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EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT GRAPHIC DESIGNERS BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK.

#6

OFF BRAND?

> ALWAYS FOLLOW YOUR STYLE GUIDE

#6

OFF BRAND?

If I ever win the Lottery (a double rollover would be nice), as a present to myself, I'm straight off to Savile Row to get measured up for a couple of Ozwald Boateng suits. Then I'm off to Turnbull & Asser for a few bespoke shirts and finally to Oliver Sweeney for some lovely Italian shoes.

Why? Well, apart from appreciating exquisite craftsmanship, I know they'll complement each other magnificently: working hand in glove to create the perfect impression. There are no weak links in that particular sartorial chain.

Well, exactly the same goes for branding. If you want your organisation to project a consistent and composed image, then you have to lay solid foundations to support it. And the way to do that is to create a set of style guidelines to manage your brand's presentation.

They don't have to be complicated or onerous, but they do have to be professionally considered – and then adhered to, by *everyone*.

In this brief article, I will run you through the basics of good – or bad – style guides and why it's important to always follow them.

WHAT'S IN A BRAND?

As we all know, branding, in some form or another, has been around for millennia. In order to communicate with their customers (many of whom were illiterate), merchants in Greece, China and Egypt used to use symbols and pictures to help identify their wares. They also used to use heated irons to permanently 'brand' their human slaves and animals – a practice adopted many centuries later by American cowboys, when marking their owners' livestock. Indeed *brandr* is the Nordic word for fire and they too, used to burn their marks (or brands) onto the products they sold.

In the UK, brands have been utilised since the mid 16th century; the oldest known is Cambridge University Press (Est. 1534) and its longevity is partly down to its consistently recognisable mark. Other longstanding British brands of repute include Barclays (1690), Twinings (1706) and Sotheby's (1744).

Impressively, in Europe, Stella Artois, now the best-selling Belgian beer in the world, preceded them all, having been established in 1366. It still utilises the horn graphic from its original logo – testament to its visual recall.

However, many well-known *global brands* – as we understand the term – were developed in the US around the early 1800s (eg Jim Beam, 1795; DuPont, 1802; and Colgate, 1806). These brands grew because of a unique convergence of circumstances, such as: advances in printing technology; the rise of advertising (via newspapers and journals); improved transportation; changing demographics and more sophisticated retailing.

Companies could finally engage with mass audiences on an unprecedented scale. Many of them realised that, to be successful, they needed to stand out from the crowd; they needed to create distinctive and memorable products and services – and part of that projection included branding.

Today, every large company (and many small ones) instinctively understand the importance of delivering a brand *experience* that customers warm to and, in an ideal world, advocate to their peers. Part of that experience is the visual engagement, and a good style guide is absolutely central to that.

"DESIGN IS THE SILENT AMBASSADOR OF YOUR BRAND"[1]

WHAT IS A STYLE GUIDE?

In its simplest sense, a style guide is a set of agreed rules or standards that can be consistently applied to any form of company collateral.

What is its purpose?

A style guide has two primary purposes. *Externally*, it is to help project a consistent visual (and aural) expression of the brand. *Internally*, it is to ensure that everyone in an organisation is singing from the same song sheet. When they refer to their style guide, they should be presented with very clear guidance on what they can – or cannot – do, when creating content or collateral. This also applies to any sub-contactors or third parties who may have been given access to the style guide. This *consistency* of application is the very essence of a good style guide.

What does it typically comprise?

At its most *basic* level, a style guide usually comprises guidance on:

> Logo, including exclusion zones

> Dos and don'ts (logo usage)

> Corporate fonts

> Corporate colours (primary)

> Stationery

> Use of photography

> Limited application to collateral.

1 Paul Rand

Who needs one?

It often depends on the size of a business and whether it understands the nuances of branding within the marketing mix. The above list would probably suffice for a small/micro business that recognises the benefits of a consistent and professional image, particularly if it is customer-facing (a professional image also helps internally too, as employees feel that they are part of something that is both focused and organised).

But as a company grows, and it develops more communication channels and branding touch points, it will need a more comprehensive style guide to maintain consistency across all collateral, particularly if it operates internationally and has a presence in multiple territories. At this point, a company would need all the above guidance, typically augmented with detailed direction on:

> Logo lock ups
> Joint branding
> Brand/core values
> Tone of Voice and writing style
> Colour palettes (secondary/tertiary)
> Iconography
> PowerPoint decks
> Printed material
> Advertising
> Exhibitions
> Uniforms

> Vehicle liveries
> Signage
> Large format graphics
> Events and conferences
> Video
> Animation
> Websites and microsites
> Social Media
> PR
> Accessibility.

