

Brand Harmony

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Companies need to understand and manage design to achieve maximum brand-building results. From the design of their corporate identity to retail, web, packaging and products, design is the key attribute that ties it all together.

In all the talk about brand in the business and marketing arenas today, there is a distinct lack of discussion about one of the most powerful drivers of brand: Design. Design is the principal agent in communicating and supporting your brand's attributes. Most companies understand this only as it relates to the corporate logo. But it goes far beyond that. It is the graphic layout and visual attributes of your website, the design of your retail space or point of purchase displays, your advertising, and, of course, your products and packaging.

Consistency is key. Tying all these disparate elements together with design creates brand harmony. Every two-dimensional and three-dimensional item that your customer comes in contact with should convey a consistent message. Are you a technology leader, easy to use, young and hip, traditional, etc.? Brand harmony is the result of an integrated design effort that includes designers from many disciplines working on a common visual expression for your brand.

Here are a couple examples to illustrate. Recently, Sony launched its Clié line of handheld computers running the Palm operating system. The products in the line exhibit a very

contemporary design aesthetic. The website dedicated to the line of products also exhibits a very contemporary graphic aesthetic and this is reinforced with similar visual elements in the packaging of the products, down to even the manual and CD that are contained within. How many companies understand how to ensure the visual communication of their brand at so many levels? Not many.

Take a look at UPS. Recently the company launched a new advertising campaign that leverages the graphic identity of the logo and the design of their trucks and uniforms. The tag line is "What can brown do for you?" From the edgy art direction of their TV spots to the graphic layout of their print ads, UPS is taking an integrated approach to their brand by leveraging their core visual attributes. However, they come up short in one very important area – their website. The company has missed an opportunity to support their advertising effort and further the brand-building potential of such an important customer interaction point. This is an example of disintegrated design. UPS has obviously contracted with a good ad firm, but lacks the understanding or expertise in web design to incorporate a consistent visual look and feel.

An integrated design effort results in consistency of visual expression across all consumer touch points and helps you deliver on your value proposition.

No harmony here.

Why does this happen? Most marketing professionals do not have any training or much understanding of design as it relates to so many areas. And most designers are too focused on their specialty (logos, web, retail, product, advertising, etc.) to get the big picture. In-house groups responsible for each piece are often separated by functional departments and may never even speak to each other, much less find out what's going on elsewhere. Further, there is a lot of outsourcing of design and little comprehensive oversight.

How do great brands do it? The concept of brand harmony is evident in the most recognizable and relevant brands. Think Nike, Target, Coke, Starbucks. Sophisticated companies have high-level creative directors to oversee the aesthetic development of many or all of these areas. An integrated design effort results in consistency of visual expression across all consumer touch points and helps you deliver on your value proposition. Would anyone pay over \$3 for a coffee if the Starbucks' environment wasn't so inviting and harmonious?

It's easy to do a basic audit to see how much brand harmony your company has. Just gather everything your company puts in front of customers, from the products and packaging to all collateral, retail displays (use photos when necessary), website, even trade show exhibits, and put it together in one room. If your company has more than one brand, then the exercise should be done for each brand separately.

How consistent is what you see? Are there visual attributes that tie the elements together or does each item look like it was

designed by a different person? Perhaps you will find that you do well in a couple areas, but need to bring your website design in line (like UPS). Or maybe you realize that you need to rethink how you approach the issue of design and create a more integrated team to work on the design of all touch points.

While considering the design of all the items, ask yourself the following questions:

- *Is my company proactive or reactive in regards to design?* Using design as an afterthought will not create consistency. By understanding the need for design at the outset of a new ad campaign, branding initiative, or product development program, and involving designers early, you greatly increase the ability of the team to generate a consistent visual look and feel among all touch points.
- *Does my company understand the visual expression of its brand message?* If your brand message is unique (and it should be), then the design of your products, web site, etc. should embody and communicate that uniqueness and differentiate you from your competition.
- *Is there a link between the people responsible for web design, graphics, retail, and product design?* Setting up cross-functional teams and having a qualified design director on staff that can monitor the visual expression of your brand and ensure consistency can help bring many of these elements together.

Creating an integrated approach to the design of all customer touch points will set you on track to achieving brand harmony.

Greg Hinzmann is founder and principal of Level 4, a design strategy firm that helps companies build better brands, innovate, create new markets, increase ROI, and grow - with design.