Four things you need to know about brand guidelines

By Chemory Gunko

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According to Woodrow Phoenix in his book *Plastic Culture: How Japanese Toys Conquered the World*, "A distinctive appearance and a simple set of characteristics lead to an extremely flexible brand."

He couldn't be more right... and yet time and again you get the same requests from marketing managers and business owners: "we want brand guidelines with templates that can just be easily filled in when we need them."

So once again I'm back to debunk a few myths about brand guidelines... and here's what you need to know:

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1. There's no such thing as a template

You can create as many designs and 'templates' for collateral as you want - each new piece of marketing will still require a new design.

The reason for this is something you aren't anticipating: content & copy drive design.

So your template may have four clear spots for content and copy in it's poster layout, but you have only three points of info... or worse still you have five pertinent points that need to be put across, or you have the required four lots of copy but they're too long to fit into the design at the font size you've specified.

Copywriting is always the starting point of a design - you have to know what information you're going to put across first; you make it look pretty afterwards.

The design is all about balancing the look and feel and making sure that all the relevant information is easy to take in - you cannot just force a set of content to adhere to a design.

The other downside of templates is the Internet boom that we've experienced: if all your content and collateral looks exactly the same, people will stop looking at it - we get bored quickly on the web.

You need variety, difference and interest in your digital collateral, and you need to put more focus on making sure the content is good - because good content is what will actually get shared. The audience of the Internet couldn't really give a damn about your brand.

2. Colour standards

There are 256 shades of grey in the RGB grey scale alone.

These greys range from blue greys to green greys to warm, khaki-coloured red greys... and that's just talking about greys.

There are equally as many reds and blues and blacks and yellows and oranges and more... and you've adjusted the colour settings on your screen to make it more comfortable for your eyes. What this means in a nutshell is that you aren't actually seeing the colour your designer used, you're seeing your computer's interpretation of that colour.

And even worse than that you're seeing the RGB versions of the colours; this is not the colour standard you'd use for print.

This doesn't seem like too big of a deal, except it is and here's why: in print (CMYK) you have literally hundreds of shades

of black you can choose from - whereas RGB tends to render all shades of black as black or #000.

As a result, when you're looking on screen, you may not notice that the designer used a green based dark grey or black for the background in one part of the design and another shade in another part, but you will see it when you print and your colours come out all blotchy. Or your grey is too green or khaki.

Things go wrong in print quickly, and you have not chosen a colour palate until you've seen it printed and played out over a number of different pieces of collateral and from a few different printers.

3. Not all designers are created equal

Before the advent of the web, designers were taught the basics of design and how to use the programmes they would work in. They were expected to be artists.

Since the introduction of the World Wide Web we've seen a rush of young, new designers, many of whom have only studied digital media and design.

So while they may be great artists who suit your style and can create a look and feel that you feel represents you, they do not necessarily have the print knowledge they need to ensure that your print collateral matches your digital collateral. Even worse, they're making design decisions around your brand when they don't know what to expect from pieces of collateral you'll create in the future.

You have no idea what you're going to need in the future in terms of collateral, but you do need a brand guideline that will allow you to create what you need to create without limiting you going forward.

An example of this would be an annual report: your designer has laid out the template, specced the font size, you've made all your decisions... and now you have to fit a seven-column layout into the middle of a section of copy - and the font size you chose doesn't allow it to span the width of the page.

So... are you going to go back and update the entire document and your brand guidelines with the new font size, have a mismatched font size in the middle of a section or perhaps even to flip your page landscape?

This also applies to logo development.

Many of the artistic effects we use inside the design programs go horribly wrong when you convert them from RGB to CMYK. So instead of beautiful highlight in the relevant spot on your logo you'll land up with a circle of white.

The design and rendering knowledge that goes into print is very different from what goes into building websites - and that even differs from the knowledge it takes to code an emailer.

If you are going to go the route of having a proper brand guideline drawn up, please ensure you are using a senior and experienced designer - this is the one place where cheaper is in no way better.

4. Fonts and typefaces

The first thing you have to know is that there is no 'right' or 'true' font to use for your brand guideline, or even for digital or print collateral. Design, like all forms of art is subjective and it's about what looks good to you.

The second thing you have to know is that fonts look different at different sizes and on different pieces of collateral.

So, your minimum font size for a pull-up banner is going to be very different to the font sizes you use for brochures or on the web.

On a pull-up banner, like a billboard, type needs to be visible from a distance and easy to read quickly. On a print brochure, you could comfortably drop to size 9 or 10 for your body copy, but the same brochure digitally would require a font size of at least 14 because you have baby boomers to cater to and different sized screens to account for.

Likewise that cool heading font you've chosen... you did check that it has weights and styles right? Because, if it's just one font at one weight how are you going to make it italic or less bold when you've rendered it at a bigger size?

Until you print and render the abovementioned pieces of collateral, you won't know what those minimum font sizes actually are - and there's no way to second guess this because every font takes up a different amount of space at the same size.

Likewise, you may be in love with a typeface and desperately want to use it for your brand, but you can never do that with an emailer and only in certain cases can you do it with a website, in some cases if you're willing to have it cost up R10k a year just to have that font license on your website.

And then it can still go wrong and default to Times New Roman.

At the end of the day...

At the end of the day your brand guideline should be exactly that - a guideline, a set of instructions that enables the designer to ensure a thread of consistency throughout your collateral so that it can be recognised as belonging to you and your brand.

If you make a brand guideline too restrictive you're going to land up changing your own changes, and often land up spending even more hours on generating collateral than what you would've done otherwise, because the designer now has the task of trying to force your collateral to meet the design.

Designers and copywriters are creative, artists - they need the space to be creative and create beautiful and impactful messaging that helps you sell your products, services and brand.

So you have to ask yourself what's more important - sticking to a made up set of guidelines because that's what you were taught is the right thing to do, or creating impactful and meaningful collateral that actually helps you do what you want to do - which is make money.

ABOUT CHEMORY GUNKO

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