Five
Simple
Steps

A Practical Guide to

Designing the invisible

by Robert Mills

A Practical Guide to Designing the invisible
by Robert Mills

Published in 2011 by Five Simple Steps
Studio Two, The Coach House
Stanwell Road
Penarth
CF64 3EU
United Kingdom

On the web: *www.fivesimplesteps.com*
and: *www.designingtheinvisible.com*
Please send errors to *errata@fivesimplesteps.com*

Publisher: Five Simple Steps
Development Editor: Simon Mackie
Copy Editor: Bill Harper
Production Editor: Emma Boulton
Production Manager: Sarah Morris
Design & Art Director: Nick Boulton, Mark Boulton
Typesetting: Nick Boulton, Colin Kersley

ISBN: 978-0-9561740-3-1

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

Foreword

Mark Boulton

As a designer, you will be asked ‘why?’ A lot.

Your colleagues will ask you. Your manager, your clients and your peers will too. The answers you give can win or lose work, determine the direction of a design or help win you awards.

Early in my career, I was told several times: ‘Tell me, don't show me’. As a commercial designer, explaining your work is a critical part of what you do.

When designing for the web, we’re often wrapped up in mechanics. The nuts and bolts of the design process. Browser capabilities, the content, the imagery, the HTML, CSS or Javascript – the *stuff* of our designs. Each of us has a toolbox of design-related tips and tricks that we call upon when similar problems arise. What is often missing from that toolbox however, are the reasons why. The rationale. Why use black for this project? Why not? Why does that sidebar look like wood-grain? Why does this icon look like a fish? Important questions, that demand an answer. And that's what this book will give you: some answers.

So much of what we do is invisible. In fact, someone once said that design is like air: you only notice when it’s bad. The subconscious cues, messages and stories are what makes our designs effective; not how pretty they look. To create really great design, you have to understand why; not just for your benefit, but for the person you’re explaining it to.

If you’re an experienced designer looking for a challenging read on semiotics, then this isn’t the book for you. However, if you're dabbling in web design, or just starting out, then Rob Mills has crafted a super-practical guidebook that will give you a few more of those tools to put in that tool box.

A few tools ready for when you need to explain why that icon looks like a fish.

Contents

Acknowledgements

This book was far from a solo project, many others offered their time, knowledge and support and these acknowledements go a small way to express my gratitude.

Five Simple Steps
I'm always proud to tell people that I was once part of the FSS team, having been production editor on the very first title. I'm also proud to know join the ranks of their authors. Huge thanks to the whole team:

Mark and Emma: I still think you've both taken a risk by going ahead with this book and I'm so grateful for that risk and for all of the opportunities and support that you have given me, both through Five Simple Steps and through my time at Mark Boulton Design. To say you kick-started my career is an understatement. I sincerely hope that Designing the Invisible is a book that you guys are also proud of and glad to have on the FSS shelf.

Sarah: thanks for the updates, organisation and encouraging words throughout the final stages.

Nick and *Colin*: Thanks for all the hours spent crafting the final book, it was such an incentive to know the book would be in safe hands when handed over and that when it came back it would look incredible!

Nathan, *Dan* and *Alex*: Thanks for all of your hard work in creating the ePub version, the website and for proofing and sense checking the book respectively.

Contributors

Mike Kus: Thanks so much for allowing me to use Carsonified as a case study. Not only was it a privilege to have someone of you calibre willing to share your work so openly but it was a true inspiration to learn about your process.

Matthew Smith: I love the SquaredEye website so was thrilled when you were happy for me to include it in the book and also answer my questions about the site, the story, the process and the decisions behind the final design.

Carolyn Wood: You may say your involvement was small but you still took time to check a chapter and provide some info, both of which made it a better read. I was delighted to be able to have you involved.

David McCandless: Thank you for allowing me to include your infographic for colours in cultures. A picture paints a thousand words and this graphic is the best visual representation I've seen for this subject matter.

Camdon Wilde: Thank you for permission to include the Periodic Table of Typefaces. It's a great resource and one that really complimented the text of my book. Really grateful that you allowed me to share this with my readers.

To anyone else who had a chat with me about the book, shared a link, tweeted words of support and of course bought the book. It means a lot. More than you realise probably.

Editors:

Simon Mackie: There is no doubt in my mind that this book is 100 times better thanks to your input. There's no denying that it was a long road but your comments, feedback and suggestions kept me on track, helped me develop a concise writing style and above all else, made me think about every word that committed to paper. I hope I get to meet you in person one day to buy you a beer!

Bill Harper: I've said it before Bill but I want it written here for all to know, you are truly excellent at what you do. You made me sound like a better version of me! You never put words in my mouth and you always understood exactly what I was trying to say. I cannot imagine releasing this book to the masses without your input. You too are owed many beers!

Family and Friends

Mum, *Dad*, *Rich* & *Lou*: Thanks for letting me talk about the book for about three years and spend many weekends and evenings hidden away working on it. I hope you're proud of the final product.

To all my other friends and family. Thanks for being you, for letting me be me and for buying this book (you had better buy it!!)

Bluegg: I never knew work could be so much fun. I've loved being part of the team in the final months of this book and appreciate the support you've shown by letting me have time off for it and for being behind it 100%. Once you've tried the Bluegg way there is no other way!

Introduction

I'm fascinated by how much we are influenced by the media and indeed how much they make us think we are in control of our own decisions. Are we really in control though? I'm not so sure because despite being a media savvy species, there are subliminal forces at work affecting our moods, buying habits and emotions.

The layout of a supermarket can cause us to leave with bags of goodies we didn't need. The colour of a hospital wall can stop us from feeling agitated in a stressful environment. A simple icon or sign can quickly tell us if we can proceed or not. The structure of a sentence and words used can convey a mood or tone to us. A logo can reinforce the values of the company it represents.

As we are continually exposed to the hidden messages within the media, we become adept at receiving these messages and the more we are exposed to them the more capable we are at reading them. It's like a continuous circle of exposure, ability to process, exposure, and ability to process etc. This happens to the point where we digest the messages without thinking and that's the fascinating part, how much of the final story are we 'reading' subconsciously? A lot.

This happens on the web of course or else this book wouldn't exist. All of the elements of design communicate to us, either literally through words and images or on a more invisible level. This book is the focus of the latter elements, the invisible ones. Colours, brands, tone of voice, icons, typefaces, they all reveal more of the story and if given the consideration they deserve they will contribute to a more fulfilling user experience for the target audience.

That's a lot of buzz words for one introduction. Let's get on with it and find out how to make the invisible visible.

Part 1

Invisible Communication *101*

What is invisible communication?

The power of invisible communication

Communication in cultures

Who should care and when?

Making the invisible visible

1

What is invisible communication?

'Invisible communication' describes the way we can convey messages, moods and values using more than just words and images. A variety of these methods exist in the design world that can help us tell our stories more effectively and efficiently.

Invisible communication is happening all around us, often on a subconscious level, revealing more of the story being told.

When we talk about the story in the context of invisible communication, we mean the whole package that's being communicated. In the case of a website, all of the page elements – copy, colour, imagery, icons, and tone of voice – contribute to one story, a shared message being communicated.

Here are some examples of invisible communication. More are featured throughout the book, showing invisible communication at work both online and offline.

One well-known example is subliminal messaging. This is where images and sounds within media (such as advertisements) are received and processed by the audience on a subconscious level, or 'below threshold'. It could be the flash of an image or an implied message, and audiences often don't acknowledge them or even realise they've been exposed.

Subliminal messaging has become associated with sexual references and innuendo. This, coupled with controversy around its powers of persuasion, has led to subliminal messaging techniques being banned in several countries, including the USA and the UK.

