

GRAPHIC DESIGN ESSENTIALS FOR MARKETERS

Study Notes

Graphic Design Essentials for Marketers

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LESSON 1: GRAPHIC DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND BEST PRACTICE

Why Graphic Design is a Critical Skill

Importance of using the right image

It's important for audience engagement to be able to incorporate great graphics into what you do. It's easier now than ever to put together high-quality images, whether it's to complement that post on social media, or the blog you're going to post. And using the right image *directly* influences your chance of success with your audience.

Consumers today spend so much time plugged in and using devices that digital media provides the best opportunity to engage your audience and attract new prospects. With mobile devices being the most popular way to access the internet these days, it's obvious the best way to connect with them is digitally.

What's also interesting is that consumers have less time and also smaller devices to process messages. That's why great images are the best way to get your message across quickly and easily.

Benefits of great visuals

What are the benefits of adding great visuals into your deliverables?

- Using quality images is a great way to **clearly deliver your message**. When expressing an idea, as a visual aid it's easier to SHOW rather than TELL.
- It also **builds credibility and trust** with customers and prospects – especially on the web.
- **People process images more quickly** than written words.

Easy to create

It's also easier now than ever before to put together great imagery. You don't need a degree in graphic design to create great images. You also don't need a massive budget. In fact, there are a variety of free tools that have all the features you'll need for most small design projects. Plus, they're linked to a lot of resources which are also available to use for free. And because they're easy to pick up and use, you'll be able to do pretty much everything you need within a short space of time.

The flip side, of course, is that poor design or inappropriate use of graphics can have the opposite effect. Not only does it negatively affect the way your product and business are perceived, it can also lead to additional costs – meaning changes, delays, and even full redesigns.

Design Fundamentals: Color Theory

Let's look at the important elements to focus on when you're designing a graphic. The key things to get right are:

- Color
- Imagery
- Typography
- Composition

Why use color?

First is color theory. Color is a critical element to get right in your designs. It's used to attract attention, convey meaning, and of course for aesthetics.

We don't usually even think about the colors we look at; we judge things quickly and often measure instantly whether something is desirable, professional, nice, ugly, or even weird based upon its color.

Color contrast

The most important thing to think about when using colors is the contrast between them. Contrast refers to how well one color stands out from another. You can use contrasting colors within an image to make text stand out from its background, for example. Complementary colors, like yellow and purple, or blue and orange, for instance, provide maximum contrast with one another.

Contrast can also be used to guide people's actions; to let people know what you want them to do. If you want to increase 'click-through,' make sure that there's a strong contrast between the call-to-action button and the rest of the design.

Color wheel

You can check how colors contrast using a color wheel. A color wheel shows how colors are related visually. For example, complementary colors are those opposite one another on the color wheel.

Effects of poor color contrast

So what happens if we don't have good contrast? Users will have a poor experience and can misunderstand meaning. Colors also give visual cues to meaning – for example, a green button usually indicates an affirmative action, like 'OK' or 'Accept.' But if you were to design a large 'Accept' button and make it red, it could really confuse the user, and in some cases, the results could be disastrous.

Common colors used by brands

Let's talk about the most common colors used by brands, and what meaning or feeling they can invoke in their audience.

- **Red.** The color red can trigger powerful emotions, both positive and negative, to create a sense of urgency – which is why it's effective with sales. It also encourages appetite, so it's used regularly in the fast-food sector.
- **Orange.** Orange, a warm color, is considered light and fun, so it suits less 'corporate'-feeling brands. Darker shades of orange are associated with autumn, which lends itself to more 'earthy' brands.
- **Green.** Green is easy on the eye and synonymous with health. So you'll often see it used by brands promoting health products, such as pharmaceuticals or food brands. It can also be linked to growth or power, such as with financial or military organizations.
- **Blue.** Blue has a calming effect on the mind and is the color of reason, but also of strength, wisdom, and trust, which is why it's used so widely. It's a safe option for brands, but brands need to consider if it will help them stand out in their space.
- **Pink.** Pink has historically been used to portray femininity, like with Barbie and Cosmopolitan Magazine. But nowadays, a lot of mainstream brands use it regardless of their audience,

such as Lyft. It portrays youth, but also inspires comfort and represents hope. Pink has been used successfully in many industries to 'break the mold.'

