



GRAPHIC

DESIGN

Basics



ROBERT H. FLORES

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Note:

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INTRODUCTION

The following is some basic tips and rules that can help make the best design. This graphic design article is based on tried and true methods, design theory and my own experimentation rather than specific software tips and tricks. I have been working as a graphic designer professionally for over a decade and I hope to show you some tips that will help you create the best designs possible.

FINAL PRODUCT (PAPER ORIENTATION)

Knowing the end result of a design will greatly help in getting started on it. What will it be? A trifold, abook cover, a billboard, a catalog, a letterhead,



Example 1: Catalog cover using a horizontal design.



Example 2: Linecard using a vertical design.



Example 3: Catalog cover using a vertical design with diagonal lines to create action.

a business card? What will the orientation of it be? Portrait (Vertical) or Landscape (Horizontal)?

OVERALL DESIGN (THE DESIGN ITSELF)

Once the paper orientation is determined, you can then start on how the design is going to be implemented. If your paper is horizontal, a horizontal design will emphasize the horizontalness of it, but you can also do a vertical design on a horizontal paper (see Example 1). A vertical design on a vertical paper helps emphasize the verticalness of it (see Example 2). But, there are many times that you may want a horizontal design as well, which would lend itself into a relaxed design. Think in terms of a grid. Horizontal design=relaxed, calm, cool. Vertical design=exciting, movement, action. Diagonal design=most exciting, dynamic and interesting (see Example 3). That's why when you were a child and you were eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, you asked for it to be cut diagonally! Symmetry=calm and relaxed. Asymmetry=action and interest. Focal point=the



Example 4: Grid layout of a page with shapes of text and pictures.

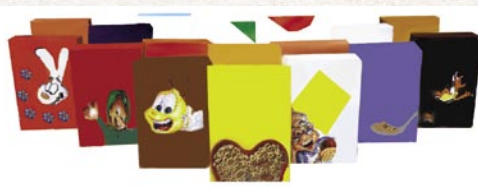
point at which the reader's eye goes first. Bleeds create interest as well. We'll be talking about these topics later. Look at your format, then start thinking in terms of a grid: 2, 3, or 6 tiles to create a grid version of your design.

OBJECT DESIGN (THE INDIVIDUAL PIECES OF THE OVERALL DESIGN)

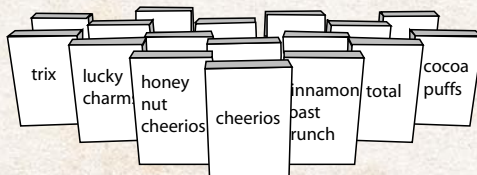
The objects within the design follow the same preceding rules. If you had 10 small horizontal pictures stacked, the design would still be a vertical design creating action, but the individual parts used to create that action are horizontal, calm pictures. Graphic Design is about mixing text and pictures (i.e. arranging the shapes of paragraphs and visuals). Everything has a shape: text blocks, pictures, the letters themselves, etc (see Example 4). There are even "invisible" shapes on the page that don't have any physical form, but they are still there (i.e. negative space and implied line).

WHAT MAKES A GOOD DESIGN?

That's like asking "What makes a good painting"? Answer: A lot of things done right! There is no secret formula or recipe for making any set of pictures and text into a magnificent design. However, there are a lot of tools at a designer's disposal, that, when used correctly, do create good designs. These tools include: implied line, color, types of text, positive/negative space, emotion, focal point, etc. To create a good design you must use each of these tools properly, appropriately, moderately and subtly.



Example 5: Absolute form and no function.



Example 6: Absolute function and absolute boredom.



Example 7: Form and function get married!