Colour is a fascinating invisible communicator, because each colour has unique connotations. Colours can evoke emotions in people, guide them when used on signs, and hint at specific moods such as romance and fear. The meanings communicated by colours can also vary depending on the culture or context in which they are used. Red for example may connote romance or war, purple wizardry or wealth and white can represent both marriage and mourning

Learn More: Part 3, 'Using the right palette', has more information and examples on how colour can communicate invisibly

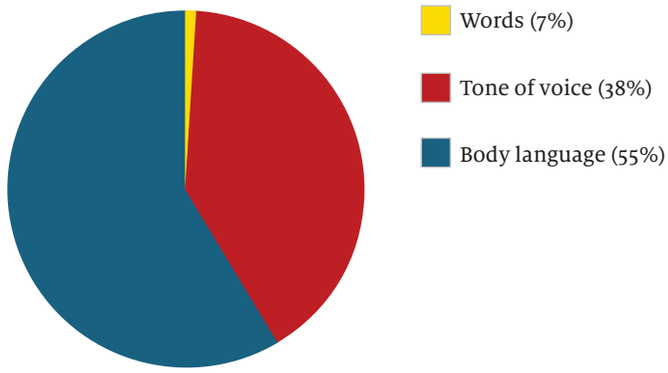
Tone of voice is another example of invisible communication. This isn't what we say but *how* we say it – a significant difference. We can use tone of voice to express a range of emotions such as anger, happiness, surprise, and sorrow. The pitch and volume we speak at influence our tone of voice.

Tone of voice often relates to body language, another form of invisible communication. With body language we use gestures, facial expressions and body posture to communicate non-verbally. Sometimes its message even conflicts with the words we use.

The 7-38-55 rule

The most commonly quoted communication statistics are from studies conducted by *Albert Mehrabian*. He concluded that when we communicate, body language conveys the most meaning (55%), followed by tone of voice (38%) and finally the words themselves (7%).

Learn More:
See chapter 19 for more information on using tone of voice as invisible communication.



Anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell estimated we can make and recognise around 250,000 facial expressions[1]

While the statistics are interesting, they can't be taken literally. Otherwise an email would only communicate 7% of what the author intended, and we would be able understand 93% of what anyone said in a foreign language.

The real value in Mehrabian's studies is that it makes us think about how we communicate, and how much is conveyed in ways we don't always realise or consider.

The few examples I've outlined are all ways to connect with and communicate to an audience beyond words and imagery. Whether you are a designer, a content strategist or a project manager, understanding invisible communication and its uses can enrich your end product through the power of more effective storytelling.

It all comes back to the story.

[1] The Definitive Book of Body Language by Allan and Barbara Pease.

A world dominated by the invisible

We live in a world where we are inundated with invisible communication. Billboards, television, films, websites, road signs, adverts and a multitude of media outlets ensure we are rarely left alone. Even supermarkets place products and use specific colours to guide shoppers around a pre-determined route, acting on their subconscious and convincing them to buy items they don't need.

Films are an interesting study of invisible communication because they are littered with codes and references. They're hidden in the narrative or dialogue, and often play on cultural, political and social knowledge. For example, someone packing a suitcase is a 'signifier' – the action alone signifies that person is going somewhere. It doesn't need to be stated specifically in the dialogue exchanged between the characters.

Films use other invisible communication methods, such as colour. In *The Sixth Sense*, for example, the colour red is used as a storytelling device. Red is absent for most of the film, and where it does appear it is significant as it represents "anything in the real world that has been tainted by the other world".[1]

This isn't explained before or during the film. It is left to the audience to notice the use of the colour red and to draw their own conclusions as to its importance. The film is just as enjoyable if the audience doesn't notice, but it does add another layer to the story. An invisible layer, if you like.

This is why colour is one of my favourite invisible communication methods. It can add so much more to a story. Red communicates romance and love, but also danger and war. Green is associated with all things environmental and purple has connotations of royalty, wealth and luxury. Using appropriate colours in the right context can really enhance your storytelling. With invisible communication, the power often lies in how

[1] Screenwriter/director M. Night Shyamalan, "Rules and Clues" bonus featurette on the DVD.

audiences can receive and process the messages without realising it. These messages are then reinforced through exposure to media and culture to the point where audiences can get insight and meaning without the message being explicitly stated.

Most people associate the colour red with love, romance and passion. This cultural knowledge means designers can simply use red to create a product or website that screams romanticism.

We learn these associations between colours, symbols and similar devices throughout our lives. The meanings and relevance become reinforced through the continual association between, for example, one colour and its connotations.

Audiences are a clever bunch. They have been exposed to various invisible communication methods (and their corresponding meanings) so often that they learn to read between the lines and draw meaning from them.

The strength of many

While invisible communication methods are useful on their own, they're even more effective when combined. For example, using specific colours, icons, tones of voice, imagery and branding can create an altogether more engaging and successful website.

Invisible communication is just too important to ignore.

What's next?

The rest of this section looks at the power of invisible communication, how it is influenced by cultures, how it can be integrated into design projects, and examples of invisible communication online.

2

The power of invisible communication

How we communicate with others can have significant implications on how they perceive us, our business and our products. We have the ability to engage people or offend them, depending on the approach we take.

Good communication is the foundation of successful relationships; invisible communication can help a company build, maintain and preserve a strong relationship with its customers. If your website is a key connection with your audience, then every facet of what and how it communicates will influence your relationship with them.

Why is invisible communication important?
Invisible communication can:

- Provide a more fulfilling user experience
- Communicate more quickly and efficiently
- Make a personal connection with our audience
- Improve our storytelling
- Target the right people in the best way

Thinking about what you say and how you say it will lead to better relationships with your users. Of course the 'what' is the easier of the two – it's the 'how' that needs invisible communication know-how. But if you ignore it, you risk failing to reach the right people.

Was it good for you?

Invisible communication can improve the way users experience our website by making the page elements tell a consistent message that's relevant to them.

The words help them accomplish their tasks through accurate information and clear calls to action. Colours can connote moods and emotions, and the tone we use can make our site feel more personal or friendly.

Good communication will draw users in and show them the way. It should also leave them wanting more, or at the very least let them achieve what they came to do in the first place.

And it should be the same for their entire experience. So as well as the main website it should be in every other touch point between the user and your brand/service, including 404 pages, shopping cart processes and contact forms.

Less haste, more speed

Invisible communication helps us tell stories quickly and efficiently. That's what makes it so powerful.

Icons are a good example of how to communicate quickly and efficiently. If we follow standard conventions, one small symbol can communicate instructions to users or help them navigate our site. The home icon, for example, is a standard way of helping users get back to the homepage. We don't need to state it explicitly with words and copy on the button. A simple icon will suffice. Web users understand an icon vocabulary, which allows designers to say more with less.

They say a picture paints a thousand words. Imagery can quickly convey a story in the same way colour can convey a mood or emotion without needing any supporting content.

Learn more:
Part 2, 'Following the right signs', looks at icons, signs and wayfinding on the web.

Everyone has a story to share

There's that word again! Storytelling has long been used to share information. Telling stories on the web can be a challenge, as we tend to think of it in relation to more traditional methods. By incorporating invisible communication into our design process we can say more to users without being explicit. Invisible communication and storytelling are perfect partners, and their child is a great user experience.

Learn more:
Interested in storytelling? Part 5 is dedicated to this topic!

One advantage of great storytelling is being able to connect to audiences on a more personal level.

By targeting our content at specific audiences we can make our websites more relevant, and therefore more personal. This, along with an appropriate tone of voice and a well-crafted story, can make the difference between great communication and miscommunication.

To tell a great story online we must consider every strand of the story including colour, imagery, copy, branding, information architecture, navigation and tone of voice. We can use them individually to communicate, but combined they create a richer and more fulfilling experience.

Responsible communication

There's a quote from the *Spiderman* comics that tells us "with great power comes great responsibility". This also applies to web design. To design powerful communication vehicles such as websites we have a responsibility to find our story, understand our audience, and then tell that story in the best way possible.

This helps build trust between our users and our brand, product or service. If we don't invest time to plan our story and how invisible communication contributes to it, we risk offending the very people we are targeting. We may even need to change our story depending on the cultural, social and political context we work in.

3

Communication in cultures

Our culture encompasses more than just our language. It shapes our perceptions of the world around us. Culture also influences how we communicate and is a key part of telling stories, sharing information and targeting audiences effectively.

While some words and gestures have universal meaning, cultures can vary in their use of language, gestures, and even the meaning of elements such as colour. We need to be aware of these differences when communicating to different groups.

The subconscious culture

Learn more:
If you want to read more about cultural variations of colour, jump to chapter 14. But come back to read the rest of this chapter!

In all cultures, people experience the same emotions: sadness, happiness, anger, laughter, etc. However, each culture also has its own unique qualities, behaviours and messages learnt from birth unconsciously via cultural imprinting.

