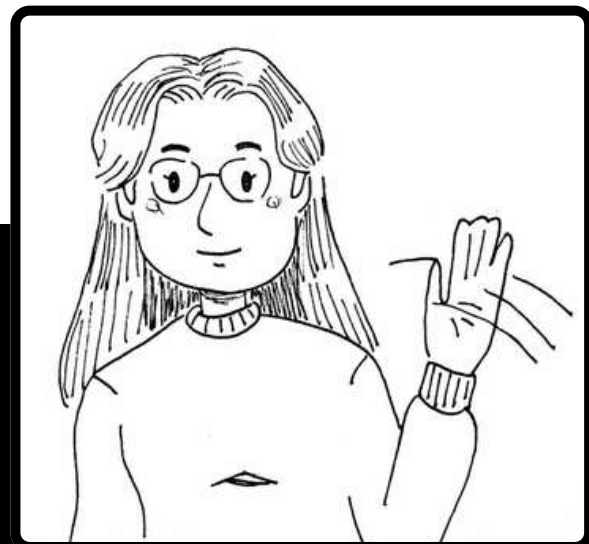


# **“SMASH” Through the Noise**

**How Winnipeg Non-Profits can use  
Comics as a Communication Tool**



Maya Shank  
2026

# Introduction

Comics are an attractive communications tool for Winnipeg non-profits that are looking to make the most of their budgets, staff, and time. Not only are comics eye-catching, but they are also engaging and can make complex ideas easier to understand. Through comics, organizations can create communication assets that publics want to interact with.

Some Winnipeg non-profits are already successfully using comics as communications tools. This white paper takes you through a series of case studies, where those organizations share their insights on how to approach the planning and execution of creating comics. It also includes insider information on how non-profits can work with local comic artists, making everything from hiring to collaboration approachable. This guide can help your organizations think about how you too might use comics to connect to your audiences and reach your communications goals.



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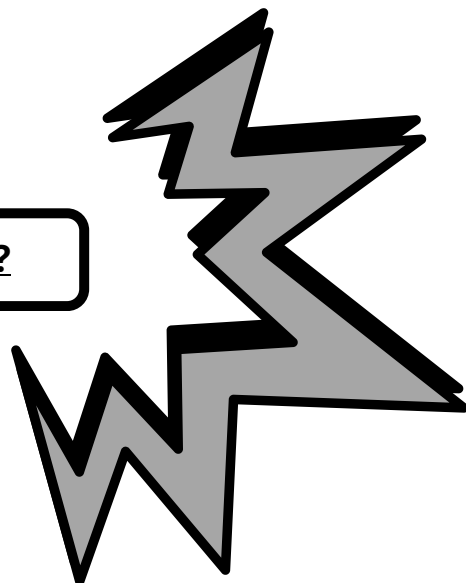
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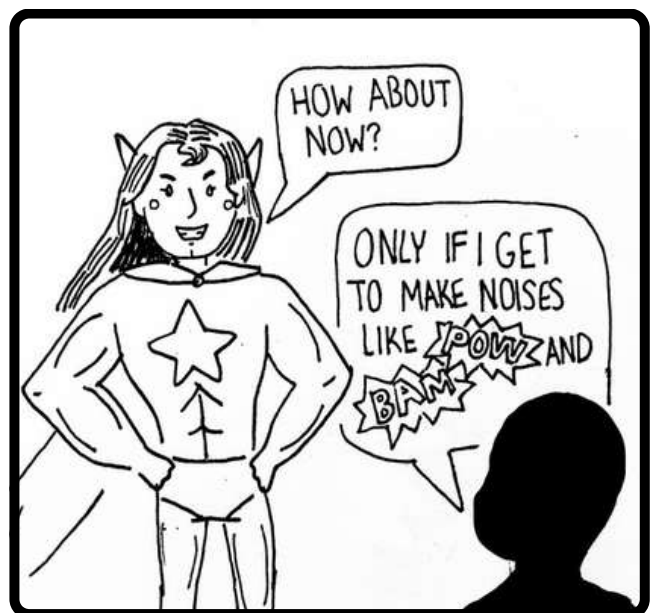


# Why Comics?

Most people associate comics with the POWs and KABOOMs of superheroes, but comics have a long and varied history, spanning across many genres. Comics as we know them today have been around since 1897.

