

PASSION FOR VISIMAP

What Our Customers Taught Us

Companies want to know what their customers really think of their products and how they use them. More often than not, they survey them with a series of set questions in multiple choice format. CoCo Systems and its distribution partner, Dynamic Thinking, decided to go a simpler and more direct route to learn more about customer satisfaction with their VisiMap software.

VisiMap falls into the classification of visual mapping software, also popularly known as mind mapping software. Mind mapping is the name given to the concept by popular writer and speaker, Tony Buzan. Buzan's early books on mind mapping stressed its value as a memory tool – keeping ideas in the brain. A later book, co-written with his brother Barry, included insights on its use in getting ideas out of the brain and on to the page.

My own introduction to the concept occurred about 15 years ago, even though mind mapping had been around since the seventies. At the time of certification as a trainer in mind mapping in 1994, I encountered a cumbersome DOS software version and immediately knew that there had to be something better – and there was. I discovered VisiMap, the first visual mapping software written for the Windows platform.

Visual mapping software presents ideas in a tree structure radiating from a central core. Branches can be expanded indefinitely and can be enhanced by colours and images and linked to virtually anything in a file format. As software development has progressed, designers have added a multiplicity of functions without necessarily thinking about whether these are valued or even used. We were far more interested in benefits than features. So we asked our customers:

How has using VisiMap changed or improved your work or your life?

We weren't really prepared for the flood of almost immediate responses. I was tempted to wonder, "Don't these people have jobs?" But what was clear was huge enthusiasm and commitment. These were really nice people "Thanks for asking", said Mike O'Sullivan of Adept, a UK based training and consultancy firm, as though we were doing him a personal favour.

We also weren't prepared for how long the responses kept coming in. Some people took the time to write quite detailed thoughtful answers. Some, like Alan Williams, the director of Cerulean Visions Limited, a UK based consulting firm, even sent us comments in map format. There were entertaining stories and a highly credible response rate.

Users come from everywhere. South Africans mingle with Americans, New Zealanders, Danes, Australians and Canadians. Their job titles are eclectic. We were not surprised by a large number of consultants. We were more interested that users were also from fields like the military, human resources, litigation law, event management, the priesthood, university administration, film making, medicine, marine day charters and construction. One simply offered "mind-mapping junkie" as a job title. What united all of them was the need to create, refine and organize ideas and information.

And use VisiMap they did – for many things I had already thought of, but many that hadn't ever crossed my mind. These are some of the many uses that our customers describe.

Getting ideas out of one's head and on to the screen is still probably the most preferred use. Phrases like “dumping a jungle of issues and problems” “brainstorming”, “free flow of ideas” “personal problems and issues” suggested that users simply like to start with a central topic and let the ideas flow without judging them. “To be critical at the same time as I absorb new information creates bias before I can appreciate the value of new ideas”, observes South African consultant, Armand Kruger. The fact that one can simply start typing and get things down is liberating. “I can lay out ideas without worrying about layout or presentation”, one respondent said. “I can add new thoughts as fast as I can type”, said another.

Users have realized consciously or unconsciously that they can take advantage of the way the brain actually works and processes information. In his important research of thinking preferences and its relation to creativity, Ned Herrmann estimated that at least 25% of the population prefers to look at the big picture right from the beginning. Visual mapping tools recognize that not all people prefer to think in linear mode, - and then supports them in allowing their initial approach to a subject to flow freely.

But that's just the starting point. Once users can see what the ideas are, they naturally move on to refine them. Phrases like “ordering thoughts” “refining ideas”, “defining scope” “culling from the many” “organizing” “seeing relationships” “reducing complexity” all suggest active minds at work. “I find VisiMap a useful tool to lay out visually all the ideas that could be in a film (usually far too many to include) then sorting and culling, trying different combinations of ideas until robust patterns are identified to suggest the story arc,” observes Peter Shepherd. The benefit is simplicity. When items are all on the same page, it is easier to see what one is thinking.

Users identified work related benefits that show consistent patterns.

Article writers like Jim Rait like to list the main points and expand on them. When the article exceeds its limit, it is also easier to contract the copy to respond to the original main points. Other writers of books and doctoral theses like to “map the big ideas and then hang random thoughts on appropriate branches”. At that point it is possible to switch to outline mode and flesh out the ideas with ease. One writer drafted an entire novel this way.

VisiMap also offers advantages for less literary writing, such as proposals.