The environment we grow up in heavily influences our perceptions of the world, as well as the relevance and meaning we place on things like colours, words, language and imagery. For example, in western cultures the colour green represents good luck, but in China good luck is associated with the colour red. As a westerner, you wouldn't make a connection between good luck and the colour red unless you were exposed to Chinese culture.

Cultural meanings and associations are also reinforced via the media and people we interact with, to the point where every time we see a certain colour, symbol or word we immediately understand the meaning behind it.

A good example is the association between a rose and love. In films, books and TV programmes one person will often give another a rose as a symbol of their love. So we're taught that a rose symbolises love, and whenever an example is communicated the symbolism is reinforced. Eventually the knowledge that a rose represents love is processed subconsciously, but only within cultures where this symbolism exists and is relevant.

A cultural message is something everyone within that culture knows that outsiders do not, but which these outsiders can learn.

Changing cultures

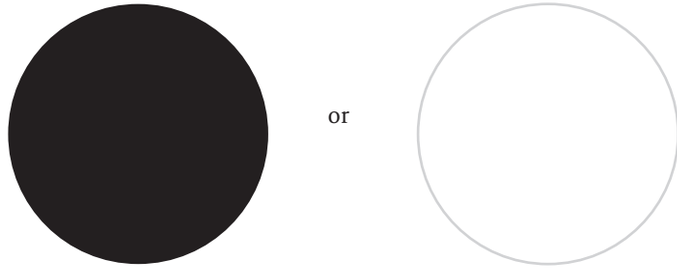
As we grow up our interests change. We visit more places, are exposed to different types of media, and our horizons are broadened. Naturally, we attach new meanings to things around us and view the world differently.

Similarly our cultures change over time. Maybe a new political party is elected, or cultures react to environmental issues, and so how we live is affected. Cultures (and their associated messaging) don't change overnight, but over time they evolve, develop and adapt. This means some cultural messages will fade away, others will change and new ones will be introduced. Once these changes and additions have been adopted, they will start being reinforced and eventually become part of the subconscious culture.

Cultural influence

Culture influences all forms of communication, both visible and invisible.

The colour of mourning?



Colour is perhaps the best example of how invisible communication varies between cultures. For example, in the western world the colour black signifies mourning and death. But for the Chinese, mourning is historically represented by the colour white.

Communicating effectively and accurately comes down to knowing your audience. Understanding the cultural relevance of colours, signs and other invisible communication types can, in the context of the web, help your site appeal to your users and draw them in.

One symbol, a whole belief system

A solitary symbol can represent a whole religious or belief system, as shown here:

Similarly, colours can represent an entire religious or social group. For example:

- Green is considered to be the holy colour of Islam
- Judaism is represented by the colour yellow
- In Hinduism, many gods have blue skin
- White is linked to peace across many religions

Used in the right context, colours and symbols can communicate more than the literal shade or visual symbol.

Political parties can also be represented by a colour. In the UK, for example, the following pairings exist:

- Labour – *Red*
- Conservative – *Blue*
- Liberal Democrats – *Yellow*
- The Green Party – *Green*

But these pairings of colour and political party aren't universal. In Belgium, for example, the colour blue represents the liberals, while in Finland it represents the National Coalition Party.

Parties can even be differentiated by different shades of the same colour. In Ireland, for example, the Green Party is represented by light green, while dark green is linked to Sinn Féin. How one colour can stand for such varying values, beliefs and behaviours depending on which part of the world you're in is staggering.

The shrinking world

Naturally, many invisible communication types (such as signs) are more relevant in the cultural context they're meant to be seen in. But thanks to the Internet we have a wider understanding of other cultures and how we can communicate within them.

The Internet is shrinking our world. Not literally – the planet isn't getting smaller. But we can now connect to others more easily than ever before. Through films, websites, music and books, we can learn about other cultures and learn how communication differs between these cultures. The lines between one culture and another can become blurred, but there are still significant differences in what we communicate and how we communicate.

For example, if you avoid making eye contact in the UK or USA you may be perceived as being shifty or rude. But in Japan children are taught to focus their gaze at their teacher's Adam's apple or tie rather than maintain eye contact. Whether or not you look someone in the eye may seem like a small thing, but it can have a big impact if you get the custom wrong.

Do your research

Never assume you know about a culture or group. Things change, sometimes very quickly. It's always worth investing time in researching a culture or audience group. Even if your research confirms and validates your knowledge or assumptions, it is still time well spent.

Don't under-estimate the significance of knowing the cultural, political and religious messages that exist invisibly behind colours, symbols, words, signs and images. Just as you'd probably read up on a particular country's customs (hand gestures, language, ways to act, etc.) before you visit, you should also do your research when communicating via other platforms, such as the web.

4

Who should care and when?

Invisible communication isn't solely the responsibility of the designer. To achieve the most effective invisible communication the other members of the project team need to be involved during the project cycle.

Who can design the invisible?
It's usually the designer who incorporates invisible communication as part of the overall design. But other members of the team can also get involved, including:

- Copywriters
- Information Architects
- User Experience Experts

Designers
Designers should have an in-depth knowledge of using appropriate colours, icons, typefaces and other methods of communicating through design. And they should consider these methods throughout the whole design phase.

Designers can fuse the design elements together to tell one coherent story. If they take ownership of invisible communication there should be a consistent storytelling approach, as well as a final design that answers the client's brief.

Copywriters
The role of the copywriter is critical when it comes to using invisible communication methods such as tone of voice.

The copywriter shouldn't work in isolation. They should be involved in the project as early as possible to ensure the tone of voice matches the visual design elements. An informal tone of voice will jar when incorporated into a formal design.

Information Architects
The information architect helps to group the information and structure the content (our story). They may not contribute to invisible communication directly by choosing colours or the tone of voice, but they help determine what information should be included and how it should be organised. This will influence not only design decisions, but also what information is shared and ultimately how the story is told. In effect the information architect provides the frame on which the story is hung.

User Experience Experts
User experience (UX) and invisible communication go hand-in-hand. If the invisible communication elements are done right (appropriate colours, brand consistency, appropriate tone of voice and efficient use of signs), then naturally the user experience will be enhanced.

For example the *Threadless* website, which sells t-shirts, has a fun and informal tone of voice, clear navigation and neutral colours that appeal to everyone.

Anyone and Everyone
I'm not saying these are the only people who can or should be involved in invisible communication. A team may have a project manager who is a colour theory expert, or a content strategist who knows how best to communicate to different cultures or audience groups.

But thinking about invisible communication and integrating it into the project process should be a team effort. It should start at the research phase and continue through to the content population and post-launch phases.

The key is effective and accurate communication among the entire project team. If a decision is made about the design, the decision must be passed on to everyone concerned to keep their involvement in line with the overall story. There needs to be a consistent voice telling the story, through both the visible and invisible communication elements. And the only way to achieve that consistency is through a well-managed project.

Invisible communication and the project cycle

Different invisible communication methods will be applied at various points during the project. Exactly what happens when will be influenced by its scope, agreed deliverables and target audience. But despite these variables, most web projects go through certain well-defined phases.

Research and Discovery

This phase occurs after all pre-project meetings have been held, the contract is signed and the project has just kicked off.

Depending on the scope of the project, it may allow time for competitor research, initial design concepts and, most relevant for invisible communication, audience research.

Determining the wider target audience, and then drilling down to specific user groups as needed, will help the project team make design decisions and communicate effectively and efficiently via the invisible. For example, the research and discovery phase can help us learn about the social and cultural worlds our users live in, which will affect not only *what* we communicate but *how* we communicate.

Design

Every project has different requirements and methods, but they all have one phase where invisible communication plays a key role: the design phase. Giving consideration to invisible communication here is fundamental to everything else that follows.

The design stage may involve wire framing, prototyping, designing concepts, generating sitemaps and any number of other design activities. At some point, the team will consider elements such as colour, icons, copy, signage systems and branding. All of which can be used for invisible communication, as we'll discuss later in the book.

How these elements get incorporated into the overall design will be dictated by the designer and project team. But the information obtained during the research phase will point the way and help determine some of these design decisions.

Refinement/Iteration

The refinement phase will include time to ensure all invisible communication is relevant, accurate and complimentary to the overall design and project specification.