THE TOOLS

Just because you have tons of tools at your disposal, don't be drunk with power! Just because you CAN do something, doesn't mean you SHOULD! There's a lot of items in my refrigerator. If I wanted to make an omelette, would I just start throwing everything that was in my fridge into the frying

pan? Of course not. And graphic design is no different. Use everything in moderation. Less is more. Don't draw attention to any one tool. Your mission is to market a product, not your talent. Just because you have 200 filters in Photoshop doesn't mean that you should use every single one in a photograph! Just because you can italicize, embolden and underline a word, doesn't mean you should! Part of being a graphic designer is knowing which tools to use at any given instance, knowing which ones to downplay, and knowing which ones to just save for another design. Every trick you use should always be done to serve the design—not your ego. You cannot allow the form to overtake the function of it (nor vice versa).

FORM OR FUNCTION?

Which is more important? Form or Function? That's like asking who is more important in a marriage, the husband or the wife? Good design is a MARRIAGE between: Form and Function. If things were just about Form, you'd have art (see Example 5). If things were just about Function, you'd equally have just art, usually text in the form of prose or poetry (see Example 6). The good designs are the ones that blend Form and Function seamlessly together (see Example 7).

SYMMETRY AND ASYMMETRY

Symmetry is a way of creating a calm design. Asymmetry is a way of creating action in a design. Both can be used for great effect. Symmetry is defined as having an equal amount of text or pictures on both halves of the page. Asymmetry is defined as having an unequal amount of text or pictures on both halves of the page. For example, symmetry can be created by having a paragraph of text on one side and an equally sized picture on the other side of the page. An example of asymmetry could be a paragraph set in a Helvetica typeface competing with a picture that bleeds (see section "Bleeding"). Look at any number of magazine ads: if you're selling a skateboard, you should definitely be using an asymmetrical design; if you're selling an easy-listening cd, you should probably be using symmetry. Though I would add that even if you are designing for something more subdued than, say, skydiving, you may want to do an asymmetrical design anyway. The reason being is that even though the product itself is more "calm", you need to create action for the customer to actually buy it. This is an example of where you are actually designing for the customer's perception of a product rather



Example 9: The focal point of this catalog cover is the gauze wrap with the logo on top of it. Notice how the products circle around it.

than the product itself.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SPACE

Positive space is defined as the object/design itself. Negative space is defined as the space around the object/design. Let your design breath! In watercolor class, while creating a landscape with trees, my professor always emphasized leaving bits of sky in the trees for “your birds to fly through”. My other art professor emphasized drawing the leaves on a tree by drawing the space in between the leaves, not the leaves themselves. Have you ever seen a design that looked way too busy that you didn’t even want to spend the time trying to understand it? Chances are, that it was a design with little or no negative space. A design doesn’t have to take up every square inch of real estate on the page. It is true that negative space won’t sell a product, but negative space does help positive space sell a product. If the page was stuffed to the edges with information, the design certainly would be getting its money’s worth of product, but would anyone bother to read it? Designs need white space for the eye to relax and not feel overwhelmed (see Example 8). So let your birds fly through your design!



Examples 8a, 8b: Notice how the negative space surrounds the 5 main people in this cover design.

FOCAL POINT

Where does the customer’s eye go first in a design? The focal point is the book in the bookstore that stands out from all the others on the shelf. It is the point at which you suck the reader into the world of your design (see Example 9). It should be the point at which things point to or revolve around (like a bunch of piranhas after a single piece of meat or the planets revolving around the sun). It is the attention grabber; usually a picture rather than text that intrigues, invites, lures the audience into the rest of your design.

IMPLIED LINE

This is one of the most effective tools to use. Implied lines are those invisible lines that the reader connects between two visible objects that have similar angles. It is part of human nature to find the connection between two seemingly unrelated or different objects. Implied line usually starts with a focal point and then leads the reader around the design back to the starting



Example 10: Cover design using implied line to lead the reader's eye around.

point (see Example 10), but it is also used in keeping a nice grid-like layout. Another example would include this very line of text. As you can see, there is no physical line present, but the reader sees a line nonetheless.