Comics also have a long history in marketing. They have been an effective tool in convincing audiences to consider new ideologies, most notably as part of war propaganda. The Journal of American History says comics “manufactured popular attitudes to war.” The years from 1938 to 1956 are known as the “golden age of comics.” At that time comics were central to political propaganda related to World War 2. For better or worse, comics have been used to influence public opinion for a long time.

Comics continue to evolve. More people are reading comics since the pandemic, and there’s been a surge in the popularity of manga and graphic novels. According to an article from Media Smarts, a collection of digital media literacy resources, kids who grew up reading comics like *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and even *Garfield* are now adults who still like comics, making the medium popular among adults. This increase in popularity makes comics a great medium for communicators to experiment with.



# From an expert

**Dr. Candida Rifkind**, a professor at the University of Winnipeg who specializes in alternative comics and graphic narratives, says comics are a great tool for educating publics as they can be used to make complex topics – like climate change or Indigenous issues – more accessible. Referencing Scott McCloud, a comic theorist, she explains how every detail in a comic plays a role in the experience; for example, the gutter, that little white space between panels, is an invisible messenger that signals an end to a thought and gives readers a moment of reflection between each image. This “space” creates deeper engagement.

“We make readers connect the dots by literally making them connect the panels to make a story, making comics more immersive than other media. They can bring their own experience to it and feel like they are part of producing the story,” says Rifkind.

Comics make stories more accessible, and they encourage deep engagement. Many comics are written at a college level and are deceptively complex but have the benefit of coaxing reluctant readers by looking approachable.



**Dr. Candida Rifkind**

# Case Studies

Some Winnipeg non-profits have already successfully integrated comics into their communications:

**Mennonite Central Committee** shows how comics can be used to share an organization's achievements with both existing and potential audiences by sharing their origin story in this unique way.

**RaY Inc.** created a comic targeted at youth with varying literacy levels to make dense information on their many programs and services more accessible.

**Oceans North** is creating a comic to educate readers about the Manitoba coastline. Though still in progress, their comic shows how non-profits can start small and build a comic that can be distributed in a number of ways to achieve a goal.



# Case Study 1

## Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)

### “The First Mennonite Committee Journey” (2020)

MCC is a Christian non-profit designed to provide relief, development and peace to communities in need by providing food, health services, education, shelter, and income generation.

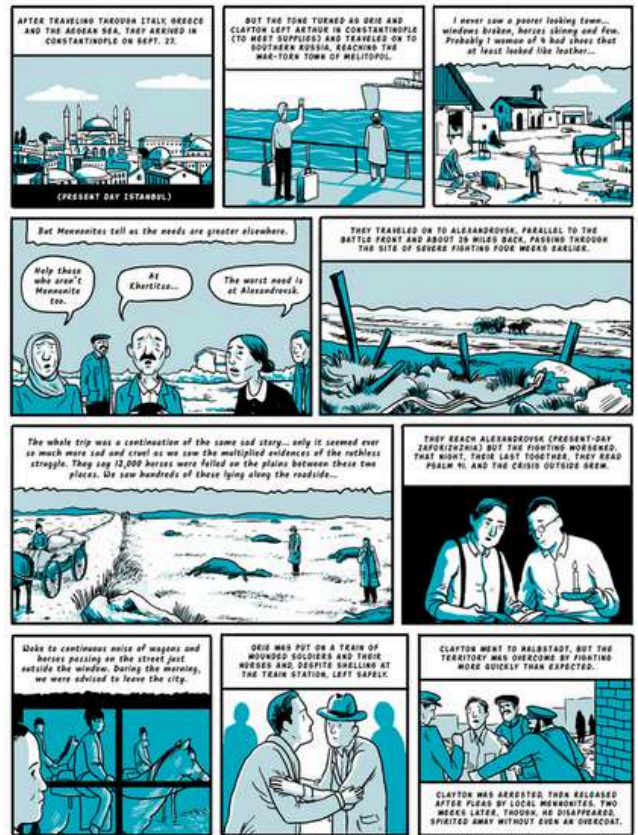
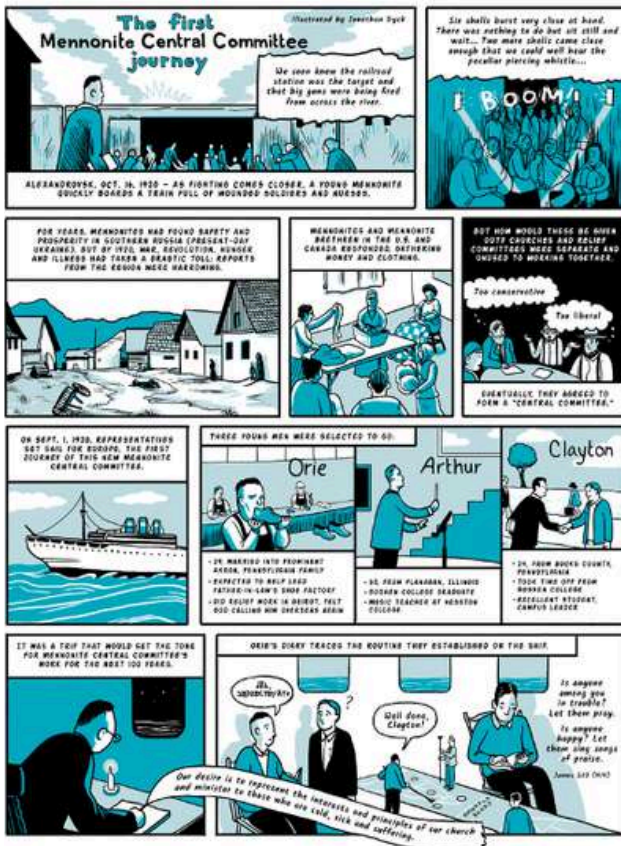
Text by Marla Lester

