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Give Your Pages a Design Makeover

Next time you have your company's marketing material in your hand, look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. Is the design appealing? Does the message come through clearly? Are the colors pleasing and up-to-date? If you feel there is some room for improvement, then your material may be a good candidate for a design makeover.

When you understand the basics of electronic page layout and design, you will be able to analyze your current printed material and determine where improvement is needed. You will be able to tackle design problems with more insight. And since the success or failure of a page is heavily influenced by how well information is presented and organized, you may find that a relatively slight redesign will produce dramatic results.

Four Elements of Page Design and Layout

The best design begins with a plan that takes into account the basic elements of page layout: the *headline or banner* that establishes the purpose of the page; *hierarchy* that visually ranks the copy in order of importance; *anchoring elements* that need to be included but

have secondary importance; and *reader eye flow* that describes how the reader's eye moves across the page.

When encountering a new page, the reader's natural eye movement is to begin at the upper left quadrant of the page, then move diagonally to the bottom right quadrant. However, this natural movement can be disrupted by things like dark areas (created by heavy type or graphic elements), white areas (created by large amounts of white space) or competition between design elements of seemingly equal importance. The challenge of good design is either to cooperate with natural eye flow or to give clear signals to guide the eye around the page.

One clear signal is an attention-grabbing element – bold display type or a photograph or graphic – that commands the eye to move to the desired location and begin reading. This location typically indicates where the most important information can be found. After the reader completes this, it should be evident where to go next, either because of another clear signal, or because the next most important information falls within the natural eye flow.

Anchoring elements, because they have secondary importance, should be placed out of the way of natural eye flow but arranged to attract the eye after the primary information has

Element

Five dwarves kisses umpteen aardvarks, even though five extremely schizophrenic wart hogs bought one aardvark, however the Jabberwockies annoyingly sacrificed five aardvarks, even though elephants marries five angst-ridden televisions laughed.

One bourgeois botulism fights umpteen sheep, but obese poisons grew up. Five sheep ran away, however Batman mostly fights the tickets. Five elephants drunkenly telephoned the party schizophrenic tickets. Two obese Klingons marries one fountain. Two speedy bureaux grew up. Umpteen pawnbrokers bought two chrysanthemums, even though five extremely putrid mats auctioned off Minnesota. One ticket incinerated the quixotic orifices. Two cats fight five dwarves. Afghanistan gossips, yet the extremely purple lampstand grew up mostly annoyingly, then one pawnbroker telephoned five silly elephants.

Two putrid chrysanthemums annoyingly telephoned five cats. The Jabberwocky grew up. Five bourgeois wart hogs auctioned off the progressive Jabberwocky. Umpteen quite bourgeois orifices quickly untangles Batman, yet two dwarves easily towed orifices, because umpteen slightly irascible mats untangles the dwarves. One ticket incinerated the quixotic orifices. Two cats fight five dwarves. Afghanistan gossips, yet the extremely purple lampstand grew up mostly annoyingly, then one pawnbroker telephoned five silly elephants.

grew up mostly annoyingly, then one pawnbroker telephoned five silly elephants, although two Klingons gossips, even though five almost speedy Macintoshes cleverly auctioned off slightly purple chrysanthemums, yet five bureaux noisily marries one speedy elephant. Two cats incinerated the mats, but one progressive orifice very easily marries five obese mats, even though Quark fights the trailers. Afghanistan gossips noisily.

been read. If the anchoring elements are part of a regular, recurring publication such as a newsletter, they should appear in the same location in each issue.

For many page layouts, the headline serves a dual purpose of orienting the reader to the purpose of the page and indicating the most important editorial copy. However, when designing a newsletter, the banner or masthead needs to establish the identity of the publication without overwhelming the rest of the page. The reader's eye should light on the banner or masthead, then move smoothly to the most important story on the page.

Planning the Design

To begin redesigning the page, disassemble it into its four basic elements, then analyze each element to see if it is up to its assigned task. Does the headline or banner establish the purpose of the page? If it is a headline, is it sufficiently bold to attract the eye and tell the reader where to begin reading? If it is a banner or masthead, does it identify the publication without competing with the lead story?

