. Being out on your own could be a good thing (more distinctive) or a bad thing (what do the others know that you don't?).

If you are presenting to win a pitch, pointing out some current deficiencies and explaining how your proposals will improve matters (moving towards the top right) can be very powerful.



**Exercise** Select a market or category to look at. Choose your first two variables. Place your company or brand, and competitors, on the grid. Repeat with different variables and new combinations. Examine the results, identifying where opportunities lie.

## THE BOW TIE



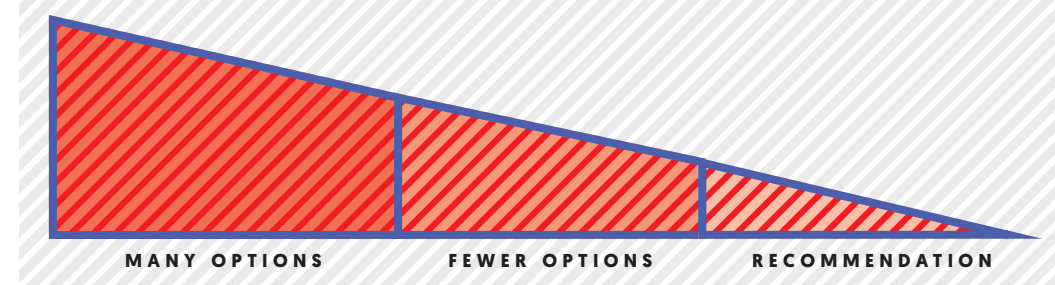
## The Whittling Wedge

The Whittling Wedge (below) is perfect for telling a strategic story and narrowing down options. This allows the presenter to explain their workings, show that a lot was considered, but still end with a clear, preferably single, recommendation. Starting on the left, many options can be introduced, analysed, and then systematically rejected, using as much rationale and detail as is appropriate to the subject.

By the middle of the wedge, we should be down to a maximum of three or four possibilities. These can be analysed more closely, or even recommended for detailed research. Finally, the presenter arrives on the right with a beautifully argued recommendation that has covered all considerations.

**Exercise** Choose a presentation or story that needs explaining, ideally one with quite a few options or wide-ranging subject matter. Use the Whittling Wedge to start broad, and then reduce the number of options or topics.

## THE WHITTling WEDGE



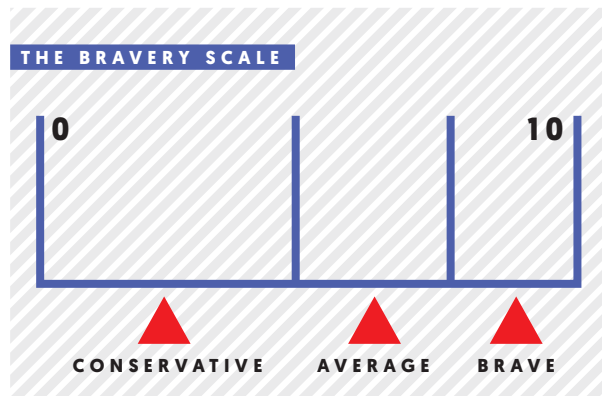
## The Bow Tie

The Bow Tie (above) is a close relative of the Whittling Wedge. It is an extremely simple depiction of how to tell an effective strategic story. The line of argument flows from left to right. Starting broadly on the left, many wide options and possibilities are considered and discussed.

After investigation and analysis, these are gradually ruled out and reduced down. When the reduction of options is complete, the central idea, thought or theme is revealed. After pausing for a moment to consider the quality of what has been revealed, the idea is expanded out again to explain all its possible applications. This is the ideal way to tell a strategic story.

**Exercise** Choose a strategy or rationale that requires explaining in a presentation. Use the Bow Tie as a template. Start broad, explain how options were reduced down, reveal the central theme, and then expand on how it could be applied in many contexts.

**A diagram can help distil analyses and hone marketing strategies**



### ► The Bravery Scale

The Bravery Scale (above) is a good way of establishing how adventurous projects or proposals should be before a lot of time and effort is spent preparing them. The project leader or proposal writer asks three questions:

- 1 How adventurous is the company culture?
- 2 What standards are expected?
- 3 How brave should the targets be?

A score out of ten is generated to see whether conservative (below 5), average (5-7), or brave (above 7) levels are desired. The scores can be blended to create one overall figure. For example, a conservative company asking for brave work may need to have its scale weighted downward to reflect its overall conservatism.