“I can check that the proposal contains the essential information and that it focuses on and directly responds to client needs”, a respondent observes. There is an excellent chance he got the job. Roy Strodl, a skills development consultant, has written a number of articles and contributed to various planning textbooks, all of which were outlined and then the first draft was written using VisiMap. He says, “I love the ability of being able to move the structure of the document around, which is very hard to do once the document is in Word”. Neil Botten, managing consultant at NAB Associates, and principal lecturer in strategic management at Westminster Business School says “VisiMap has been invaluable in mapping out a number of books and other publications prior to writing fairly large commissions for my publishers.”

Speech writing is a related use. “It's easy to build a structure and change it easily,” one user said. A parish priest has to preach on assigned readings; he looks carefully for common themes, identifies three key ones and expands upon them. One senses that his listeners will

hear something coherent that they can take away. "As an occasional speaker at public conferences, I have found VisiMap invaluable in ordering and organizing the content of a piece," said Ray Currie, of Towerhouse Training Limited. "Not only does it summarize and link the content that I have identified to date, but it also prompts memory and imagination." His contention is borne out by recent brain research.

When the map is completed it also provides an interface for a speech or address, - a better tool than a text for a speaker who knows his content and can make eye contact with his audience rather than bury his face in a printed sheet. One user summarizes it well by noting VisiMap's ability to "shape communication".

Once a map exists, many users find VisiMap a useful way to move forward. "Onsite minute taking" and "planning agendas" get frequent mentions. "Sharing first drafts with users allow for virtual brainstorming", commented a user. "Seeing the range of complexity reduces tension", said another. Other users note visual maps' ability to "establish and maintain an overview", essential when multiple concerns and details tend to cloud the big picture. Maps are a useful way to maintain status reports. "Recording phone calls" is another way to keep the record straight.

Organizing one's work and one's life sparked many responses. "I use it for job analysis and see the relationship of tasks", says Kathryn McKee, the co-author of *Leading People Through Disasters*, who first learned about the software when working for Standard Chartered Bank as a Human Resources executive. She should know because she experienced and had to deal with six disasters in seven years.

Glen Hammond, a Manitoba based college instructor uses VisiMap to summarize ideas for a fast review before teaching. Another user creates a mini portal for access to other documents on his company network and the web. The ability to create "hyperlinks to frequently used sources" is one of VisiMap's strengths. A daily task list developed by another user indicates both the number of tasks and their relationships. Such use allows one to streamline work in chunks and groupings, a decidedly more effective use of time. One used VisiMap "for setting up and planning a new business". Dafydd Lewis has used it to document the McKinsey Seven S framework.

David Hodgson's family benefits from great holidays and he described the process in entertaining detail:

"VisiMap was extremely helpful in planning our family vacation. Each family member had their own ideas of what they wanted to do and who they wanted to see. Matching up the people and places with the available dates allowed us to create a full colour-coded itinerary that included all the trips on planes, car rentals, ferries and public transit. We even used it to plan out the luggage and carry-on! Not only that but once we had our trip mostly sorted out, then we realised that we had still more planning to take care of the pets left behind, house-sitting and a myriad of other details when you take a break and go away for over two weeks.

A large part of enjoying a vacation is the anticipation before you go. Using VisiMap early on allowed us to have everything possible planned out so well in advance that for once we spent much more time thinking about the fun times we were going to have instead of scrambling around right up to the last minute. We took the coloured VisiMap printouts with us and had a

great time “checking off” everything we did as we went along. It became our own special kind of travel “map”.

Ebbe Berg of Denmark wrote a 200 page marketing website, www.marketingsite.dk and a book, *fra outlook til insight*, and used VisiMap to control and keep an overview. After brainstorming, Bob Daintree uses VisiMap to organize “the actions, impacts, consequences, responsibilities, order, priority, follow up and the required outputs. He can then sort the entered items by “time, priorities and responsibilities”. He also likes the ability “to export to Word and then flesh out the various headings and paragraphs with more detail”.

He’s not the only exporter. One user likes to export his private brainstorming to Outlook. Another, who wisely recognizes that not all his colleagues think the way he does, “restructures by moving to a linear format for left brainers”. A popular use is export to project management software, which has particular strengths in assigning resources and timelines. But VisiMap is better suited to “breaking down work before export”. Another user “by accident created a Power Point presentation”. It raises a question for all of us as to whether we ever use the full capability of software. Accidents sometimes have happy endings.

While it was less frequently mentioned, the use of visual mapping to help retain information is still cited. One noted its ability to “boost recall”. “Studying” is an obvious choice especially since mapping keeps the mind and body active and allows one to commit main points to memory. Patricia Romain, now a training manager and County Verifier for St. John’s Ambulance in Kent, first used VisiMap when studying for her degree in Psychology. Dr. Steve Tanner used it to structure and compile his doctoral thesis. One user cited its value to himself as a person with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. VisMap helps him because it “aids recall”, and “assists in prioritizing of priorities and tasks” and “scanning”. These are things that are useful to us all. They can be especially valuable to young students who have trouble paying attention, and I have had personal success in coaching them in the use of visual mapping.