VERTICAL CENTERING

Have you ever noticed the letter “H”? If you look closely (or, if you turn it on its side) you will notice that the bottom half is slightly larger than the top half, even though it creates the illusion that the “bar” is equidistant from both sides. This is called vertical centering. When you want to create the appearance that something is smack dab in the middle of a vertical space, you move it slightly up from the halfway mark. There are a few theories as to why this works. The best theory (in my humble opinion) has to do with gravity. As humans, we are so used to gravity that our eyes naturally pull things down. So, to compensate, extra space has to be added underneath a “centered” object of design.

INVISIBLE DESIGN

Good design is about not drawing attention to the fact that it is a good design. In other words, if you are doing your job, people will not notice the design until after the fact. The message or the product or the idea got across first so effectively that the design of it (how it was done) took a back seat. The same goes for typography. The best typography is the invisible kind. If all the reader sees is the Form of it, he is not going to get the Function (message) of it.

SIMPLIFICATION

Have you ever noticed the (pre-2009) Jack in the Box Logo? If you look closely there really is no “H” in “THE” and there is no “X” in “BOX”. This is a mark of a good design, because you see the “H” and the “X” even though they are not fully there. The designer went to a lot of trouble to simplify this logo to the basics and it works. (Also notice the fact that the design is at an angle, creating a design of action). Simplification is a major element of good design. Ask yourself: “What can I cut from the design and still have the message remain the same?” That is essentially what editors do on movies. They cut and cut until they reach the point of: “OK, we can’t cut anymore.” The designs of today need to have their message received in seconds. Logos, especially, need to convey everything under 2 seconds. A good logo design should work at smaller sizes



Example 11: Logo designs should be simple and work at small sizes.

and still be decipherable (see Example 11).

BLEEDING

Bleeding is when a design goes from the edge of a page to the other edge of the page. Creating a bleed is one way of creating interest. For instance, if you had a portrait of someone, creating a bleed on one side wouldn't create much interest. But, if you bled the portrait on three sides, that would indeed create interest in an otherwise not-so-exciting portrait.

HUMAN INTEREST

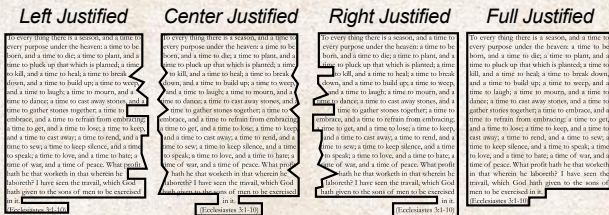
If you put a smiling lady on an advertisement or webpage, the human eye will inevitably go to the smiling lady. It's part of human nature to connect with someone. I'm always debating how much emphasis should be placed upon human interest or the product itself. Human interest works if it isn't overdone (see Example 12). If the focus is just on human interest, it doesn't show the product's details of what the customer will be buying. If the focus is just on the product, it doesn't really convey in visual terms how it may benefit the customer. There are also "action shots" that can be used (which show a product in "action"), but my preference is to place more emphasis on the product and let it speak for itself. However, the design should reach out to the audience and cater to its needs.



Example 12: Example of human interest mixed with product interest.

TEXT

"Sans serif" are typefaces without serifs on the ends of the letters (i.e. Arial, Helvetica, Swiss). These typefaces should be used for titles, logos, billboards, short phrases, and captions—basically anywhere that needs to get the message across quickly and simply. "Serif" typefaces are typefaces with serifs on the ends of the letters; i.e. Times Roman, Garamond, Caslon) should be used for text that is to be read and digested. Serifs lead the eye along the sentence and is much easier to read over long distances than sans serif fonts. (Hint: you never see a novel printed in an Arial typeface and you never see a stop sign in a Garamond typeface.)



Example 13: Text blocks create their own shapes depending on their justification.

Besides the fonts themselves, text blocks create their own shapes and should be treated as such (see Example 13). For example, use the right edge of the page to emphasize a right justified block of text, or, center the text if the rest of the design is symmetrical. Use italics to create action. Use bold to emphasize and draw attention to catch phrases, product details, pronouns, adjectives, etc.

