



Visual Communication through Web Design (Part 2 of a two-part series)

To better understand some of the psychology behind making your best decisions in web design, we spoke with San Francisco web design expert Melvin Ram of Web Design Company, Inc.

Part one of this series covered Basic Design Principles, Identifying Goals, and Testing Design Changes. (<http://www.advanceme.com/VisualCommunicationThruDesign.htm>)



Using Design to Persuade

Ram believes that good design is powerfully persuasive. He believes control of this power is achieved only when your design speaks to both the logical and the emotional “sides” of the brain. “In web design,” says Ram, “basic logical and emotional needs can be strategically connected using carefully selected imagery, balanced color palettes and the proper use of negative, or ‘white’ space to achieve balance.”

Hand Select Site Imagery

Ram says imagery should always be hand-selected based on creating strong emotional connections with the intended users. Ram suggests that images containing people are often a smart and simple way to connect. “When using images with people, look for figures that illustrate ideals shared by your targeted audience,” he states. “Select realistic photos of people ideal to your intended audience. Age, sex, racial characteristics, and position of the figures may all be different variables to test to determine the best fit image for your needs.”

Ram advises that purchasing quality imagery for use on your website adds a necessary level of professionalism to your design. He states that visually, the right images will satisfy both the logical and the emotional sides of your visitors, while also psychologically communicating that you adhere to a higher standard of doing business.

The following sources offer many ‘Royalty-Free License’ options for stock photography:

- <http://www.istockphoto.com>
- <http://www.shutterstock.com>
- <http://www.gettyimages.com>.

The Emotional Side of Color

The right color choices are a critical aspect of effective web design. Color can psychologically promote your message.

Ram offers: “Don’t disregard the idea that colors tend to represent certain emotional characteristics. Lighter colors equate to a more personal one-on-one social theme (e.g., Bakeries, Life Coaches, social networking sites) while darker colors denote the cold austere business environment (e.g., financial institutions and government agencies).”

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"The more vibrant colors," states Ram, "like bright orange and neon green will usually produce more of a 'child' theme suitable for young or fun-themed sites, like children's clothes or pizzerias. While at the other end of the spectrum, somber colors will produce a more 'mature' theme."

Knowing how many main colors and accent colors to use might be a little intimidating to some, but Ram suggests keeping it simple: "Keep your color scheme to at most, two dominant colors with a few complimentary colors to fill out your palette," he says. "A good rule of thumb: the fewer colors the better."

For more information and tools for selecting complimentary color palettes:

- <http://www.colorblender.com/>
- <http://kuler.adobe.com>
- http://www.masternewmedia.org/how_to_select_perfectly_matching_color_combinations/

Bring Focus to Your Core Ideas

Visual contrast can be focused relatively easily in web design. Ram clarifies: "While contrast usually refers to how colors interact, such as the effect of having black text on a white or a grey background, you can also think of it in a wider sense. Employing various font sizes to communicate the hierarchy of your ideas is an example of using simple contrast to guide your visitors," he says. "A large, treated headline or bold line of text will pull the eye to it, setting it apart from the regular body text. This makes it a simple way to bring focus to the most important ideas of each page."

In addition to font treatments, Ram suggests using complementary colors to group similar ideas and highlight important content. "Color choices can help bring visual organization to your message, allowing your website visitor to digest your content with greater ease," he says. "For example, if every active link in your site is orange, when a user sees something orange they will come to know intuitively it is a link. Or, if only your desired call-to-action is orange and all other links share a different color, your call-to-action becomes more visually prominent wherever it appears."

Negative or "White" Space

Negative or "white" space refers to the empty space between each of the elements of the site. Proper use of negative space makes the text much easier to read, allowing the user's eye to "breathe" and glide through the elements more naturally.

"Modern web design is moving toward the use of much more white space," says Ram. "This starts to have an effect on user expectations. Judicious use of white space through margins, line spacing, headlines and font treatments, and spacing maintained between the text and images are the key behind the power of many contemporary designs."

While a lack of white space will make your pages cluttered and difficult to read, applying too much white space can come across as a simple lack of substance to fill the space. Ram suggests testing and finding a good balance where your text and imagery are worked into the design to appear tight and crisp, and your most salient points are easily scanned/identified with a glance. "The genius is in being purposeful with both white space and the lack of white space so that it guides focus and communicates hierarchy of information," he says.

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"One caveat to add," Ram warns, "is to keep an eye on how the mobile industry affects the future of design, especially regarding space and presentation. You may well see the norm move back toward more narrow and compact vertical presentations."

Some degree of negative space can be controlled by minimizing the number of ideas you present at one time. "By logically grouping and separating content to keep similar concepts more closely and tightly aligned in a physical sense," he says, "your users will have a greater tendency to be able to navigate intuitively through your design. It may mean more pages, but it should also mean more focused and effective pages."

Final Words of Advice

Ram reminds businesses that their website is a means of communication as well as a sales tool you can optimize.

"On your site," he states "you are sending out many subtle signals through your design choices. The way you present your text, the images you select, the color palette and the space you employ will work together to send a message to each user. You must determine what you are trying to say with the site and use the answer to this question to steer your efforts toward the best use of your time in testing design modifications. Keep answering the question-'How does this help me achieve my goals?' Make your design changes for a reason, and maintain consistency,"

He concludes: "Too many different things happening at once will compete for the user's attention and end negatively. By sweating the details and ensuring quality drives your process, your design will please the eye, communicate clearly, and ultimately open the door to better financial opportunities online."

See Melvin Ram's Design Company on the Web at: <http://www.webdesigncompany.net/>