In a world of information overload, our ultimate responsibility is to make wise decisions. Time after time users confirmed the value of VisiMap in this respect. “Seeing the options” allowed one user to “move around the organizational units and positions” in a critical reorganization. VisiMap helped in difficult decisions like “changing jobs” and “moving” and “selling the house”. Once decisions are made its also possible to “record decisions and actions” From initial brainstorm to important action, VisiMap acts as a companion.

In summing up, users confirmed its value. “VisiMap is my right hand”, says John Mackenzie. “It’s a rabbit out of the hat tool” says Steve Newton. “I like the fact that you can get something reasonable from VisiMap in small time slots, - you don’t have to set aside hours, - minutes will do,” says Tom McKenzie, Business Development Manager at Unigena. Jim Rait adds “I think mind mapping in general and VisiMap in particular is a creativity support tool par excellence that can also integrate into the other tools very easily and yes... SIMPLICITY is the key... the KISS principle writ large!

“It’s friendly to the hand and to the mind”, says Fabian Acosta. He also notes, “As a former practicing trial lawyer this is the best litigation tool I have seen including the ones that cost thousands of dollars.” “You can export it for people who hate mind maps and avoid death by Powerpoint”, observes another user. “It means I get better solutions/outputs with a lot less stress”, says Alec Webster, General Manager New Zealand for Opus International

Consultants Ltd. “As a computer consultant, particularly doing strategic IT planning, package selection and implementation, VisiMap is an essential tool for me and has saved me at least 25% time on some jobs,” says New Zealand computer professional, Chris Bridgman. In off hours, one user even uses VisiMap to plot “chess moves”.

Were there some good additional tips? “You can save iterations – and use earlier versions if later ones fail” observes one user. “It’s quicker than PERT and GANTT”, says Pennie Evans, Director of Integra Training Limited. “The notes area is a reservoir for comments or ideas” observes Peter Shepherd. “One button export functionality” is powerful tool.” And “Colour coding can show departmental implications”. Says Fabian Acosta “You can show portal links on screen in a meeting”, says another user.

Presentations are one of visual mapping’s greatest strengths. You can increase focus when you “collapse and expand branches”, notes Scott Campbell when he is engaged in campus planning. “Words tweak new associations”. “Graphic presentation shows relationships”.

Medical professional Frank Englehard observes, “It is an excellent way of pruning bad ideas and realizing which are the good ideas”. When Niels Tonnnesen facilitates brainstorming sessions, he projects the results “so everyone can see them instantly on the wall during the process, - and the result is in the mailbox of the participants even before they reach their working-place after the meeting”. He adds, “It’s my experience that this way of working increases the commitment and feeling of ownership. You have literally seen the project grow.” On a more existential level, one user comments, “See life as a series of projects”.

Were there any wished for additions? We didn’t ask about them, but some users would like spider diagram relational lines. In a world where Leonardo da Vinci’s adage that everything is connected to everything else, this is a valid request. Another user wished for voice recognition data entry. But most users seem satisfied with VisiMap and are not looking for more bells and whistles.

We are incredible grateful to customers who responded and thank them for taking the time to write and provide us with such a wealth of ideas. And we were also gratified by comments like Glen Hammonds when he commended “the excellent, outstanding, superb service both offer. You are both always reliable and to the point. You solve the problem immediately and it stays solved.”

Is there anything in the response that surprised me? As someone who is exploring the visual arts in later life, I was surprised by virtually no comments on the use of images, especially in presentations. I’m also a former teacher of English literature and have spent many hours praising the value of metaphor, the intuitive link between image and idea that forms the basis of poetry and other forms of literature.

The ability to combine images and words on a map with ease is one of the strengths that VisiMap offers. You can use any image that is already on your computer and Google or the Microsoft Image Gallery offer infinite possibilities. The map itself is already an image. Anything that you can do to make it more beautiful, more visually engaging, more thought provoking will stimulate not only your own thinking, but also those of others - and you will truly see what you think.

Norah Bolton is president of Dynamic Thinking, a Toronto based consultancy specializing in helping clients develop, organize and refine their ideas. She is the author of See What You Think, How to Work Better and Faster with VisiMap. All or part of this article may be shared in print and by electronic means. If you do so, please acknowledge the company and the author. Contributor quotations are included with permission.