DESIGN AND MARKETING

My job as a designer is to make a product look good so it can sell good. Put yourself in the customers' shoes; it is his perception of your product that matters. What will catch his interest? Where will his eye go first? Will he get the message quickly? DESIGN IS COMMUNICATION. You are trying to convey a thought and an emotion to another person (see Example 14). Design



Example 14: Logo design incorporating the medium of comic books and Christianity.

has to do with having an “angle”. You need to give the audience a “feeling” or an “experience” when they see your design—preferably the feeling that will lead them to buy your product. You want to put a reason in their mind as to why they would want

to buy a product. Good design caters to a customer's perception of a product, which, in turn leads to a customer buying your product. What should the reader feel when looking at your product? Excited? Bored to tears? Whether trying to market a product, sell a philosophy or propagate an idea, a graphic designer's mission is always the same: get your message across efficiently and memorably.

COLOR

A basic understanding of mixing, distributing and using colors effectively is essential to good design. If I was to create a design with a blue sky as the background, and if I wanted to use a Complimentary color scheme, I should have some orange text in the design. There are a lot of different ways to use color. Familiarize yourself with the color wheel (see Example 15). Do you know what the Primary and Secondary colors are? Do you know what a Triad of colors is? Do you know about Analogous color schemes, or Monochromatic color schemes? Do you know how the human eye sees color? Do you know how RGB works in contrast to how CMYK works? Whole volumes have been written on the subject of color theory and the professional



Example 15: The Color Wheel.

graphic designer should at least know the basics of this huge field.

EMPHASIZING AND DOWNPLAYING

Not everything in a design can be EXCITING, EXCITING, EXCITING. There will always be boring objects that have to be put into a design, or, should I say, objects that aren't the main attraction. That's OK, because as a designer, you now can contrast the exciting with the boring. You can emphasize what needs to be emphasized and downplay everything else. The exciting objects wouldn't be half as exciting if placed next to other exciting objects. But if the exciting objects are placed next to the boring, the exciting is made more apparent. And that is what you want.

UNIQUENESS

Being unique is critical in doing graphic design. Today's society is so bombarded with advertising every minute of the day, that if you really want your message to get across, it has to be remembered. And the only way it is going to be remembered is if it is uniquely told. Being unique doesn't mean "being obnoxious" or absurd. Being unique means using the tried and tested tools of good design (i.e. the rules that God Himself created): color, shape, line, contour, form, function, volume, mass, area, plane, axis, perspective, proportion, scale, light, shade, value, hue, texture, symmetry/asymmetry, focal point, implied line, positive/negative space, balance, simplicity/complexity, etc. It is a blessing to work in this field of graphic design. And, my hope is that this small article has helped you appreciate and understand this wonderful field a little better.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Things that you can do: Start collecting logos that you find interesting. Ask yourself why do the colors and shapes work so well. Which logos are using sans serif fonts? Go through a bookstore and look at the covers of the books. Which covers caught your eye? Which ones are using diagonal implied lines? Which ones are balancing opposite colors of the color wheel? Look at magazine ads and billboards. Which ones are easy to read at close distances? At long distances? Study the history of logos. How do logos 30 years ago differ from logos of today?

GETTING IT DONE

Being a designer is fun, rewarding and (can be) lucrative, but, like with anything, it is not without its drawbacks. I wish I could say that every time I sit down at the computer, that nothing but good designs flowed from my mouse.

But that isn't the case. Every time I sit down I have to make a conscience effort to make a good design, and that usually means struggling to get there. Good designs don't happen by magic; it takes discipline, patience and fortitude. There are so many things that I have yet to learn about design. There are so many of these tools that I have yet to master. With every project comes new challenges (i.e. technological challenges, managerial challenges, being-true-to-yourself-challenges, etc.); challenges that only God and effort can overcome. So having said all that: go out make some good designs. I look forward to seeing them!