At this stage there shouldn't be any drastic design changes (such as a complete colour change), but more tweaking and refinement of the copy, symbols and the design itself.

Targeting the audience

Some methods in our invisible design toolbox (such as colour) may be constrained by the client, particularly if they have already established brand guidelines. If that's the case you'll just have to work within the parameters. But that doesn't mean you can't tailor the rest of the content or design towards a specific audience.

The best way to approach invisible communication is to ask the client a lot of questions about the audience, and the project brief and goals. The project team can then use the answers to make decisions about invisible communication.

Showing, not telling

So far we've identified what invisible communication is, why it is important, how it can be powerful, and who should be involved and when.

In the next chapter I will deconstruct some web pages, and peel back the layers of invisible communication. I want to show it, rather than write about it in detail.

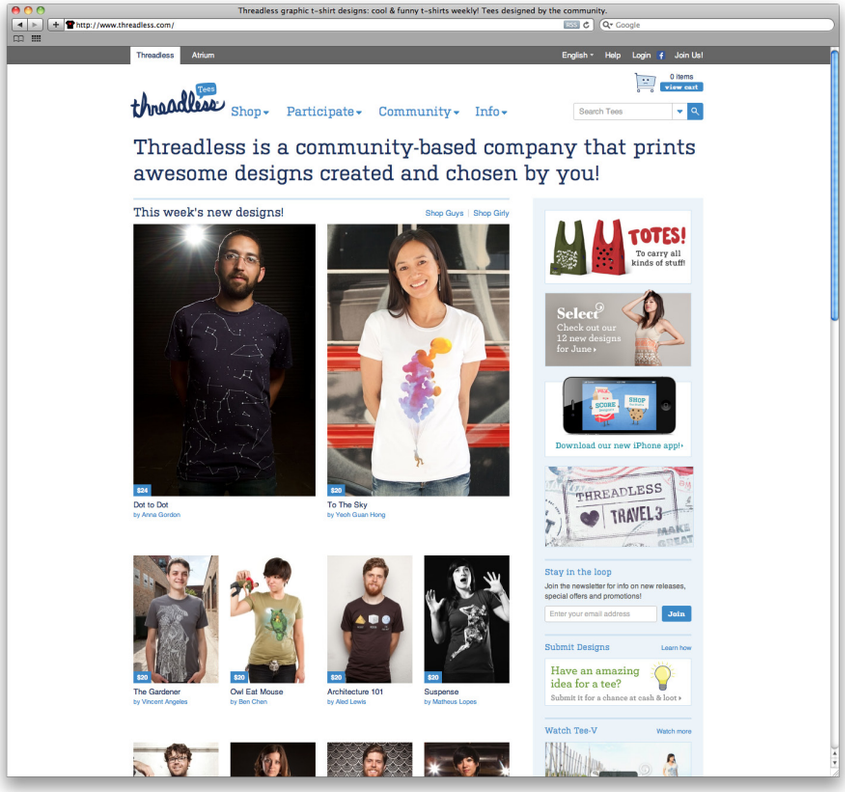
For the rest of the book I'll be talking about how you can design the invisible, using practical examples to demonstrate how the theory works in practice.

5

Making the invisible visible

The following websites provide good examples of invisible communication. Although the websites offer different services and target different audiences, they all share common invisible communication techniques that we'll examine in this chapter.

Threadless.com[1]



The *Threadless* website sells t-shirts to a young, stylish and slightly geeky market. So it's crucial that it appeals to this specific audience.

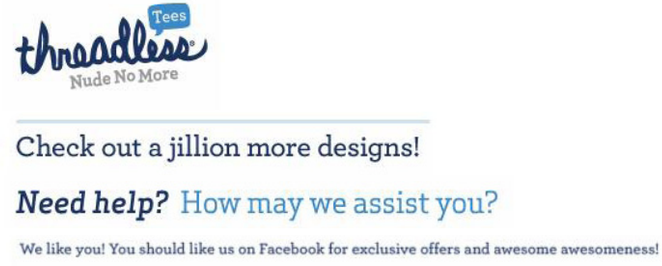
[1] http://www.threadless.com

Colour

Colour is used to organise content within the site. This is most evident in the Community section, where the forum categories are represented by specific colours.

Typeface and tone of voice

Both the typeface and tone of voice on the Threadless site are friendly, informal and approachable.



This fits well with its purpose – selling t-shirts to a young and stylish audience. As the t-shirts are also designed by the Threadless community, the informal tone of voice encourages people to join in and participate.

Invisible communication elements such as colour and tone of voice are used consistency throughout the website. For example, if you click on your empty shopping cart, it says:

> *'I'm so, so hungry! Have mercy and fill my carty belly with delicious Threadless products. You can use the drop-downs above my starving body to get started. Hurry!'*

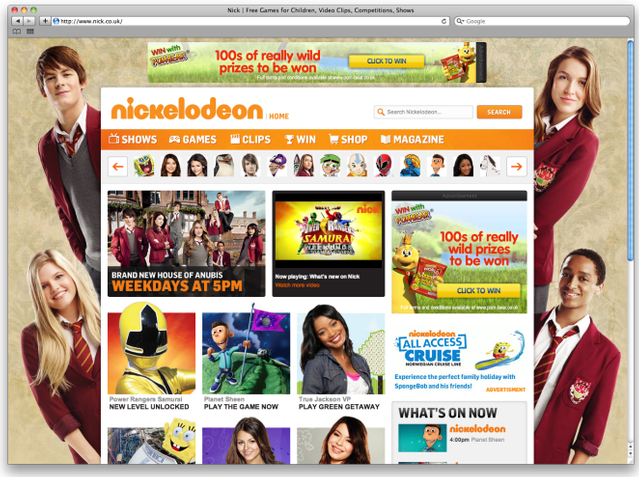
Icons/symbols

The site also makes good use of symbols and icons. The shopping cart icon, for example, serves two purposes. Firstly it can take the user straight to their cart to view any items in it. Secondly, it can indicate whether it's empty or not. The cart has a sad face when it's empty, but as soon as something is added it changes to a happy face.

The happy and sad faces have universal meaning, and the predominant US and European Threadless audience would understand them instantly.

These examples of invisible communication, together with the copy and overall design, make Threadless.com a good example of what a website can do for an organisation. It can engage their customers, encourage them to participate, and provide a great user experience.

Nick.com[1]

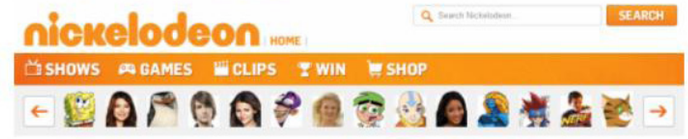


[1] http://www.nick.com

Nickelodeon is a TV channel and website for kids. Nickelodeon has brought us some of the most famous kids TV characters, including *SpongeBob SquarePants*. The website offers games, video, and products.

Colour and brand

Orange is Nickelodeon's brand colour, and so is the dominant colour across the whole website. It's used in the main logo, for calls to action and for the navigation.



Orange works well for a website aimed at children. It has connotations of happiness and warmth, and it isn't stereotypically associated with one gender or another.

The whole website is a colourful affair with striking and colourful background images, such as on the shows page:

Using colour this way is important because of the website's target audience; more muted tones would communicate a very different vibe and not be as appealing to children.

Imagery
The Nickelodeon website uses very little wording, again due to its target audience. In place of copy they rely heavily on imagery. For example, clicking on the image of SpongeBob SquarePants on the homepage will take you to the SpongeBob page. From here you can click on further images to play specific games.

Due to the lack of words, the site's tone of voice isn't expressed through written content. Instead, the childlike and friendly mood of the website is invisibly communicated through the heavy use of imagery and bright colours.

Whitehouse.gov[1]

The official website for the *White House* and *President Obama* features photos, videos, news and the White House schedule.

[1] http://www.whitehouse.gov

Overall mood
The elements on the White House website combine to give an impression of a serious, formal and professional organisation; three values people would expect of an official government website.

Colour
The main colours of the website are red, white and blue – three colours that communicate patriotism and are quintessentially American. The secondary palette includes brown, a neutral and organic shade.

Typeface and tone of voice
Given who and what this website represents, it is fitting that both the typeface and tone of voice are more formal than we found in the previous examples.

