

Winning Edge #41 – Ben Franklin’s Viral Meme

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners’ *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



In the spring of 1754, middle-aged Benjamin Franklin considered how to persuade the public to unite and support the French and Indian War. As the publisher of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, he had a powerful platform, but he wanted to create something with a persuasive punch.

On May 9, 1754, he published an article with a small image that would change American political communication forever. The headline read "Join, or Die," and the image depicted a snake cut into parts, representing the colonies. You've likely seen this illustration—a twisted snake with the colonies labeled on each segment and the subtle headline, "Join, or Die," beneath it. Next to the image was an article about a recent battle to further persuade the public. Interestingly, that article used firsthand the reporting from a young Major named George Washington.



The snake image was America's first political cartoon, and it quickly became the 18th-century version of a viral meme. Newspapers across the colonies reprinted the *Join, or Die* image, and it struck a chord with readers. Part of its appeal came from a widespread belief at the time—that a severed snake could come back to life overnight if its pieces were put back together. The message was clear: If the colonies united, they could be stronger together than apart.

Franklin believed that presenting ideas in unexpected or unusual ways made them more likely to grab attention and stick. By pairing a striking image with the complex idea of colonial unity, he turned an abstract concept into something concrete and memorable.

His use of visuals extended beyond print. At the Constitutional Convention decades later, Franklin used another persuasive technique. After months of grueling debates, he pointed to the carved half-sun on George Washington's chair—a detail every delegate had spent hours staring at as Washington presided over the proceedings. With the convention finally drawing to a close, Franklin seized the moment to make his point.

Franklin stood and said, "I have often and often...looked at that [sun] behind the President, without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting: but now at length, I have the happiness to know, that it is a rising and not a setting sun." With this simple reference to something everyone in the room had seen daily, Franklin took their uncertainty about the new Constitution and gave them a visual anchor of an optimistic America's future.

Making Visual Persuasion Work Today

Franklin's approach teaches us three key principles when it comes to using visuals in our work:

1. **Keep It Simple**—Create or reference visuals that can be understood in under 5 seconds. The snake cartoon worked because its message was instantly clear. Complex charts or detailed graphs often lose your audience before making their point.
2. **Use What's There**—Look for powerful visuals already present in your environment, just as Franklin used Washington's chair to make his point. This could be something in the room, a landmark in your district, or even a common sight everyone recognizes.
3. **Connect to Shared Experience**—Reference things your audience has already seen or experienced, making your message more relatable and memorable. The best visuals tap into common understanding and shared cultural experiences.

Putting It Into Practice

Before trying any visual technique, remember that successful visual persuasion requires all three principles working together: simplicity, using what's there, AND connecting to a shared experience. Many attempts at visual persuasion fail because they miss one of these elements.

For example, when considering visual aids:

- Create a simple diagram showing how funding flows through a program - but test it first to ensure others grasp it immediately.
- Reference physical landmarks in your district - but only if they're widely recognized and their significance is clear to your audience.
- Point to visible examples in the room - but first verify that others see the same meaning you do.

The key is to think through your visual from your audience's perspective. What's obvious to you may not be obvious to them. Always test your visual concept with a few trusted advisors before using it publicly.

Remember, the goal isn't to wow with complexity but to clarify through simplicity. When in doubt, simpler is better.

Bottom Line

Remember Franklin's example the next time you need to persuade an audience. The right visual can transform abstract ideas into powerful, memorable messages that move people to action, whether through a simple drawing or a reference to something in plain sight.

Sources:

Image: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Join,_or_Die#/media/File:Benjamin_Franklin_-_Join_or_Die.jpg

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