Art by Jonathan Dyck



## Key Takeaways

1. Art is an effective way to showcase an organization’s achievements
2. Comics can fill visual gaps in storytelling when photographs and footage is limited
3. The novelty of comics makes them an engaging communications tool
4. Comics encourage deep interaction and provide long-term value



“The First Mennonite Central Committee Journey” was created for MCC’s 2020 centennial celebrations. It tells MCC’s origin story, which provides context for the organization’s current work in international development, disaster relief, and peacebuilding. The comic was released in print and was also on their website until recently. The artist, Jonathan Dyck, used to work for MCC and had done graphic design work for them in the past.

Comics are a great way to document, showcase, and celebrate achievements. MCC is a non-profit organization with a long and rich history. With limited photos of MCC's history, the three-page comic filled in visual gaps. The narrative was built from existing documentation to ensure accuracy.

Having worked with Dyck prior to this project, MCC was familiar with his art style. They already knew his work aligned visually with their campaign and brand. Elements like the black and blue colouring, philanthropic imagery of people providing food, clothing, and money to those in need, and writing about their mission in providing relief, development and peace are included very intentionally to reflect MCC's identity.

MCC chose to use a comic as one of many mediums in its publication celebrating its centennial. The comic stands out, since it tells the story of MCC in a new and engaging way, prompting interest from existing supporters who have never seen their story told this way before. The comic also potentially connected with new audiences who found the format compelling. The comic had long-term value as it continued to receive views on the website almost five years after it was released, proving it was an engaging way to celebrate the non-profit's history.

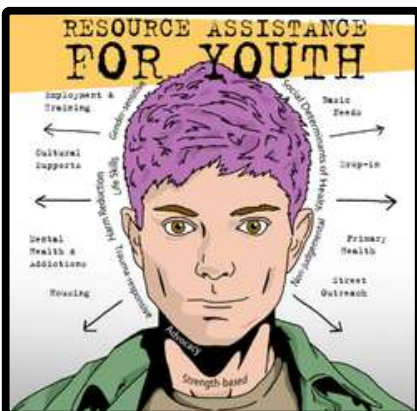
## Case Study 2

### RaY Inc. (RaY)

### “Resource Assistance for Youth” (2023)

RaY is a Winnipeg based organization that supports disconnected youth (up to 29 years old) with integrated programs and services such as education, cultural supports, and resources like food and medicine. They aim to create an inclusive space and provide for youth on their own terms.