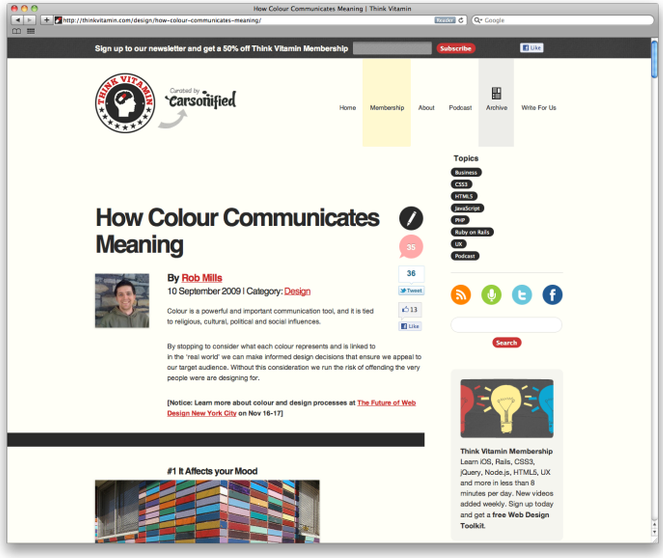
Serif typefaces feel more formal; they are the sort of typefaces found on more high-brow newspapers and in professional contexts.

The tone of voice is very professional, as you might expect. Here's an example:

> *'His story is the American story – values from the heartland, a middle-class upbringing in a strong family, hard work and education as the means of getting ahead, and the conviction that a life so blessed should be lived in service to others.'*

There's invisible communication at work here. There is no need to explicitly say this text needs to be read in a serious tone. It is implied through the words themselves, how they look, and the context in which they are placed.

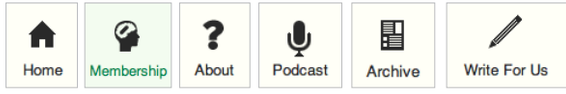
Thinkvitamin.com[1]



Think Vitamin is a blog by *Carsonified*, aimed at those who work in the web industry.

Icons

Icons are a great way to communicate efficiently. Think Vitamin is one of my favourite examples of the power of using icons.
For example, here's how they are used on the main navigation:



While these icons are supported by text such as 'Home' and 'About', they would communicate just as well on their own. Remove the word 'Home', for example, and users would still know the icon would take them to the homepage. 'Write for us' is more specific to Think Vitamin, but the pencil icon is synonymous with writing so even without the words the icon invisibly communicates the content it links to.

[1] http://www.thinkvitamin.com

Icons are also used to represent ways users can interact with Think Vitamin:

Here they use the brand colours for RSS, *Twitter* and *Facebook* to quickly communicate what each icon does without needing to explain each one.

The green icon isn't standard like the others, and so it isn't as instantly recognisable. But it has still been given its own colour to help users navigate to the Think Vitamin podcasts.

Colour

Colour is used subtly on Think Vitamin. Links are shown in red, and navigation items turn red when rolled over.

Storytelling

Where Think Vitamin excels is in its attention to detail. It weaves a compelling story that draws users in and encourages them to like, comment and share the content. This is achieved through content that is informative, easy to read and relevant. It may not be invisible communication, but it is part of being a good site.

The story is also enhanced through invisible communication methods, with colours and icons adding an extra dimension to the story. They categorise the content, help users navigate the site, and make it easy for users to contribute.

Putting it into practice

Now that we've looked at examples of invisible communication on the web, it's time to look at how we can incorporate these methods into our own designs. The following chapters will show you how to achieve this, and help you appeal to your target audience and improve their user experience.

Part 2

Following the right signs

Showing the way

Context and culture

Wayfinding the world

Warning signs, cultural signs and icons

Case Study: *Guardian.co.uk*

6

Showing the way

Signs help us navigate, communicate danger and explain what we can and cannot do.

We learn the significance and meaning of signs throughout our lives. We quickly become adept at understanding the hidden meaning behind the signs we see, and react to their messages subconsciously.

> *"A human being, during his or her childhood, acquires the meanings of the signs used for communication in its culture, as well as a whole series of conventions. Graphic structures rely upon these conventions for their various meanings"*
>
> Carl G. Liungman

Carl G. Liungman was born in Sweden in 1938. In 1972 he took an interest in semiotics and compiled an encyclopaedia on Western ideograms. Visit *www.symbol.com* for more information.

The web is full of signs: text, icons, images, symbols and website navigation help create a well-understood signage system that can incorporate colour, hierarchy and pointers.

A number of systems exist for classifying symbols and signs. Indeed, the study of signs (known as semiotics) is worthy of its own book. However, we need to understand some fundamental definitions and systems to investigate the importance and significance of signs on the web in the context of invisible communication.

Why signs are important?

Signs are useful because they can help us communicate a great deal of information without having to literally write or show everything.

The benefits of using signs – both online and offline – are:

- They communicate efficiently
- They help people get where they want to be
- They can communicate across languages and cultures
- They can help people achieve their tasks quickly

Signs are useful enough on their own. But when you combine them with other signs or with the physical environment they can become a signage system that leads a person from the start of their journey to the destination.

A good signage system can:

- Stop users getting frustrated with your website
- Increase accessibility of your website
- Lead users down a specified path
- Help users find your content

Semiotics

> *"Semiotics is the study of how meaning is socially produced through various languages or codes such as colour, gesture and photography."*
>
> (Branston and Stafford)

The field of semiotics is largely concerned with how certain things come to have significance and meaning. It tells us that language is constructed by people and cultures to make sense of the world around them.

A sign on its own has no meaning. It means something when those exposed to it agree on what it defines and represents. Therefore, any language relies on its shared understanding by a specific group of people, and that includes the language of signs and symbols. If a sign meant something different to every person who saw it, then its very reason for being would be invalid.

Some signs, such as a smiley face, are fairly universal. But others are more subjective, and you have to understand its context and convention for its meaning to be effective.

Imagine trying to cross a junction with traffic lights if there was no common definition for what the three colours represented. If the *go* signal was red for one person and green for another it would literally be an accident waiting to happen.

Just as people need to agree on what signs represent, they also need to agree on what words are used to describe certain things. For example, there is no reason why a cow is called a 'cow'. If enough people agreed to it, a cow could well be known as 'sizzlebang'. It is only because we have agreed in our culture that a 'cow' is a cow that the word refers to the animal.

This also happens online. There's a shared understanding that an envelope represents email, and a house icon represents the homepage. If this wasn't the case then the website's navigation would be almost useless.

Classifying signs and symbols

A sign is any object, action, event, or pattern that conveys a meaning. Let's take a look at some different types of signs.

Symbols
A symbol can be defined as an object that represents something other than itself.

For example a rose is a flower, but it can also be a symbol for love.

Ideograms
An ideogram is a character or symbol that represents an idea or a thing without expressing the pronunciation of the sounds used to say it. Examples include '&', '@' and '$', the 'no parking' symbol, and the symbols used to guide people in airports.

Words
Words are signs, too. On a website the word 'Home' can impart the same message as a house icon. But for some audiences the word won't be relevant in their culture, whereas the icon will. We all know what a house/home is; we just have different words to describe it.

Similarly, 'stop' can give the same command as a stopping prohibited sign. Words are important signs, but they need to be used in the right context.

Signifiers/Signified
Ferdinand de Saussure believed that signs consist of:

- A signifier – *the physical form of the sign*
- The signified – *the thing it refers to other than itself; the concept it represents.*

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) was a French linguist who pioneered the semiotic study of language as a system of signs organised in code and structures[1]

When both the signifier and signified exist, the result is the sign: the whole they combine to form. For example, if there is a sign on a shop doorway that says 'open' then the signifier is the word, 'open'. The signified, however, is that the shop is open for business and you can enter. On the web, an example could be a printer icon. The signifier is the icon itself, while the signified is the suggestion that clicking the icon will allow you to print.

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce proposed that signs can be been grouped into three categories:

1. **Icon** – iconic signs that resemble what they signify. One example of this is a photograph. It represents that moment in time and the people in the photo. Icons on your computer are... well, icons, such as the house icon for your homepage, the envelope icon for mail, and the colour palette icon for choosing colours.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914) was an American philosopher who produced a classification of different kinds of signs.