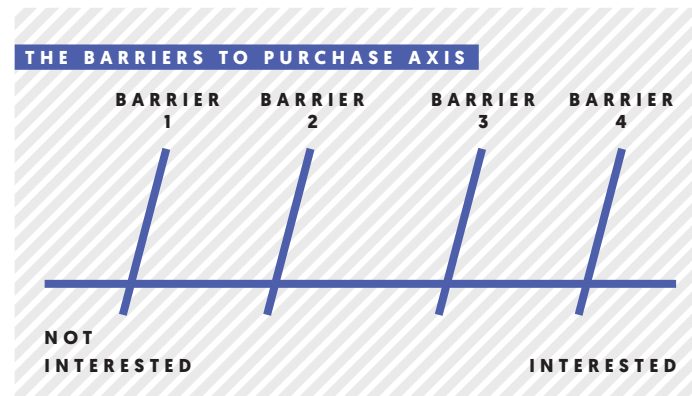
The three questions can be varied to suit the nature of the work. When the work is reaching its conclusion, the scale helps to remind all present what level of bravery was requested in the first place, and provides a measure with which to compare. The scale is particularly useful to both sides in a service relationship such as a client and agency, where the bravery of work is frequently under discussion.

**Exercise** Choose a client or proposal. Consider what questions would provide the most helpful guide. Ask the person or team receiving the proposal to answer them. Use the responses to inform colleagues who are working on the proposal of what is expected. Judge the ideas against the scale before deciding which to present and use the scale to frame expectations when presenting.

### The Barriers to Purchase Axis

Lines and axes can be helpful to demonstrate a progression from one state of affairs to another. With the Barriers To Purchase Axis, inactivity or disinterest is shown on the left, and interest or action on the right.

Each notch of the axis represents a barrier to action, in this case a series of reasons why the potential customer will not purchase a product.



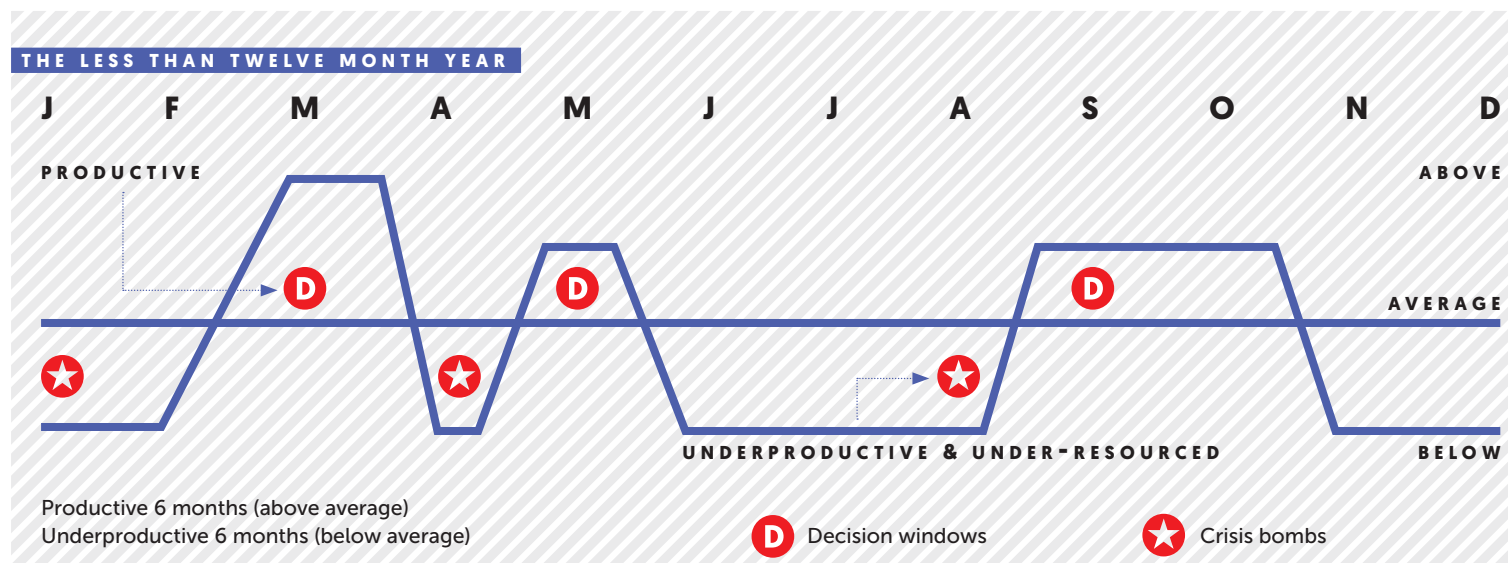
By mapping the decision-making process diagrammatically, each barrier to purchase can be identified and isolated. A plan to knock down each one can then be devised.

