

Getting The Most From A Design Audit

by Neil Tortorella

It's amazing how much visual material businesses create. Think about the typical mid-size company. They have signage, stationary, forms, vehicle graphics, uniforms, brochures, catalogs, webs sites, newsletters and advertisements to name a few things. As a company grows, so does its visual arsenal. Pretty soon, there are more locations, more signage, more forms, more stationary, etc. If management isn't careful, it can get out of hand faster than a group of young guys at a Britney Spears concert. That's where the design audit comes in handy. Don't let the name fool you. This kind of audit is a good thing.

A design audit is a review of all the visual elements used by a business, as well as its message to the public. It's something a company can do that's akin to therapy, leading to corporate enlightenment. Without a method in place to monitor visual style, a business is in danger projecting more personalities than Sybil.

And, it's not just for the big guys. Small businesses can benefit from an audit as well. Just like their larger cousins, they have signs, forms, stationary, ads, and brochures too. By the way, if you're a small business, and you don't have these things, call me. I'll fix it for you.

A design audit concerns itself with the consistency of visual style and message. What does it all look like? Is the design consistent throughout all materials? What message is being sent? Is it the right one? Is it consistent? Is the level of production quality where it should be? The visual materials produced by a company are a key factor in how it is perceived by its market and other audiences. If a logo is the face of a company, visual style is its clothes. Sure, there are several other factors that contribute to corporate identity. Quality, customer service, environments and the likes all work in concert to create an identity. Successful companies will direct these with a strategic plan. Companies that don't police their materials and message simply let their identity happen to them. Not a real good idea in a competitive marketplace.

An audit begins with the collection of all visual elements a business creates. For companies with several operating locations, materials are gathered from each. These are then studied by the designer and an analysis report is presented to management. Many businesses have a shocking revelation when they see all their visual elements together in one place, at one time. It's often a monster made of pieces and parts that would do Dr. Frankenstein proud.

As companies expand, they often start to have materials created and printed in remote locations. "Geez, we're almost out of letterheads. If we order through headquarters, it will take too long. Let's just go down to the local quickprint shop and have some run off."

And so it starts. A little here, a little there. Next thing you know, your company has 15 or 20 versions of its letterhead. Same goes for other elements. For the small business owner it's often the same thing, just on a smaller scale. Out of business cards? Run out and get some printed. "Oh, you know, I used to like that typestyle, but the one in the book here is pretty neat. Let's go with that. Oh, and make it blue this time. Whadda ya mean what color blue? I don't know. Just blue!"

So, is that a big deal? You betcha. When the visual style goes down the tubes, so does positioning and with it, potential sales and mindshare. If things keep changing, customers and clients can get a little nervous. Worse, they may not even recognize you in the market after the latest change. If there are multiple operating locations, the connection between them begins to fade faster than your favorite pair of jeans.

Visual style and message are a big part of branding. When you go into a McDonalds in Hoboken, it's the same as the one in Sri Lanka. Drink a Coke in Detroit and it's the same as the one in Tokyo. The colors are the same, typestyles are the same (within the confines of the locations' alphabet). That's comforting to people.

We communicate with words, but also with our mannerisms, body language, clothes, attitudes, etc. Think for a moment of someone who talks like Neiman Marcus, but dresses like the local Goodwill. How believable is their message? The message and the style that it's wrapped in need to line up. When a business strays from a consistent visual style, its message begins to erode. One part of the company is saying one thing, while another is saying something else. It's kind of like corporate cognitive dissonance, where you think one thing, but do another. That creates anxiety. Management gets anxious because the market isn't reacting as they believe they should. The market gets anxious because they can't figure out what the company is trying to say.

A design audit brings all the inconsistencies to light. From this point, management and the designer can begin to structure a plan to insure that the company and its message are presented in harmony. That harmony should be chronicled in a Standards Manual. This documents how an enterprise's visual style should be portrayed. It shows how the company logo is structured, what colors are to be used, using a standard numbering system like the Pantone Matching System. It will also show what typefaces are to be used along with any specifics about them.

A Standards Manual can be just a couple of pages for a small company or a volume equal to War and Peace for a multi-national. It simply depends upon the size and scope of the company and how many applications are typically used. A large company will need to show signage applications, uniforms, vehicle applications and several others,

while a small business may only need to show the logo, its colors, stationary and a few forms. The point is to document it and never, ever, under any circumstances, stray from it.

With a completed design audit and a clear set of standards, you're ready to meet the market with a stronger, consistent identity. You'll also save yourself a lot of time and aggravation down the road when it comes to preparing new or additional visual materials. You tend to sleep better too.

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