By Nicholas Friesen



## Key Takeaways

1. Use the resources you have
2. Comics make complex content more digestible
3. Consider your audience
4. Decide how you measure success



This 24-page comic follows Ray, a youth experiencing homelessness as they navigate the supports and programs RaY provides. The comic is posted on RaY's website as a tool to explain their resources. It is also printed and passed out at events by the artist, Nicholas Friesen, who worked for RaY in communications and donor relations when he made the comic. The comic succeeds in diversifying RaY's communications tactics.

Leveraging internal talent can be an asset in creating an accurate and budget-friendly piece. An artist who understands and cares about your organization can create a more authentic product. The guide includes information about multiple services, so using a comic form makes it approachable. The comic allows readers to understand the impact of each service offered through the character's experience.

As RaY primarily serves a younger audience with potential literacy or English barriers, the use of visuals and storytelling helped engage the youth they aimed to reach. The comic uses visual cues such as an "every child matters" sign and 2SLGBTQIA+ flags to send the message that all youth are welcome at RaY. The comic has a gender-neutral protagonist, so anyone can relate to them.

RaY's goal was to create a resource that diversified the organization's tactics and filled a gap in their communications.

"You really have to consider the medium and the audience... There's something a little less intimidating about sitting down to read a comic... you can sit there for 20 minutes and get a complete story."

**Nicholas Friesen**, artist

It's important to understand what success looks like for your organization before beginning a comic project. Whether it's increasing engagement or getting donations, the more metrics you have to measure the outcomes, the better from a strategic outlook. Knowing your SMART goals will affect qualities like format, tone, and structure. In RaY's case, their primary focus was on building awareness, so they published the comic digitally on their website and also printed out smaller booklets to distribute at events by donation.

## Case Study 3

### Oceans North

### “Qilagugaq”

Oceans North is a non-profit that aims to protect the health of the ocean through conservation and sustainability by partnering with Indigenous and coastal communities that rely on it.

**Narration by Johnny Mamgark**

**Art by Jonathan Dyck**



### Key Takeaways

1. Comics bring audiences into unfamiliar experiences, which makes them great for education
2. Always involve the communities you seek to represent in the process
3. Start small, but plan in a way that makes it possible to expand or keep the story going
4. Consider reformatting for multiple uses and purposes



*Qilagugaq*, which translates to beluga, is a 48-page comic intended for print. Still in development, it's a story that teaches readers about the relationship between Inuit and the land and animals they live alongside. The narrator, Johnny Mamgark, is an Inuk hunter from the area of Arviat. Artist Jonathan Dyck collaborated with Mamgark and Oceans North to create the illustrations for the piece. Oceans North plans to create a four-part series about the Manitoba coastlines and the Cree, Dene, Inuit, and other communities that live there.

Oceans North wanted to create an educational tool that respectfully spreads awareness of the Manitoba coastline and the people and cultures that rely on it. Oceans North has used a variety of mediums like videos, photography, and articles to emphasize the importance of ocean conservation, but felt there was still a lack of understanding from outsiders. They chose comics as another medium to help communicate their message.

The first comic aims to represent lived experiences from a local Inuk perspective. Respecting traditional Indigenous storytelling elements was central to the project, so Oceans North worked closely with narrator Johnny Mamgark. Mamgark's narration in tandem with the visuals helps readers to understand and connect with the vibrant geography and culture.

Oceans North is creating this project with the communities the stories center around by making them the voice of the comic, ensuring they have ownership of their stories, and maintaining ongoing conversations throughout the process.

While the first comic has taken just over a year to create, they have used it as a learning process to build best practices and find out what works for them. They were able to try different structures, lengths, and refine the piece to fit their vision. This piece will serve as proof of concept for later comics and build trust between the non-profit and the communities they hope to collaborate with.

“We decided to really focus on one issue first rather than tackling them all at once, so we could tell one story and use it as a proof of concept, so hopefully as we approach other potential storytellers from different communities they can see it is authentic to the storyteller without speaking for them.”

**Aaron Janzen**, Senior Field Campaigner at Oceans North

# Best hiring practices

Once your non-profit decides to create a comic, finding the right artist or artists comes next. Before approaching an artist, know what you want. Winnipeg comic artist Nicholas Friesen says clients usually reach out to an artist with a general idea and then give them creative liberties. For a successful collaboration, creative freedom needs direction, so that artists can effectively incorporate feedback. Clear articulation of what you want at the front end of a project will help to avoid dissatisfaction down the road.