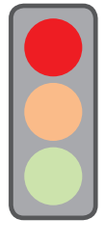
[1] Branston and Stafford

Some well-known examples of icons include:



The 'no smoking' sign resembles the object and action it isn't allowing, the Statue of Liberty silhouette indicates the value of freedom (as well as the building itself), and the printer icon resembles a real printer.





2. **Index** – a signifier that is directly connected to the signified. A clockface is an indexical sign of time passing. Smoke indexes fire. A hyperlink indexes a webpage. The sign is an indicator of something else.

   This sundial indexes time passing. The cloud and thunderbolt indicate an imminent storm and the red stop light is a sign you should stop your car or risk an accident.

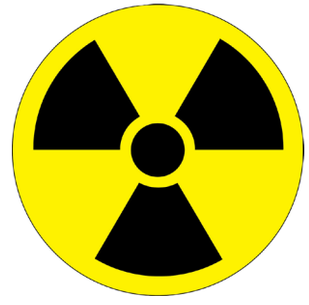
3. **Symbols** – abstractions that use images to represent an object, concept or action. For example, symbols of men and women are used to communicate gender, and a smoking cigarette is used to convey 'no smoking' (when coupled with the red circle and strikethrough).



Mathematics is filled with symbols such as addition, subtraction and the Pi symbol. Copyright and trademarks are also represented by symbols. A smiley face is symbolic of happiness (although it also has connotations of drug use), the heart is a symbol for love, and the yin yang is an old Chinese symbol for the universe now integrated into Western ideography.

Arbitary signs

Peirce also stated that signs can be arbitrary. These signs have little or no resemblance to the object, concept or action. Here is the radioactive sign:



This sign is an abstract representation of radiation with no literal interpretation. Its meaning has been learned over time, having been exposed (pardon the pun) to people over a sustained period. This is what makes it an effective communication device.

This sign is also common in computer flowcharting, meaning external memory or offline storage.

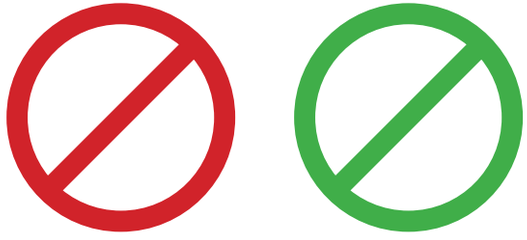
The colour of signs

A sign's colour can help communicate its meaning. Red is commonly associated with danger, and consequently is used on warning signs and, of course, as the traffic light colour telling us to stop.

Red also represents love, but the symbols are given in an entirely different context to when we see road signs so the message is clear.

Similarly, hazard signs are predominantly yellow and black. This has links to nature; bees and wasps use black and yellow markings as a warning. The contrast between these two colours also makes the sign (and therefore the hazard) stand out. This is evident in the radioactive example shown earlier.

Red is linked to 'stop', and green is linked to 'go'. If we changed the colours people expect to see on signs we could confuse them. Let's take a typical sign that tells people not to do something and change the colour.



The second sign doesn't feel right because the shape of the sign is telling us 'no' but the colour is telling us 'yes'.

The same applies to other symbols linked to an action or a journey. A tick denotes 'yes' while a cross denotes 'cancel' or 'no'. Swap the colours of these and their meaning is less clear.

A small colour change to a symbol can have big implications for how and what that symbol communicates.

Deconstructing signs

Let's deconstruct some well-known signs so we can see the importance of shape, colour and cultural variations when using signs in design.

No Smoking

- This sign is an icon. It resembles what it signifies: no smoking
- The circle is known in the UK to give an order
- The colour red connotes danger, warning, don't
- The smoke is an index of a lit cigarette. The way it rises from the cigarette represents a lit cigarette as opposed to an unlit one

The line though the cigarette symbol is synonymous with 'no' or 'don't'. This is a meaning that has developed over time with a shared understanding in the western world.

Email

- This sign is an icon, a computer icon for opening email
- In the physical world, mail is received in envelopes. Web icons to represent email have adopted this as the standard icon as users can connect this to something already relevant to them
- Again, this is a shared agreement of the meaning
- The fact that the envelope is open distinguishes it from icons that represent sending or deleting email
- The arrow is a call to action and is representative of opening an email

Speech Bubble

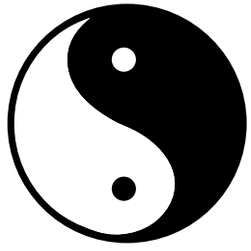
- The speech bubble is a modern ideogram
- It has gained this meaning because it is shown with the point coming out of someone's mouth, representing the words they are saying
- This meaning is far-reaching, with comic books following similar conventions worldwide
- Again, there is a shared understanding amongst audiences and users that a speech bubble represents spoken words

In this chapter we've discussed what signs are, why they are important and the different types of signs. It's now time to look at signage systems in the 'real' world and on the web.

7

Context and culture

Just as body language can have cultural relevance, so too can signs. Signs carry different meanings and significance in different cultures. Some cross cultural boundaries more successfully than others, but often a sign needs to be seen in context for it to communicate effectively.



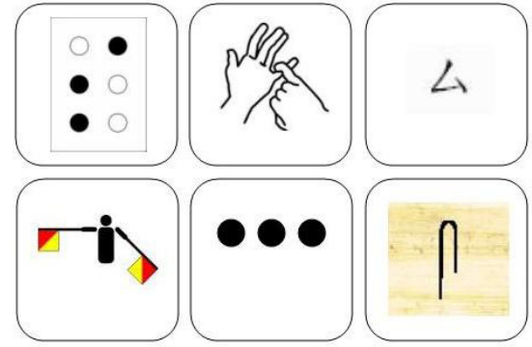
Some signs are born out of one culture but become integrated with others, resulting in a shared meaning and significance. The Yin Yang symbol, for example, is an old Chinese symbol for the universe but is well recognised in western cultures today; it is often used to symbolise opposites or peace.

Many signs used on the web, such as the home, print and email icons, mean the same thing in most places. However, it is never safe to assume this. In certain cultures or contexts, a sign you have used may be communicating the wrong message invisibly.

It's all about the context

As we've discussed, signs only mean something when a group of people agree on that meaning. There may be entire sign systems you aren't aware of, simply because they aren't relevant to your life.

This is where context becomes significant, and an individual sign's agreed meaning moves from just being culturally dependent to being socially, politically and historically dependent.



These signs are all for the letter 'S', represented in (from top-left):

- Braille
- British Sign Language
- Chinese Phonetic Alphabet
- Semaphore
- Morse code
- Hieroglyphics

Unless you have learnt how to read Braille, the first sign may look more like a domino. Your knowledge of Braille depends how significant that sign is to your life. For some it is essential, while for others it isn't.

The same applies to the sign language representation. You may have learnt sign language and know how to express the letter 'S', but even sign language can vary from one place to another. For example, British Sign Language is different to other forms, such as American.

The third symbol is the Chinese phonetic alphabet representation of 'S'. You might recognise the character as being Chinese, but unless you speak or write Chinese the sign's specific meaning will probably elude you.

Semaphore is a flag signalling system for communicating from a distance. It is mainly used in the maritime world, and has been around since the Battle of Trafalgar.

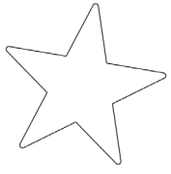
Morse code is something most people know about but don't recognise when it's represented visually. The three dots that represent 'S' could also be interpreted as an ellipsis.

The final symbol is an 'S' represented in hieroglyphics. Again you may recognise this as an ancient language, but not necessarily that it represents the letter 'S' specifically.

One sign, many stories

Signs and symbols can have multiple meanings, depending on the culture you look at them in relation to. Whenever you use symbols on the web, it is time well spent to research its origins, just in case you unknowingly tell a story far from the one you wanted.

One example of a symbol used on the web that does not translate across cultures is the podcast symbol from the Think Vitamin website. This isn't as commonly used as symbols for home, email or print, and while some cultures will recognise it others are less likely to do so.



One sign, one story

Generally, however, signs and symbols can work across cultures. The heart symbol is almost universal in its representation of love. A smiley face can represent happiness in several cultures too.