Next isolate the most important editorial copy. Determine whether it will fit comfortably on the page or if it needs to be continued. Analyze the photograph or graphic that accompanies it. Is it tied to the editorial copy in a way that creates interest or helps comprehension? If not, find something else that does.

Look at the anchoring elements. If

they compete too vigorously with the most important editorial copy, determine how they can be changed – perhaps by being isolated inside a box, by being reduced in size or changing the typeface to a lighter weight.

Assembling the Elements

An effective, pleasing design has an underlying organization that is very satisfying to the reader. One of the best ways to achieve this organization is to use a design grid as the basis for the page layout.

Think of the grid as a framework to which the design elements are affixed. A grid may be a network of uniformly spaced horizontal and vertical lines to produce square modules; it may be a typographic grid that defines margins, columns and the principal spaces of the design; or it may be as simple as the guides in page makeup software programs. Its utility when redesigning a page comes from the fact that it keeps all the elements properly aligned.

Start placing elements on the grid, beginning with what you have decided is the focal point of the page. To establish hierarchy for the reader, be sure to incorporate strong contrast into this placement – a bold headline contrasting with the type for the body copy; an oversized graphic; or a photograph cropped to draw the eye.

Next, gather the rest of the information into logical groups and determine whether the groups are related or unrelated. Indicate the relationships with proximity; that is, place related groups close to each other and unrelated groups farther away.

As you arrange the elements, use the grid to create and maintain alignment. A strong line, such as the edge of a photograph, can establish a vertical or horizontal orientation for other elements (body copy, headlines or graphics).

Finally, examine the layout to see if there are any consistent design elements – things that recur in the design. A bold font, a thick line (also called a *rule*), a series of bullets, a spatial relationship or a color are all examples of repetitions that readers will visually recognize. Repetition helps unify a design; if none exist, create some.

Analyze and Refine the Layout

The final step is to analyze the layout. Look for bad hyphenation; rivers of white space running through copy; trapped white space; heavy black areas; widows and orphans; sub optimal leading between paragraphs; missing jump lines; too many rules; etc. Some techniques for locating these things is to squint so the words are slightly blurred, or hold the layout up to a mirror.

Ask Us To Critique

Because we know you want the best possible design and layout, we will be happy to look at your preliminary layout and make suggestions if necessary. Call us at 212-349-1233 and tell us when to expect your file. Good design does not come easily. It is a result of studying good design, understanding how to analyze design problems, knowing who the design must appeal to, applying simple design principles, developing a sensitivity to good design, and lots of trial and error.

Design Proofreading

After designing a page layout, consider giving it a *design proofreading*. Just like proofreading words, design proofreading is intended to identify imperfections or mistakes in a design layout that hamper its effectiveness. Here's what to look for when proofreading for design:

- *Simplicity*: can an element be removed without compromising the message?
- *Tight layout*: is the layout unified, or does it have holes of trapped

white space or improper alignment?

- *Hierarchy of importance*: is the most important element of the design indicated by its dominance?
- *Eye flow*: does the design move logically?
- *Balance*: is the design top heavy or out of balance?
- *Headlines*: are headlines short for quick reading?

- *Photographs and illustrations*: are they appropriate and add to the reader's comprehension?
- *Overall*: does the layout seem comfortable?

If you need some photographs or illustrations to improve your layout, call us at 212-349-1233 and we'll browse in our collection of stock photography for something appropriate.

Q. When designing a display ad, I like to include enough information to fill the area completely. This doesn't leave much white space. Does that matter?

A. White space in any design makes the layout look cleaner and easier to read. By filling the ad dimensions with type and graphics, you risk making the

ad look cluttered and discouraging readers. Compare the two ads below to see which is more likely to engage your interest.

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TRICKS & tips

If you must fit a lot of text into a small amount of space or if your project consists entirely of text, your layout may at best look uninviting, and at worst, intimidating. Over the years, we at Nova have developed some tricks for organizing text to improve readability. Try some of these techniques yourself:

- Add contrast to large blocks

of text by using headlines, subheads, headers, footers, pull quotes, sidebars and bulleted lists.

- Make headlines larger and use a different font than the body copy.
- Add a one-point rule above

and below a subhead and make it span two columns of text.

- Use white space to balance black space by basing the design on a grid.
- Create a drop-cap from three to six times larger than the body copy.



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