Throughout the process, check in with the artist and give feedback clearly – but don't micromanage.

“Artists are being very intentional about why they do something, why they frame a shot or a page or whatever a certain way.”

**Nicholas Friesen**, artist

There are plenty of Winnipeg comic artists with websites that serve as portfolios, so you can see their style, experience, and capabilities. [The Prairie Comic Festival](#) is a good starting point. They have a strong team of comic creators, many of whom do freelance work outside the annual September festival.

When you have a vision for your comic, make sure to research any artist you want to work with, particularly regarding art style. If all their work is done in a traditional medium, it doesn't make sense to hire them as a digital artist. This leads to frustration from both parties.



Negotiate wages in advance. Some artists will be paid by the page, and others will have hourly rates. According to [Minerva Art Studio](#) a studio that works on comics internationally including within Canada, here's what you can expect to pay:

- **Beginner Artists:** \$30 to \$70 per page
- **Mid-Level Freelancers :** \$70 to \$200 per page,
- **Professional or Studio-Level Artists:** \$200 to \$500+ per page.

These prices fluctuate based on the complexity of project, medium, and time pressures. It is important to pay artists fairly. You may find artists who will work for exposure or because they like your brand, but it's better to plan to compensate artists, which leads to a better reputation for your organization and trust between your brand and stakeholders.

You also need to create a contract. You can find simple templates online. Make sure the form includes payment amount, payment timeframe, work timeline, and who owns the rights to the art upon its completion. While everyone may have the best intentions, a handshake deal will not hold up if the artist you hired disappears two months into a project.

Ask questions prior to signing any agreements and give the artist the opportunity to do the same. Like any employee or contract worker, you want to make sure you're hiring someone that aligns with your organization's values.

## From an artist

**Alice RL** is a local comic artist who's worked with Winnipeg organizations. Born and raised in Winnipeg, they are a First Nations, nonbinary, transgender Two-Spirit, manga artist who started with comics. RL compares comics to other mediums and points out the barriers in film, videogames, and writing. They all require a firm understanding of the English language, and it can be easy to miss nuances for people with language barriers. RL points out that comics pull together visual elements with text to make them more accessible.

When asked about blending their Indigenous identity in with their work, RL said everybody has their own interpretation of different identities based off their experiences. Not every Two-Spirit person has the same beliefs. RL said that organizations should know that when they consult one person, they're not consulting the whole community and that when you hire people with marginalized voices, you are hiring more than just a token, you are hiring an individual with their own opinions and style.



**Alice RL**

# Can't I use AI to make a comic?

In the age of AI, it may be tempting to resort to computer-generated content. It's cheaper, but there are ethical issues when it comes to using machines for art. Consider your mission statement and values. Often the use of AI opposes fundamental pillars within non-profits when it comes to social impacts and the communities you aim to serve.

Consider where AI sources art. AI has a vast well of knowledge, but it learns from human content. AI has a reputation for hallucinating and creating content with bias. This affects your non-profit's credibility.

Another issue in using AI to create comics is the risk of art theft. AI can only create answers and images based on pre-existing information. All AI "art" is based off real artists' works. [An article in The Guardian by artist Molly Crabapple](#) explains how generative AI is exploitative and harmful to creative industries. Crabapple writes, "We are replaced by digital homunculi, trained on our stolen creations. And no, the work is not good, but that scarcely matters." The use of AI-generated content may raise ethical concerns that alienate and offend a significant portion of your publics, as it lacks authenticity. Plus, there are many wonderful human comic artists out there making beautiful and meaningful art that you can hire.



# Are comics right for your organization?

While comics are one potential approach for communicators, there is a time and a place. As situations vary, so do goals. To help you decide whether comics are the best medium for your message, ask yourself these questions:

## Who is my audience?

Comics cater to a wide audience and add an interactive visual that can be tailored to the identity of your brand and communities. Comics are highly engaging, yet fairly simple to read. Because they involve both images and text, you can rely on one to give context to the other, but the duality adds a complexity that allows for nuances and different interpretation. Comics are accessible to those with barriers to literacy; for example, someone whose first language isn't English can rely on visuals for cues.