The above is not a finite list but it should give you an idea of how complex managing a company's image can become – and the need to put in place a practical structure that keeps all deliverables on brand.

Having said that, we have worked with relatively large and very successful companies with little understanding of the benefits of a style guide and, conversely, micro businesses with wonderfully organised style guides, so there are always exceptions to the rule.

WHAT MAKES A 'GOOD' STYLE GUIDE?

As mentioned previously, the whole purpose of a style guide is to give users the requisite tools to apply a *consistent* look and feel to all their collateral.

If any of the guidance is too *vague*, or open to interpretation, it could lead to poor execution, potentially diluting or damaging a brand. If it's too *prescriptive*, it risks stifling designers' creativity – an unwelcome side effect that may be counterproductive to your original intentions.

What you need to ensure is that it gets the *balance* right, setting out clearly what the mandatory requirements are and where there is scope for creative flexibility.

In our experience, having both created, and worked within, comprehensive style guides since 1987, these are the three main things that we feel a client should be very mindful of:

1. It shouldn't be a straightjacket
Some style guides we've worked with have been so large (over 350 pages) and/or oppressive that we've been left wondering why these clients were commissioning *design* agencies at all. For instance:

> Several years ago a public sector client briefed us – and two other agencies – to each present a 'creative' solution for a high-profile corporate report. We were asked to design a front cover and a double-page spread. When we read through their style guide, however, we found that it was very strict and dictated the position and size of absolutely everything – from typography to tracking and grids to graphics. In addition, the colour palette was very narrow and their in-house photo library was extremely limited. The whole thing left very little room for manoeuvre.
>
> So we called them to explain that it was basically a production job and that the only options the agencies would have would be to select a background colour and then choose an image for the front cover – which we thought would be a waste of their money (as all three of us were getting paid for our submissions). We said it would be in their best interests to just choose one of the agencies (it didn't matter which one) and simply ask them to put forward three alternatives.
>
> They declined our advice and marched on, asking us all to present our 'creative' solutions. Needless to say, they received three near-identical designs with the only difference being the background colour and the front cover image. As it turned out, we did get the job – but only because we'd chosen Virginia Pine instead of Burnt Sienna for the background colour!
>
> The above is a good example of how not to get the best out of your designers, your style guide or your budget.

2. Allow it to breathe

I remember opening my first professional style guide in the mid 1980s. It was a wonderfully designed and beautifully printed ring-bound folder with tabbed sections for every conceivable application: a weighty tome, full of granular detail. It was also a lovely design piece in its own right and it sat proudly on the studio shelf next to the D&AD Annuals.

However, its biggest drawback was that it wasn't easily editable. If anything had to change or be updated, sections had to be re-printed and then re-distributed to every member of staff and agency that had a copy – an onerous (and very expensive) task.

This meant that a huge amount of effort went into ensuring that *every* conceivable application was enshrined within the pages *before* it was printed.

Today, however, we have the luxury of easily editable, online style guides that exist as microsites or pdfs. Whilst they still need designing carefully prior to launch, they can start their lives much smaller and grow organically – effectively 'works in progress'.

So, for example, a company can now wait until an outstanding annual report has been produced, and *then* insert it into the guide as a sample of how to apply the brand assets to a flagship printed item. The same applies, of course, to digital exemplars.

It also means that anything that didn't exist *before* the original guide was designed (such as a new channel, technology or touch point) can be added as it comes on stream. In addition, it also means that anything that's *not* working too well (you should get this feedback from your designers) can be refined and updated after regular internal reviews.

This evolutionary approach to building style guides is both cost effective and far more practical. It also negates the need for agencies to create unnecessarily large style guides at the outset, which is often only a 'best guess' as to how something may work. It typically takes a few projects before a client knows whether the guide is working in the real world (ie once your designers start implementing it).

So start with the mandatories and then build your style guide from a position of knowledge, where you absolutely know that your guidance is robust.

"A BRAND IS A STORY THAT IS ALWAYS BEING TOLD"[2]

2 Scott Bedbury

3. Discretion is key

We often find that the best style guides are those that strike a comfortable balance between things that are non-negotiable (such as logos, corporate fonts and colours) and things that can be left to a designer's *discretion* (such as conceptual design and layout).