One of the most popular cross-culture symbols is the five-pointed star. This appears on flags for no less than 35 countries, both Western and Eastern. It is also an important military symbol, and so is has significance in a vast group of cultures.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is defined as 'the act or an instance of placing two or more things side by side"[1]

Signs and symbols can also be juxtaposed in their meanings. Even a basic symbol such as a circle can be juxtaposed. It can mean 'everything', but can also represent nothingness, zero or 'no entry'. The same symbol given in different contexts can have different meanings.

But some symbols don't lend themselves to juxtaposition. The heart symbol, for example, is an elementary sign structure that does not carry any opposite meanings.

Understanding signs across cultures

Some signs can be understood outside of the culture they are designed for. This sign is a tsunami warning, which can been seen throughout Southeast Asia.

While the UK doesn't have tsunami threats, the sign still has meaning (even without the English text) because we can still recognise the symbol of a wave and the colour blue, which is symbolic of water.

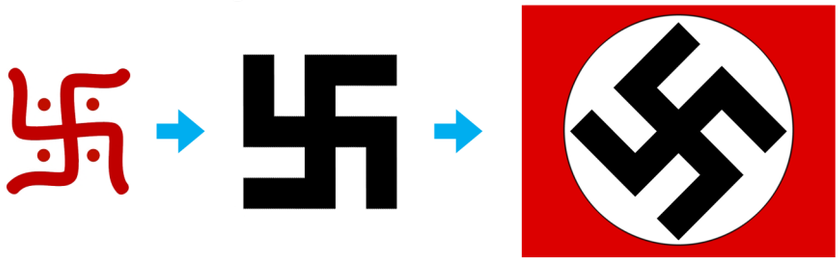
Warning signs in particular are designed to work as visually as possible, with minimal room for misinterpretation. They need to communicate quickly and effectively, hence the minimal text in the tsunami sign.

Similarly, the above sign represents the hazard of kangaroos on or near the road. It is a sign that has utmost importance in Australia where kangaroos are a genuine risk to drivers. In the UK there is no such threat to motorists, but we understand the sign because the kangaroo shape is clearly recognisable as the animal.

Additionally, the colours black and yellow are also used in the UK for hazard signs, so the sign immediately tells us there is a hazard to be aware of. Some signs can only be understood correctly within the culture they are intended for. Others can be interpreted by people from other cultures, but the sign will have no relevance to them.

[1] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/juxtaposition

Changes over time



The Hindu swastika A traditional swastika The Nazi swastika flag

Signs can have different meanings at different points in time. One example is one of the world's most recognisable and controversial symbols: *the swastika*.

This ideogram is rooted in history. Depending on the era you study, the swastika will have very different meanings and symbolism.

It's an ancient symbol, used by many cultures over the past 3,000 years to represent the sun, four directions, movement, power, good luck and change. Then Hitler revived the swastika and it took on a whole new meaning due to its iconic usage in Nazi Germany.

The swastika became the official emblem of the Nazi party on August 7th 1920, and a symbol that traditionally had positive associations became a sign of hate, violence, death and murder. A far cry from its origins, the symbol now has a stigma attached to it due to its associations with racism, white supremacists and neo-Nazis.

The swastika has had many culturally-dependent meanings, but they have been overridden by the Nazi associations. Whenever this symbol is viewed it can evoke emotions of hurt and anger and conjure up images of torture and P.O.W camps. It is one of the most powerful symbols of the world, but for all the wrong reasons.

Knowledge is power

Making sure you know the different types of symbols and their meaning and place within different cultures is an important part of targeting your work at the right audience. A symbol's meaning can change over time as society, politics and cultures evolve.

8

Wayfinding the world

Signs exist in our lives to show us the way. In this chapter we'll take a look at signs in the world around us. (In the next chapter we'll look at how wayfinding and signage systems can be applied to the web.)

An obvious example of signs that help us get from A to B are road signs. But the signs in large public buildings, such as hospitals and airports, do the same job. They help us find our way without too much effort, or at least they should.

Various techniques can be used to create a signage system, which combine typefaces, names, colours, sizes, shapes, symbols, positioning and design.

When signage works well it tells us where we are and where we can move to next. When it fails we miss buses, arrive late for appointments, crash cars, get lost, and miss the turn off.

What is wayfinding?

'Wayfinding' is the process of following a system of signs, in places such as airports and hospitals as well as on websites. The term was first used by *Kevin Lynch* in his 1960 publication, *The Image of the City*. Lynch defines wayfinding as:

> *"The process of using spatial and environmental information to navigate to a destination."*

In their book, *Universal Principles of Design*, *William Lidwell*, *Kritina Holden*, and *Jill Butler* state that "whether navigating a college campus, the wilds of a forest or web site, the basic process of wayfinding involves the same four stages: orientation, route decision, route monitoring and destination recognition."[1]

[1] Universal Principles of Design, William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, and Jill Butler

1. **Orientation**
   Orientation means knowing where you are in relation to what is around you and where you want to be. The focus is on your current position, where you can move to and how you can get there. You can use landmarks (orientation cues) and signage to make sense of the area around you.

2. **Route Decision**
   Route decision is all about choosing how you will reach your destination. People are more effective at making route decisions if they have limited navigational choices and prompts throughout the route. Signage also helps here.

3. **Route Monitoring**
   As people move though their journey, they need to monitor their route to make sure they're on track to reaching their destination. So as well as showing people the direction of a place, signage needs to regularly tell people where they are so they'll know they are still on track. As Lidwell, Holden and Butler observe, "breadcrumbs are visual cues highlighting the path taken and can aid route monitoring, particularly when a wayfinding mistake has been made, and backtracking is necessary."

4. **Destination Recognition**
   People need to know when they have arrived at their destination.

The Importance of Wayfinding

Wayfinding is essential for people to get from where they are to where they want to be. That includes tourists, drivers and web users alike.

Big buildings such as airports and hospitals can be intimidating, as can the web. Making clear routes for people and helping them complete their task efficiently is an important part of design – and signage is at the heart of this.

Wayfinding is more than just signs

Signs are important, but people will need different types of information at various points in their journey. Signs, colours, typography, words and maps can all contribute to an effective wayfinding system.

Wayfinding problems aren't always due to bad signage, and adding more signs won't solve every wayfinding problem. The key is to create an environment that's easy to navigate, with consistent clues, and where the elements have all been carefully considered with the user firmly in mind.

To create an appropriate wayfinding strategy you need to consider:

- Whom you are directing
- The information they have
- The information they need
- What they want to achieve
- What signs would be most appropriate for them

The journey before the journey

Airports are an interesting example of wayfinding because they need to show people from many different cultures and nationalities how to get from A to B.

A good signage system is important for airports because passengers are often stressed or in a state of anxiety. The last thing they need is the frustration of trying to find their destination. Airports also have many possible routes to choose from – just as there are on the web.

Pictograms
Graphical symbols (or pictograms) are important in airport signage, because they can be understood by more people than the corresponding words. This does depend on the function at hand, as some symbols and pictograms are more universally recognised than others.

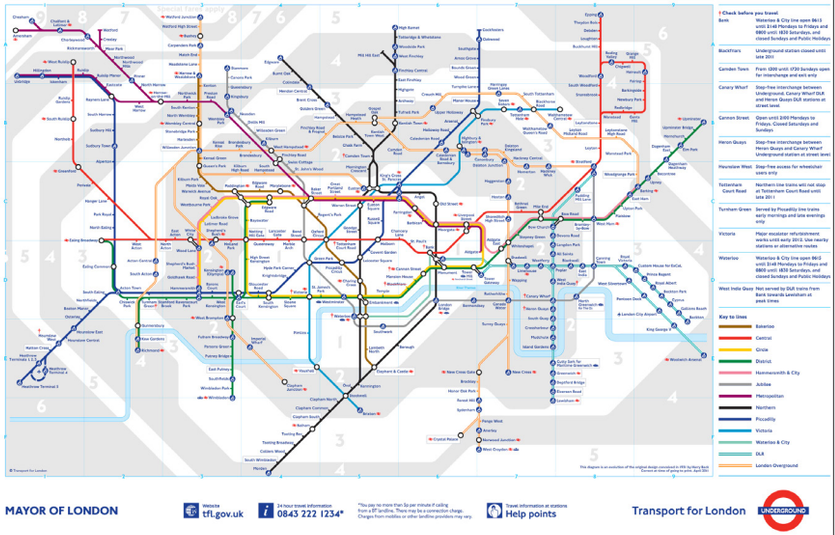
Examples of common pictograms

Pictograms were added to the signs in Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport to improve wayfinding for non-English speaking passengers. This airport is the benchmark for all airports following its wayfinding 'redesign' by Bureau Mijksenaar.