- **Black.** The color black is synonymous with luxury and power. Combining it with a small amount of a bright color can add energy to sophistication. Black is well suited to some industries like fashion, for example – but perhaps not to others, like health.
- **White or silver.** Using white or silver represents cleanliness and has often been used for a modern look and feel. It needs to be used carefully though, as it can lack personality. Many brands use white to complement another, more dominant color. When executed well, adding white to your design offers a modern, simplistic, and clean look.

Design Fundamentals: Images and Typography

Let's look at how best to use imagery and typography within your campaigns, starting with imagery.

Imagery

We've seen that images lend themselves very well to digital media, but there are some general points to consider.

Creating an emotional connection

Firstly, audiences respond well to images with people in them. It helps create an emotional connection as campaigns are targeted at real people and your imagery needs to reflect that.

Quality is important

Image quality is also very important. When customers are considering a purchase online, they want to be able to scrutinize images that give a high level of detail of the product. People often abandon an ecommerce site because the product image is not of a high enough quality to help them make a decision. It negatively affects their impression of the product, and you can lose the sale.

So when you choose images as part of a design, make sure that your images are high definition, or HD, and are appropriate to the device your audience will use. They should not be stretched or pixelated.

Graphics on mobile devices

Next, remember that most web traffic comes from a mobile device – so it's very important that you test your graphics on mobile to make sure they still look okay on smaller dimensions. If not, consider creating a separate version of your graphic specifically to show to people who are using mobile devices.

Best image dimensions

Here's a guide to the best image dimensions for different screen sizes:

- Banner Image: 2000px wide and 800px long
- Slider: 1920px wide and 890px long
- Icon: 300px wide and 300px long
- Post/ Event: 425px wide and 220px long
- Portfolio: 1920px wide and 768px long

Typography

Using fonts

What about the typography, or fonts you use? It's important when choosing a font for your visual, not to use something wildly different. Readers expect to see familiar fonts, such as system fonts – for example, Arial, Helvetica, Roboto. Use a maximum of two to three font families on a single webpage, and even fewer for your ads and images.

A font family is a grouping of fonts defined by commonly shared design styles. For example, Roboto is a family which has bold, italic, or thin styles.

Serif versus non-serif fonts

You will also come across 'Serif' and 'Sans serif' fonts. A 'serif' is a small, decorative line added to a character. The most common serif font is Times Roman. A common font without serifs, or 'sans serif,' is Helvetica. Serif fonts are used to improve the readability of text in things like blogs, articles or newspapers. Try not to use more than ten words for each line. For headings, consider using a heavy-weight, sans serif font with a larger size. Ensure the right emphasis – or size and 'weight' – is applied to the text according to its priority.

Text and images

It's also best practice not to add text directly to an image, particularly in web design, and instead to work with your web team to overlay responsive text on the image. Why?

- If the image is on mobile, then sometimes the text is too small to read.
- Another consideration is localization: because text is fixed, it can't auto-translate.

If you need to add text, for example for a social media image or blog image, ensure that there is sufficient color contrast to make the text more legible. A quick 'hack' to add better background color contrast is to darken the border.

Remember: It's the combination of an image plus your message and how it's worded, and even the fonts you use, that can mean the difference between success and failure in reaching your audience.

Design Fundamentals: Composition

Removing clutter and ordering content

Once you know the colors, imagery, and fonts for your image, you need to put them together in the best way possible – and that's where composition comes in. Your goal should be to make the design as simple and elegant as possible. Removing clutter and visual noise helps the user to focus on one task at a time.

When you have taken away all unnecessary information, you should make sure that your content – meaning all your images, buttons, color, shapes, and text – is ordered in a clear and logical way.

Each piece of graphic design content should serve one purpose. When you're creating a design, ask yourself: "What is its purpose?" Should it

- Lead the user to do something?
- Inform them?
- Nudge them to keep reading?
- Nudge them to fill in a form?
- Just give them information?

Even if you have multiple goals in mind for your content, pick one and make sure your design makes it very clear to the end user what the goal is.

Keeping your design simple

Now let's talk about the power of simplicity in your design. As UX expert Nick Babich (2016) says, "Minimalism isn't about stripping away elements, it's about adding just enough to let them tell your story." There are two key ways to keep your design simple:

- Ensure you use whitespace.
- Remove anything that's not absolutely necessary.