For absolute clarity, we are talking here about professional, talented designers, not those who are poorly trained or inexperienced. A good client should be able to easily distinguish between the two.

This discretion allows a style guide to really *breathe*; providing clear guidance but not interfering with the creativity and energy that you want from your designers. This approach should deliver continually fresh ideas with which to engage your clients and stakeholders.

WHAT MAKES A BAD STYLE GUIDE?

If you ask any professional designer what three things are most likely to hamper them (and undermine a client's credibility), when working within a style guide, they'd probably list the following. Try to avoid them, if at all possible.

1. Clichéd stock imagery

When suggesting the imagery you would like your designers to gravitate towards, try *not* to pick images of beautiful, smiling Americans with perfect orthodontistry (more often than not joyfully pointing at screens or laughing collectively within glass-walled board rooms). Or to use 'conceptual' images, such as globes floating miraculously above the palm of a hand… or, that hardy perennial, the firm business handshake… or the missing jigsaw piece… I'm sure you get the picture (pun intended).

If you do use these images, your collateral will not be taken seriously by discerning clients. You'll also run the risk of looking just like every other company that has opted for lazy clichés. These images are *not*, in any way, original and will only portray you and your company as having a lack of imagination (and gravitas).

We understand that many clients have to use stock photo libraries to keep image costs down, but you must carefully consider the types of images that you use to portray your organisation. Whenever possible, try to commission *bespoke* photography to set you apart from your competitors. After all, differentiation is key, isn't it?

2. Overly-complex colour palettes

Don't get too clever with your colours. The whole purpose of corporate colours is to communicate something that the brand is meant to represent universally, whether that's warmth, authority, innovation, danger etc. More often than not, some form of colour psychology has been applied to this process, so they're not randomly chosen because they 'look nice'. Or at least they shouldn't be!

But when it comes down to the secondary and tertiary colours, ask yourself what their *purpose* is. Are your customers really going to understand the eight bespoke colours that carefully demarcate your Business Divisions? Will they really remember the twelve tertiary colours that herald the beginning of each chapter in your product catalogue? Of course not.

Our brains struggle to demarcate colours much beyond the basic colour wheel (so that's red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet). It's an achievement if your clients can remember the main corporate colours in your identity. The rest is just window dressing, so don't over complicate it with layers of incomprehensible colour information.

An alternative approach to colour usage, and one we advocate, is to circumvent the traditional, pre-determined palette and instead allow designers to 'pipette' colours directly from any images used. This means that a designer can effectively select a colour that already exists in *any* part of an image (ie the sky, a face, some grass) and then use this colour for supporting information, such as typography.

The effect is to subliminally link everything in a much more harmonious way.

If you doggedly follow a pre-determined palette, it is far more limiting. For instance, if we were designing a brochure cover or a microsite home page, and the selected picture had an orange sky, but the style guide said *pink* had to be used for that particular Business Division, you could end up with a rather unpleasant colour clash or, alternatively, you'd have to find an image to match the colour palette – a case of the tail wagging the dog. Either way, it wouldn't reflect too well on your organisation.

So try to ensure that your colour palette is concise, coherent and, above all, useful.

3. Rigid grids and styles

I can't remember how many times we've read a style guide and it says something like '*the main heading is to be Helvetica Neue Medium, 48pt over 52pt, U/L, ranged left, and must not exceed two lines*'.

Then, when we attempt to drop in the client's approved copy, it runs to *five* lines. To compound the misery, the sub heading is even longer, rendering the design unworkable from the very outset. The only alternative is to break the design guidelines, which sort of defeats the object. This is what can happen when the grid is too rigid or a client doesn't know how to work within its own style guide. The theory simply does not meet the practice.

I would advise that, unless you can predict *every* conceivable outcome of a layout when building a style guide (which is highly unlikely), you should keep your grids, suggested positioning and size of typography relatively flexible. Or at least be open to regular reviews and adjustments.

WHEN CONTROL IS REQUIRED

There are instances, however, when a client absolutely does not want any 'discretion' or 'interpretation' of their style guide. As far as they are concerned, there is no need for any creative execution; all the design decisions have previously been made and then explained in very prescriptive terms in the style guide. Anything that varies from this is deemed 'off brand'.

This is often the case with large multinationals, where they want their brand to look identical the world over. No variation at all (except maybe for cultural nuances). For these types of client, consistency is far more important than creativity.