**Exercise** Choose a product and a potential customer type. Use the axis to plot all the reasons stopping someone from purchasing. If relevant, put the barriers to purchase in chronological order, or place the biggest or hardest ones first, to the far left. Then come up with a plan to knock down each barrier.

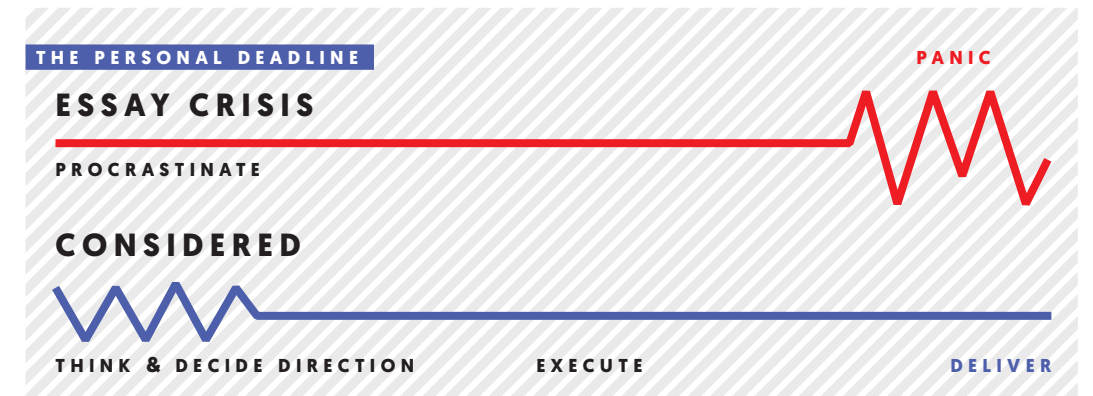
### The Less Than Twelve Month Year

The Less Than Twelve Month Year is a diagram (below) that makes a philosophical point about activity, or the lack of it at certain times, in companies. On the surface, businesses are active for 12 months a year, but in truth there are plenty of periods during which they are not very productive, and this diagram helps work out when those times are likely to be.

Businesses have different rhythms, but in this typical example the most productive –



**A 12-month year is almost always 'shorter' than you think**



above average – periods are in March, May and September. In these 'decision windows', every important decision maker is present, things get decided, and done.

From time to time, 'crisis bombs' go off – unexpected developments that are unhelpful (in this example, this happens in January, April and August). They deflect the company from its normal work, making its performance below average.

By looking at the pattern of previous years, most of these events can be predicted and allowed for. Often this tallies with simple holiday patterns, but not always. Viewing the year in this way usually shows that the '12-month year' is almost always 'shorter' than you think.

**Exercise** Consider the year ahead. Predict the likely highly productive periods, and the unproductive ones. If necessary, predict when the decision windows and crisis bombs will occur. Now add up the truly productive months and consider reviewing any forecasts and resource planning you have undertaken.

### The Personal Deadline

The Personal Deadline (above) examines the problem that most people leave it too late to start a task. For most people, this was a bad habit they acquired at college when faced with a deadline for handing in an essay or dissertation.

Common sense suggests that a measured approach over the time available would yield a less stressed run-up and a higher quality result, but human nature dictates otherwise and many leave everything to the last minute. This timeline helps to focus the mind on the task ahead while there is still plenty of time.

The considered line shows that it pays to examine as much of the material and as many of the important issues as early as possible. Once direction is decided, then orderly execution of the work can be embarked on, with completion being achieved smoothly. The idea is to avoid an 'essay crisis' in which the thinking phase is left too late and hasty work is crammed in at the very end under unnecessary time pressure. The cliché "I work better under pressure" is both false and misleading.

**Exercise** Choose a project with a known deadline, preferably no less than one week away. Work backwards from the due date to work out how much effort will be needed to complete it. Decide direction immediately, or no later than tomorrow. Initiate the execution in an orderly fashion over the remaining time. ●

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### Further reading

*The Diagrams Book*, by Kevin Duncan, contains 50 ways to solve any problem visually. A bestseller, it has been translated into Japanese, Chinese, Korean, German, and Spanish. Further editions have been agreed in Russian, Thai, Portuguese, Swedish and Hungarian

**The Bravery Scale is useful to both sides in a service relationship**