Whitespace helps focus the attention on whatever it is you want the user to see. It prevents the user from being overwhelmed by what he or she is looking at. Every item within your design should have a purpose. Unnecessary information can make your design convoluted and distracting.

Examples

A great example of whitespace is the blogging platform, Medium. Medium's website doesn't distract its users with ad banners or frustrating pop-ups. Instead, it prioritizes the right content, and shows information that the readers actually want to see. Instead of showing the published date, it actually shows the length of time it takes to read – which is very clever!

Now, everyone knows a 'bad-looking' website when they see it. For example, consider the CNN website in 2000. The composition is a mess and the content is hard to read without getting distracted.

Simple design doesn't have to be dull, but it should prioritize one thing as the focal point of the page. Instagram is another good example of this. The primary purpose is to view the images, and everything else is stripped away.

So just remember: Focus on getting the key things right – color, imagery, typography, and composition – and your designs will hit the mark with your audience.

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LESSON 2: DESIGN FOUNDATIONS – BRAND GUIDELINES AND CONSISTENCY

Building Effective Brand Guidelines

Brand style guide

Once you've got the basics of color, images, typography, and composition down, you might wonder where you can find templates and examples of each of those things to use for your own brand. Well, you can get all of these easily from a brand style guide.

A style guide is a document that provides guidelines for the way your brand looks in different media, like websites, social media, and so on. Every brand should have their own. Whether you're adding an image to your website, to a social media post, or to anything visual at all, using a style guide means you don't have to guess at colors, images or fonts – they're all available with plenty of examples in your style guide.

The beauty of having a brand style guide is that it puts everyone on the same page, presenting a unified vision of your business, whether your designs are coming from marketing, customer service, sales, or web design.

Ensuring consistency

But what if you don't have a style guide, for example if you're an early-stage company? At some point, you'll need to create one to ensure consistency across your brand. Until you have one, you can ensure consistency simply by making sure your design is consistent with your other main digital assets, like your website or product visuals.

Pretty much every major brand shares their style guide online so that everyone knows what to do and not to do when using their brand, so look there for inspiration.

What to take from your style guide

Let's look at the main things you'll need to take from the style guide when you're putting together a graphic. Those are:

- Colors
- Typography
- Imagery
- Logos

They should be easy to understand and reproduce, and it should be clear how and when to use them.

Color palettes

First, let's look at the colors or the color palette. You will find a description of the colors and perhaps even why they represent the specific corporate brand. Aside from sample splashes of the various colors, you will also find RGB and HEX values, indicating the exact color codes, so that you can reproduce each within the editor you use.

The **RGB code**, or Red, Green, Blue values, are simply three numbers indicating how much of each primary color is used to make up the desired color. For example, a ‘salmon’ color might use the following RGB: 250, 128, 114.

You might also come across the **HEX code** for a particular color. This is a 6-digit hexadecimal number indicating the intensity of red, green, and blue in the color.

Typography

What about the typography or fonts you use? This part of your style guide will make sure you’re consistent, in order to look professional. You may find a number of different fonts and sizes listed, each for a different purpose. The style guide dictates which one goes where and will typically show the spacing between letters and paragraphs as well.

Imagery

Now, let’s think about imagery. Obviously, when you’re putting together graphics, you’ll want to know which photos or images are right for your brand. The imagery section of the style guide should give lots of examples, so that you don’t need to get approval for every one you use.

Logos

Clearly, your logo is a very obvious part of your brand. Your style guide should ideally show how NOT to use your logo, so that you or others at your company can avoid misusing it.

To summarize, your style guide should contain all the info you need, including some great examples you can use with your own branding. So whether you’re adding an image to your blog post or newsletter, the style guide will make your life a lot easier.

Understanding Your Design Goals

Identifying your target audience

Before you start putting together a graphic, there are a few things you need to establish. While your style guide is designed with your general market in mind, you need to know who the specific target audience is for the graphic you’re creating.

Some questions to think about are:

- Who is the target audience?
- Where does the target audience hang out online?
- Are they heavy readers who prefer long articles with accompanying graphics?
- Or do they prefer more bite-sized content on platforms like Instagram?
- Do you want to show the graphic to existing customers, prospective customers, or both?

