

Chapter 100

Design Elements and Principles for Maintaining Visual Identity on Websites

Sunghyun R. Kang
Iowa State University, USA

Debra Satterfield
Iowa State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

The visual design of a website is critical when establishing a strong corporate identity on the web. The look and feel of a website will quickly influence a user with regard to how they perceive the image of the business. It will determine whether they feel comfortable or included in the site's target audience and whether or not they feel the business is professional or trustworthy. If at a first glance, the visual design does not connect on these levels with the user the likelihood of them using the site or purchasing products is greatly diminished. Therefore, the site must quickly capitalize on a known and trusted pre-existing corporate identity, or establish a new corporate identity that is professional and appropriate.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine design factors and determine which of these factors affect people's ability to identify and perceive information on web sites. This chapter discusses how design elements can cross media boundaries and create a consistent and effective user experience between the physical business and its presence on the web. This chapter explains branding elements such as logos, color systems, typography, grid structure, photography, graphic style, and the visual hierarchy of information with regard to how they can be used in static and dynamic applications.

The following areas are 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 while taking into consideration the web's limitations and strengths.

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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, 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, as “one of business’ most outspoken non-verbal cues,” (Haig & Haper, 1977, 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 often tend to make buying decisions based on the brand name rather than just for the product itself. Nike, Apple, and McDonald’s logos 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 (1977) 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 and Haper, 1977, p14). Corporate identity systems build branding far beyond just logos and colors. Therefore, both 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 for the creation of 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

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