I have some sympathy for this approach as I have seen, first hand, what some so-called designers can do with their 'discretion', even when given the correct guidance. You couldn't possibly predict that anyone could create something quite so poor, whether it be farcical typography, bizarre imagery, confused messaging or ludicrous logo usage. And to rub salt into the wounds, they are almost always 'designed' in the wrong package, such as Word or Corel Draw. All of these are guaranteed to damage a brand.

The downside to this inflexible approach is that internal staff, unless briefed clearly, can get bored with the repetitive nature of the collateral and try to push for 'something different' (ie off brand), putting an agency in an impossible position.

WHO SHOULD BUILD IT?

In an ideal world, we believe that style guides should be produced by highly experienced designers, in partnership with clients, who specify the broad content required. It's important that the people who put them together understand the challenges that other designers will have when using them.

Of late, we've worked with several style guides that have been put together by 'brand strategists'. Although they articulated the vision well enough, they evidently didn't have enough granular understanding of the tactical execution. As such, they produced style guides that *looked* lovely and *read* eloquently – in terms of Tone of Voice, core values and messaging – but clearly fell short of delivering workable solutions to real-world challenges; the ones that designers would typically face when trying to implement them.

As a client, the last thing you want is for your lovely new style guide to be greeted with a chorus of "*it doesn't work properly*" when your designers finally get their hands on it. Just because we can now amend online style guides at will doesn't mean that we should be any less vigilant – or knowledgeable – when putting them together.

SUMMARY

Love them or loathe them, style guides are here to stay – and they do have a purpose. They come in all shapes and sizes: some good, some bad; some well considered and some just vainglorious attempts at being clever; but if your organisation is lucky enough to have a good one, try to stick with it. After all, it's in everyone's best interests to look good.

TAKE AWAY TIPS: WHY YOU SHOULD ALWAYS USE YOUR STYLE GUIDE

1. It's there to protect you
If your organisation has a style guide, its use is *not* optional; it's mandatory. It's there to protect you, your brand and your designers. If you ignore it, you will only have a hand in damaging your brand and wasting your money.

2. It's not about you
"*I hate our style guide. Can we make our [website/brochure/banner stand] more like Apple's*"?

In a word, *No*. The above is a common refrain, and one we've heard many times before. It shows a basic misunderstanding (or wilful abuse) of what your brand is trying to achieve. A personal dislike of your company's style guide is a very poor excuse to brief a designer to circumvent it.

3. It helps to shape the creative
Style guides, now that they're mostly online, can be regularly reviewed, tweaked and updated – to keep the creative execution fresh. They're not the straightjacket they used to be. If you feel something doesn't work, collect your evidence and proactively suggest a change or revision at your next Marketing meeting. A good style guide will evolve effectively, but only if everyone pushes in the same direction.

4. They're very expensive to produce
A thorough re-brand can be a very costly and time-consuming affair. Part of that includes producing a style guide to visually encapsulate everything that has been agreed. This process is often driven and advocated by senior management; it's how they wish the company to be perceived externally. Anyone contravening those wishes will undermine all this hard work.

5. It strengthens your brand
With every consistent touch point, your customers become more aware of the quality of your service or product. Within this consistency lies the strength of a brand. Our job, as marketers and designers, is to express that brand as effectively as we can – whilst working within the parameters of the style guide.

Next article

In the next article (*#7 Design it yourself? Beware of DIY solutions*) we will be looking at:

> Why everyone now thinks they're a designer

> How DIY solutions can actually cost you money

> Why comedy isn't always funny

> Why it's best to leave it to the experts.

All this and more will be made clear in article *#7 Design it yourself? Beware of DIY solutions*.

#7

DESIGN IT YOURSELF?
> BEWARE OF DIY SOLUTIONS

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About the author

Tim Purvis is a hugely experienced communicator, having worked in the design and marketing sector since 1983.

He is an award-winning chartered designer and has successfully delivered effective and measurable corporate communications for blue-chip clients such as Tate & Lyle, British Airways, Timberland and University College London.

His experience also encompasses the public sector, where he has helped to drive behavioural change programmes for many central government departments, including Education, Health, Transport, Justice and the Home Office.

He is now sole owner and Managing Director of Bentley Holland, a through-the-line communications specialist, offering strategic insights and solutions within the brand development, stakeholder engagement, client acquisition and corporate communications arenas.

All eight articles in the series can be downloaded from **bentleyholland.co.uk**

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