

Graphic Design as a Strategic Business Tool

Recognizing the importance of design is a corporation's first step to creating great design.

The second step is talking to good designers immediately.

-Joe Mansueto, President Morningstar

The Gap, Herman Miller, Morningstar, and others that use graphic design as a strategic business tool, take advantage of an obvious, but nonetheless often ignored fact. Things that people see affect them.

Every physical representation of a company's image that people notice, whether it's a letter written on the corporate stationery, a product and its packaging, a brochure or annual report, a logo in an ad, a sign, graphics on a vehicle, or a name badge worn by a counter clerk, offers an opportunity to win respect and admiration. And business can successfully shape favorable consumer opinion by intelligently controlling these many forms of their communication program.

In today's message-saturated environment, communication programs that produce positive results must stand out in order to get noticed. Thanks to the successful use of graphic design by professional sports teams, manufacturers from Harley Davidson to Kodak, and Hollywood from Disney to Warner Brothers, people have become graphic design sophisticates. The age 20-somethings especially, have been brought up on TV, computer games, and brand name everything, respond only to high quality design. That's why successful companies hire graphic designers to plan and produce business communications. They realize that they need professionals to help them figure out which message to send out and how to deliver it with effective impact.

Strategically guided graphic design positions an organization to set off a very desirable chain reaction: Positive impressions create higher perceived value which boosts sales. The final links in the chain tug nicely on the

bottom line because the first links are forged into place with a results-oriented plan - a communication strategy.

The Communication Strategy

The Communication Strategy elevates results by establishing a target and spelling out the steps needed to hit it. Although strategic planning can be done by one person or a large task force, the steps are the same:

- A) Review the company's mission and marketing strategies.
- B) Interview people inside the company - employees and management, and people outside the company - vendors, customers, investors, etc. to learn their opinions about the company.
- C) Review company communications to assess strengths and weaknesses.
- D) Review competitors' communications to prevent infringement and identify opportunities to explore.
- E) Analyze the data gathered in steps a) through d) to prepare a list of goals and objectives that comprise the strategy.

Next comes the final and most critical step. Submit the communication strategy to top level management to win their approval and on-going support. Without management endorsement of the communication strategy a company will soon find that it has not one, but several communication programs producing a variety of inconsistent messages. On the other hand, a management-backed communication strategy prevents separate agendas, reduces duplication, and aligns all messages with strategic objectives. In the most successful design projects, the CEO believes strongly in the importance of design and takes an active advisory role throughout the process.

A successful communication strategy makes sure that people who ultimately control a company's success - the workers who make and deliver its products and services and the customers who buy them - receive the most consistent, most persuasive messages possible. In other words, it provides a plan that supports a business's most important mission - making profits.

Corporate Identity

Whether it happens by plan or accident, every business develops a public image or identity. Leading companies enjoy the benefits of a well-planned and administered, and therefore, consistent and universally recognized identity. They know their corporate identity inside and out and all the parts that make it up.

A corporate identity includes a system of visual elements - the company's symbol or logotypes, its name, colors, and typography. To ensure consistency throughout an identity system, a graphic designer creates a standards manual that shows how these visual elements should be applied to stationery, signs, brochures, packaging, vehicles, advertising, and other items. Standards manuals work like easy-to-read blueprints that can be followed by the people responsible for supervising the production of communications.

Corporate identities must work on a prima facie level (What you see is what you get). And they must withstand extended visibility because customers and employees see a company's corporate I.D. repeatedly. Good corporate identity systems offer a company a powerful asset that it can leverage in marketing products and services, recruiting staff, and receiving credit for good deeds.

Literature and Other Media

Businesses and organizations hire graphic designers to help them produce many types of communications. Here is a brief description of each.

Literature includes annual reports, brochures, mailers, catalogs, announcements, and the like. These usually require copywriting, which can be done by an in-house writer or by a freelance writer hired by either the client or its graphic designer. You can tell when a writer and graphic designer work well together because the verbal and visual elements form an integrated and more powerful whole.

Package Design includes virtually every item that shows up on retail shelves from containers and label designs to exterior wraps and shipping cartons. Some people say the package is the product and that is especially true with parity products (non-differentiable items such as rice, beans, sugar, salt, etc.). Some retailers refuse to carry poorly packaged products.

Signage can be promotional or informational, and interior or exterior. Signage can provide wayfinding cues and direct people to their destinations.

Three-Dimensional Exhibits and Displays allow people to experience things and ideas in full dimension. They can be as simple as a cardboard stand-up at the end of a grocery aisle or as complex as a portable three-room convention booth or a museum exhibit.

Interactive Media and Web Sites bring information and people together through intuitive graphical interfaces including devices such as touch-screens or verbal prompting. They can establish a close, highly-controlled, relationship between a company and its customer. Today, graphic designers create interactive communications from in-store computerized gift registries to huge, complex corporate Web sites.

Broadcast Design includes all kinds of television advertising from logos to banners to “window Frames” or screen borders. Broadcast and cable television networks understand, perhaps more than anyone, the power of visual messages.

Publication Design controls the format and typography of magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and other periodicals. A good design makes information easy to find and easy to read. USA Today founded its success on the innovative use of color and graphics, now being copied by newspapers across the country. Rolling Stone magazine has successfully used graphic design to stay attuned to one generation while bridging to the next.

Graphic designers also produce highly-specialized media, from posters, CD covers, and book designs to movie credits and video games. As you’ll discover, most graphic designers are very versatile.

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