GRAPHIC DESIGN QUOTES

"The ideal logo is simple, elegant, economical, flexible, practical, and unforgettable." — Paul Rand

"To design is to communicate clearly by whatever means you can control or master."
— Milton Glaser

"Without aesthetic, design is either the humdrum repetition of familiar clichés or a wild scramble for novelty. Without the aesthetic, the computer is but a mindless speed machine, producing effects without substance. Form without relevant content, or content without meaningful form." — Paul Rand

"Art is the collaboration between God and the artist, and the less the artist does the better."
— André Gide

"Simplicity is not the goal. It is the by-product of a good idea and modest expectations."
— Paul Rand

"'Make it clear.' This fundamental assumption of communication would seem to be an attainable goal. Objectify the audience, understand their desires—appeal to their interests, eliminate the extraneous, and presto, 'effective communication.' Well, maybe not."
— Milton Glaser

"The designer does not, as a rule, begin with a preconceived idea. His idea is the result of subjective and objective thought, and the design a product of the idea. In order, therefore, to achieve an honest and effective solution he necessarily passes through some sort of mental process . . . Consciously or not, he analyzes, interprets, translates . . . He improvises, invents new techniques and combinations. He coordinates and integrates his material so that he may restate his problem in terms of ideas, pictures, forms, and shapes. He unifies, simplifies, eliminates superfluities. He symbolizes . . . abstracts from his material by association and analogy. He intensifies and reinforces his symbol with appropriate accessories to achieve clarity and interest. He draws upon instinct and intuition. He considers the spectator, his feelings and predilections." — Paul Rand

"And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him." — Colossians 3:17

"Providing meaning to a mass of unrelated needs, ideas, words and pictures - it is the designer's job to select and fit this material together and make it interesting." — Paul Rand

"Design is the method of putting form and content together. Design, just as art, has multiple definitions; there is no single definition. Design can be art. Design can be aesthetics. Design is so simple, that's why it is so complicated." — Paul Rand

"Recognizing the need is the primary condition for design." — Charles Eames

"Simplicity is the ultimate form of sophistication." — Leonardo da Vinci

"The talent for discovering the unique and marketable characteristics of a product and service is a designer's most valuable asset." — Primo Angeli

"Designers can create normalcy out of chaos; they can clearly communicate ideas through the organizing and manipulating of words and pictures." — Jeffery Veen

"Design is in everything we make, but it's also between those things. It's a mix of craft, science, storytelling, propaganda, and philosophy." — Erik Adigard

"Design is a plan for arranging elements in such a way as best to accomplish a particular purpose." — Charles Eames

"Let the designer lean upon the staff of the line—line determinative, line emphatic, line delicate, line expressive, line controlling and uniting." — Walter Crane

"The most powerful designs are always the result of a continuous process of simplification and refinement." — Kevin Mullet

"The secret of all effective advertising is not the creation of new and tricky words and pictures, but one of putting familiar words and pictures into new relationships." — Leo Burnett

"An image. . . is not simply a trademark, a design, a slogan or an easily remembered picture. It is a studiously crafted personality profile of an individual, institution, corporation, product or service." — Daniel Boorstin

"Graphic design is the paradise of individuality, eccentricity, heresy, abnormality, hobbies and humors." — George Santayana

"It is not the purpose of the ad or commercial to make the reader or listener say, 'My what a clever ad.' It is the purpose of advertising to make the reader say, 'I believe I'll buy one when I'm shopping tomorrow'. . ." — Morris Hite

"Great design will not sell an inferior product, but it will enable a great product to achieve its maximum potential." — Thomas Watson Jr.

"Good design, at least part of the time, includes the criterion of being direct in relation to the problem at hand - not obscure, trendy, or stylish. A new language, visual or verbal, must be couched in a language that is already understood." — Ivan Chermayeff

"Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established." — Proverbs 16:3

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Robert H. Flores has been creating art since early childhood. A graduate of Riverside Community College, he has worked as a graphic designer for almost 20 years. He enjoys writing and illustrating God's Word and sharing it with the world in creative ways. He is the author and illustrator of several books including, *The Graphical Epistles* and *Broken*, an autobiography of his life. He lives in Southern California with his wife, Jennifer, and three children.



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