## Do we have the resources?

Making comics takes time, skill, and money. Consider how quickly you need the product. The time it takes to create a fully realized piece varies significantly, depending on the artist and project specifications. Even a one-page comic can take anywhere from six to 19 hours depending on how detailed or colorful you want it, and that's without the back-and-forth of feedback and rewrites. Longer more complicated comics can take upwards of a year. If you have a skilled comic artist on your team already, you may be in luck, as you are already familiar with their art style and credibility, and they are likely easier to coordinate with. Otherwise you will likely have to outsource the skill by hiring an artist. This step takes careful research and consideration of the comic artist's past work and rates. Consider whether you have the bandwidth and necessary funds for this outside collaboration.



“The artist is very much responsible for how a story looks on the page and they’re communicating with the writer to ensure that what’s in the script is getting translated properly into images that convey the story.”

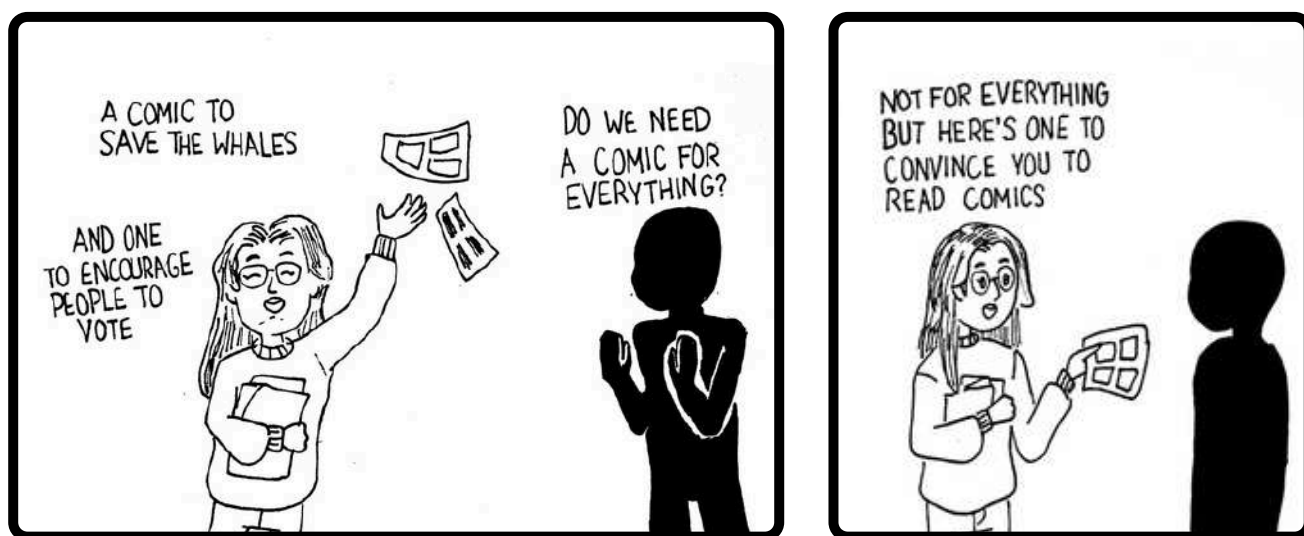
**-Stephanie Cooke**, award winning writer and graphic novelist

## How would we distribute the comic?

You can print or distribute comics digitally, but the distribution should depend on the subject matter and goal of the comic. An analysis published to The Journal of Visual Communication in Medicine found that comics were the most effective at increasing reach and audience engagement online when compared to animations, graphics, photos and videos. Chances are you could create something with multiple purposes. For example, consider creating a short-form version for social media and leave the longer versions for publication or website use.

## Is a comic the best medium for my message?

If your non-profit is in sector that requires a certain level of empathy and understanding on particular subjects, comics can be a great solution. Because you interact with comics through both reading and interpreting images, readers connect with characters deeply. There's a novelty factor too, which means that comics both grab attention and retain it.



## Does it fit our brand?

Comics are a versatile medium that can be adapted to fit your non-profit. When you are working with a comic artist or writer, be sure to communicate tone, language, information, and mandatories with the artist and/or writer to best suit your needs. Comics are highly customizable and can be tailored to the organization's identity, including brand colours and symbols.

