

Design Elements and Principles for Maintaining Visual Identity on Web Sites

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INTRODUCTION

The visual design of a web site is critical when establishing a strong visual identity and branding on the web. This is especially true now because web technologies change rapidly to meet the different size and screen requirements for tablets, mobile devices, and smartphones. The look and feel of a web site across these different platforms will quickly influence a customer's perception of a business. According to Wang and Emurian trustworthiness is conveyed through four characteristics of web design: "graphic design features, structure design, content design, and social-cue design" (2005, p.105). The appearance of the home page and usability impacts to the website credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002, p140). The first impression of a website is affected by its design elements: symbol, color, typography, graphic elements, and layout. The visual design of a web site will determine both whether customers feel comfortable or included in the site's target audience and whether they feel that the business is professional or trustworthy. If at a first glance, the visual design does not connect with a user on these levels the likelihood that they will use the site or purchasing products from it are greatly diminished. Therefore, the site must capitalize on a known and trusted pre-existing branding or quickly establish a new visual identity that is professional and appropriate.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine design factors on a web site and determine which of these factors affect a consumer's ability to perceive and identify information on web sites with different browser sizes. The ability of design elements to cross media boundaries and create a consistent and effective user experience between the physical business and its presence on the web will be discussed.

It will also examine how branding elements such as logos, color systems, typography, grid structure, photography, graphic style, and the visual hierarchy of information can be used to create a consistent visual branding in both static and dynamic applications.

The following areas will be discussed: (1) design elements of corporate identity that are effective in creating web site identity; (2) the visual elements of web site identity; and (3) strategies for creating visual identity using design elements and principles that take into consideration the web's limitations and strengths.

THE DESIGN ELEMENTS OF CORPORATE IDENTITY THAT ARE EFFECTIVE IN CREATING WEB SITE IDENTITY

Corporate identity design in the physical world has been developed to consistently apply logos, colors, typography, grids, and other stylistic treatments to a variety of media and applications. In addition,

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corporate identity design in the physical world has a much longer history than does web site identity design. Therefore existing strategies and elements of corporate identity design from the physical world will be useful as a model for developing a strategy for web site identity design.

According to Haig and Haper, logos and symbols are known as basic and fundamental elements in the development of corporate identity design. A logo, referred to as “one of business’ most outspoken non-verbal cues,” (Haig & Haper, 1997, p 1) conveys a company’s philosophy and message. Dowling (2001) further articulates the roles of corporate symbols: to create awareness; to trigger recognition of an organization; and to activate a stored image of the organization (p 167). Logos are used as a powerful tool for marketing. People tend to make buying decisions based on the brand name of a product rather than for the product itself. The logos for Nike, Apple, and McDonald’s are well-known examples of these types of corporate symbols.

Color is another important element in corporate identity. Color is easier to read than form or shape and it holds the viewer’s attention longer (Dowling, 2001, p 177). We have often heard about Coca Cola red, Kodak yellow, and Barbie pink. Color also has cultural and psychological associations. The same color can be interpreted in different ways depending on the culture and context of the situation.

A corporate identity system can be thought of as a tool that is used to maintain a company’s corporate visual image. This system must be flexible enough for different applications, at the same time, tight enough to maintain visual consistency across media. Haig and Haper (1997) point out that 65 percent of our daily communication experiences are non-verbal (p9). Thus, the impact of visual information is a large part of our everyday life. The visual elements of a corporate identity system such the logo and color scheme can create an immediate sense of recognition for the company, express its character, and build familiarity and trust (Haig & Haper, 1997, p14). Corporate identity systems build branding far beyond just logos and colors. Therefore, branding and corporate identity systems need to be integrated in the market place.

THE VISUAL ELEMENTS OF WEB SITE IDENTITY

Symbols are the most powerful elements used to build corporate identity systems in the physical world. But are they the most powerful element when creating web identity? Are symbols a powerful enough element on the web to build identity? What are the other elements used to build site identity? In answer to this, icons, symbols, colors, images, typography, and web page layout (including visual hierarchy) are all elements that need to be considered when creating a web site identity.

Creating an Initial Sense of Web Site Identity on the Homepage

The major role of a web site identity design does not dramatically differ from the role of corporate identity design in the physical world. Like corporate identity (Morgan, 1999, p47), web site identity should be a visual statement of the web site’s role and function. It should also be a means of visual communication with users or customers. The most important aspect of web site identity design is for the site to provide the company’s nature and characteristics at a glance. Furthermore, a company’s web site identity should have a unique design and features that are distinguishable from its competitors’ web sites. This uniqueness of web site identity design can help a business build immediate recognition. The key element to creating a successful web site identity is grabbing users’ attention, building a positive impression, and making sure they stay on the web site and/or return to the site. This positive impression and experience

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