Understanding the context

Understanding the context in which the graphic will be deployed is essential because it affects the way it should look. LinkedIn, for example, is a professional network which caters to business and corporate professionals. If you intend to use the graphic on LinkedIn, does it best reflect your

business goals considering the tone of the platform? Conversely, perhaps the graphic is less serious, even applying humor, and will be deployed to a platform like Twitter or Facebook.

Understanding the medium and format

You also need to consider the medium and format of the graphic.

Medium

Consider the medium for your graphic:

- Website
- Email newsletter
- Tweet or post on Facebook
- Blog
- Somewhere else?

Furthermore, you should consider how your audience consumes the content. Do you attract mostly mobile consumers or desktop users? There are a lot of questions you should be asking yourself about where this graphic will go and who it will be shown to. Tailoring the content to the appropriate medium and platform will ensure it has the desired impact.

Format

You will also need to make sure that the design or form supports the function of the graphic. Ask yourself what the overall function of the target graphic is. For example, it may be an image to support a blog intended to increase your subscribers. And while it may not always be formally stated, it's important to ask questions, so you clearly understand the desired use. Having clarity around the question of function enables you to encourage your audience to take the action you want them to take – whether that's to subscribe to a newsletter, to sign up to a trial, or to take some other action.

Budget and deadlines

Finally, before you start, it's important to know what budget, if any, is available. Plus, what is the deadline for your graphics? How long do you have to put them together?

Using stock images

While you can still achieve a huge amount with few resources, especially if you're reusing existing assets, sometimes it's faster to use or modify a stock image to achieve what you want.

If you intend to use stock images, you will need to account for the cost and time of acquiring the right images, as well as any additional licenses which may be required for the use of the image in different ways. Stock images CAN be free, but can also cost up to \$10, depending on the package you go for. Free stock image sites include:

- Negative Space
- Death to Stock
- Pexels
- HubSpot's free stock photo library

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LESSON 3: DESIGNING AND BUILDING GRAPHICS

Designing Graphics by Repurposing Images

Once you're familiar with the fundamental concepts of graphic design, you've a set of brand guidelines you can follow, and fully understand the design goal for your project, you're ready to design and build your graphic.

Before you get started, ask yourself: Can the graphic you need use images and logos that already exist? Most of the time, the answer to this question will be 'yes' – especially if you're just starting out.

Finding the right image

Let's look at what you can do to save time in finding the right image to use. There are many places you can go to search for and find your ideal visual. Internally, for example, as you've seen, the style guide is a great place to go to get pictures and logos. You may also have a number of existing company assets, either purchased from third parties or built in-house.

There are also good web sources for images, fonts, and so on, both free and for a small fee. Finally, you can use templates and graphics provided by free online graphic design tools like Pixlr or Canva.

Repurposing an existing image

Another great option is to repurpose an existing graphic – like using a stock photo as the background for a social media image, for example. By 'repurposing' an image, we mean adapting it or breaking it up to use for another purpose. For example, you can take an infographic and turn it into a number of individual images.

Benefits of repurposing

Repurposing offers many benefits:

- Repurposing is quicker than creating from scratch – and time is a precious resource.
- It's also more cost-effective than purchasing.
- If an image appears in more than one place, it reinforces the message.

In short, if you have good evergreen content, always look for opportunities to maximize reuse and save yourself time.

Using pre-made design templates

There are some great pre-made design templates out there for most of the jobs you need to do. Editors like Pixlr and Canva have libraries with extensive templates and examples for producing social media images and blog graphics that you can use.

Here are some rules for using design templates that you should be aware of:

- Ensure that the quality of the images is HD and free from any copyright.
- Ensure you remove any placeholder text or content.
- Be inspired by these sources, but don't just copy them directly.
- Be careful of the contrast and fonts of some of the templates.
- Watch out for inaccessible text.

Getting Started: Setting Up Your Image

Walkthrough

In this topic, we use the free Pixlr tool to walk you through these steps:

- Creating a new image
- Setting canvas size
- Importing images

Modifying Your Image: Text and Colors

Walkthrough

In this topic, we use the free Pixlr tool to walk you through these steps:

- Modifying an image by adding text
- Setting colors

Modifying Your Image: Buttons, Logos and Exporting

Walkthrough

In this topic, we use the free Pixlr tool to walk you through these steps:

- Adding buttons to an image
- Adding logos to an image
- Exporting the image

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References

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