## What is the long-term value of a comic?

When comics are created with accurate information they can stand the test of time, serving a purpose well beyond the intended first use. At the end of the day, comics are a fun way to share your message. Through comics, artists grapple with sensitive topics in a way that your audience is likely to connect with. According to the article "Feeling your Pain: Empathy in Comics," "The potential to graphically represent feeling and sensation through abstraction is a powerful tool for the medium." Through the suspension of belief, comics integrate metaphors seamlessly, allowing your organization to ignite the imaginations of your target publics so they connect with your mission and purpose.

# End

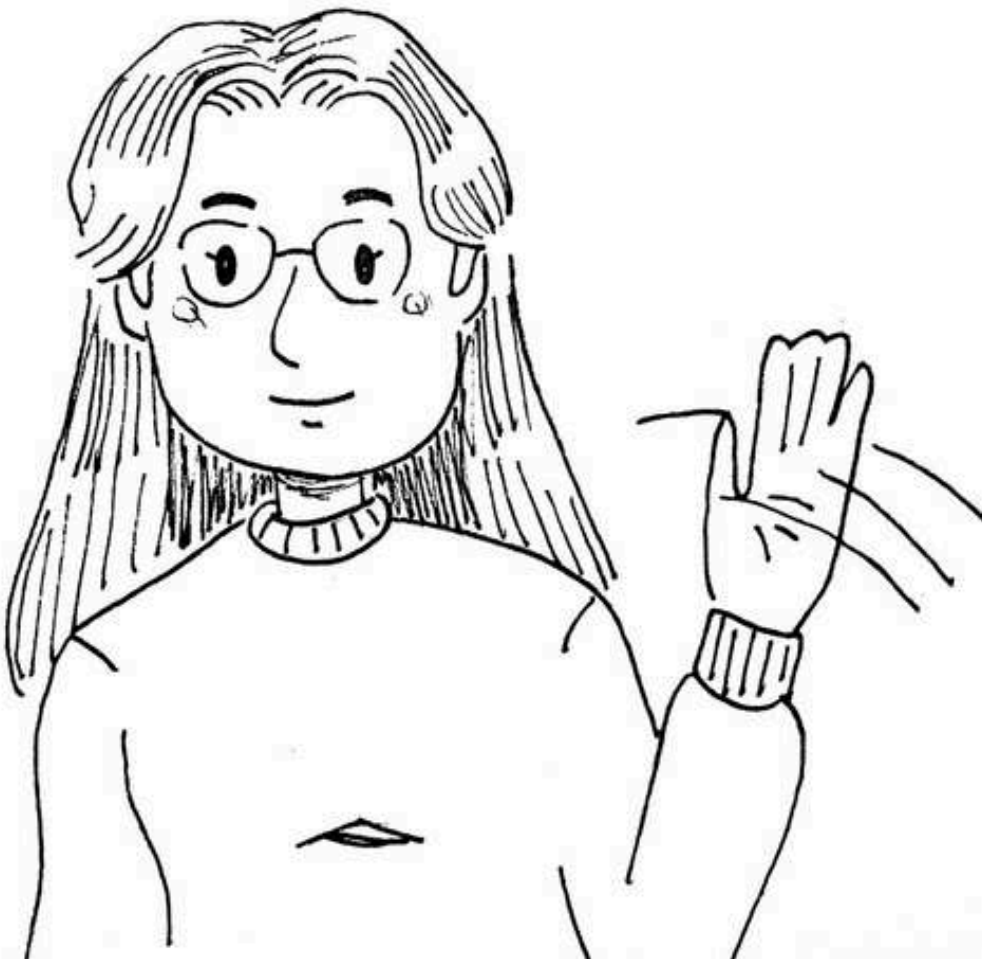
Comics have the potential to reach audiences and hold their attention. In a time where media is over-saturated with content and clickbait, comics make people pause and actually think about what they're consuming. The marriage between narrative and visuals creates stories that connect your audiences with the work your organization is doing.



Winnipeg non-profits like MCC, RaY, and Oceans North demonstrate how comics can be used as a strategy to meet your key objectives. Comics are versatile in educating, building empathy, and engaging various audiences.



Communications is about connecting with the people that matter to reach your specific goals. In the era of scrolling, skimming, and constant partial attention, effective communication is no longer just about clarity and a good message. It's about respect for the audience's time, energy, and emotional bandwidth. Attention must be earned, and the non-profits that succeed will be the ones that find mediums that persist in the public's consciousness. Comics can be that tool.



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