Colour
Colour coding areas can be an effective way to help people navigate. They will associate certain places or tasks with a certain colour. It is dangerous to rely solely on colour though – there must also be sufficient information for the colour to reinforce. Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport is held in high regard for its wayfinding and use of colour. Yellow signs provide arrival and departure information, blues signs are used for restaurant facilities, green is the colour for escape routes and anthracite is used in waiting areas.

Colour is also a good wayfinding technique for maps. But again, other information is needed to support the colour coding. One example is the map of the London Underground.

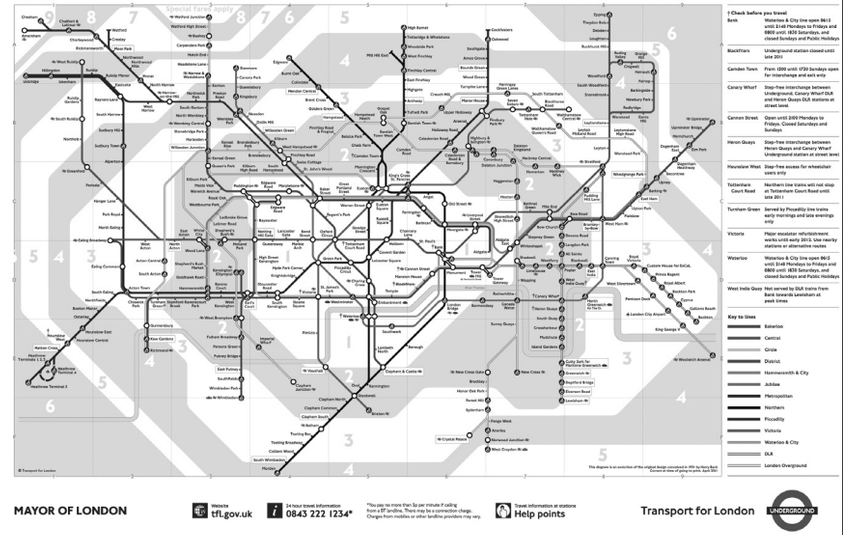
Tube map



Each route, or line, is represented by a colour – yellow for the Circle line, red for the Central line, and so on. While you still need to know where you are, the station you need to get off at and which direction you need to travel in, the colours make it clear where each line starts and ends.

The colour is important here as this map is a schematic diagram. It doesn't show the geographic information, but rather the relative positions of stations along the lines and the relations and connections between them.

Tube map



If the colour is removed from the map it is still possible to see each station and navigate. But the distinction between the routes is less clear, and the map's effectiveness as a navigation aid is immediately reduced.

Similarly, the signage uses the same colours, ensuring a consistent system. When you're changing at a station, you can easily find the right platform. It's also used on the screens that display service disruptions.

Naming places

Names on signs have to be comprehensible. If we are instructed to go to gate 28 for boarding then we need a sign that clearly says 'Gate 28'. In hospitals extra attention is given to the names on signs because they are often complex or hard to pronounce medical terms. It is always best to keep it simple. A sign saying 'blood tests' is much easier for most people to understand than 'phlebotomy'.

Avoid jargon. The best way to develop a wayfinding strategy is to assume people or users have no knowledge of the place they are in.

Legibility

Any written information should be as legible as possible, which means paying attention to colour combinations, typefaces and size and placement of signs.

At Schiphol Airport the arrows showing the way are black in a white circle for optimum legibility. Where necessary, signs are also illuminated.

Organising information

How information is organised is just as important as colours, names and signs. The hierarchy of information needs to be considered. What do the users need to know to get going on their journey? What do they need to know along the way? And what do they need to know when they get there?

Information can be categorised numerically, alphabetically or by type, and the choice you make will inevitably affect how the information is presented. Before the redesign at Schiphol airport, the directions were listed alphabetically, which made the signs cluttered and messy.

The size of signs can also hint at the importance of the information they share. Big signs carry more importance than smaller ones. The size of signage can create an information hierarchy, ensuring the most important information isn't relegated to a small sign hidden from view.

Creating a wayfinding strategy

The best way of developing a signage system, whether online or offline, is to put yourself in the position of the user. Ask yourself questions about the journey you think they will be taking.

- Where will they need to go?
- How often will they need to be reassured they are still heading in the right direction?
- What will they need along the way?
- What will they need/expect when they arrive at their destination?
- Will colour coding help?
- How can I make the journey more clear/legible?
- What resources are available if they get lost?

Think about the user and their story, and create a narrative to guide them. Use conventions and signs where necessary, but support it with colours, words and, in extreme conditions, maps.

As Lidwell, Holden and Butler said, whether navigating a forest or a website, the techniques and principles for guiding people are the same. So let's now take a look at wayfinding on the web.

9

Wayfinding on the web

The web lends itself perfectly to wayfinding strategies. We can form narratives using storytelling, along with practical techniques such as user stories and use cases. Then we can support them with symbols, icons, signs and colour to show the way.

Telling a three-act story

Navigation should tell a story with a past, present, and future:

- Past: *where have I come from?*
- Present: *where am I?*
- Future: *where can I go next/where do I want to be?*

Your users can't answer those questions unless you have a well-signposted website. This is particularly important for the web because you can't guarantee they will start their journey on the homepage. They can land on the path at any point. Information architecture, colour and signposting can show the way, while symbols and icons can communicate specific tasks and calls to action when they arrives at their destination.

Colour coding

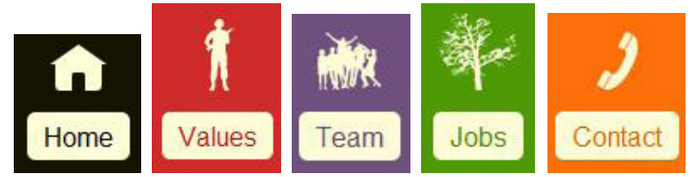
As discussed in the previous chapter, colour coding can contribute to a wayfinding system. But never use it in isolation. It must be supported by content.

The Carsonified[1] website uses colour to clearly distinguish between areas on the site. The homepage is black and white, the jobs page is green, the contact page is orange and so on.

If you spend a lot of time on the site you begin to associate the content with the colours. So if you are looking for job vacancies you will subconsciously head to the 'green section'. But chances are you aren't *that* familiar with the site, so other information is needed to help you complete your journey.

[1] www.carsonified.com

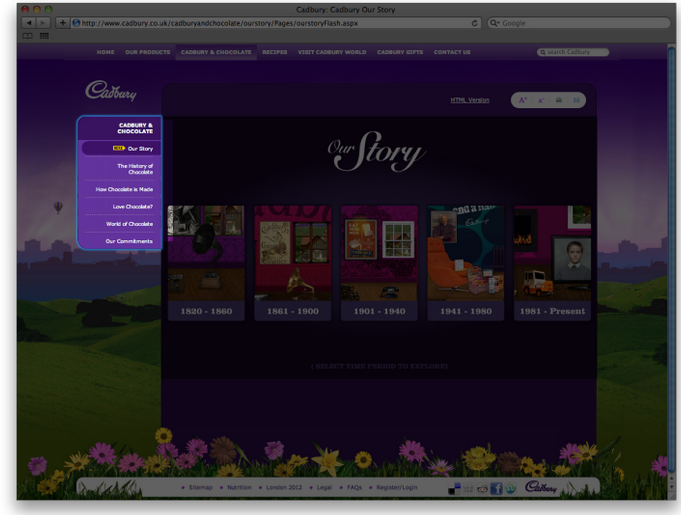
Below are the names of each area along with its colour and icon:



Carsonified uses colour as a navigation tool with the help of clear signposts and symbols. The names given to each page are easy to understand and universally recognised: 'Home', 'Values', 'Team', and so on.

The icons that represent each area are also carefully chosen. The homepage is illustrated with a house icon, for example. Some of the icons have less obvious connotations, such as the soldier for 'Values' and the tree for 'Jobs' (symbolic of growth). They may not be universally recognised symbols, but they are supported by labels that make them clear and concise signs, contributing to an overarching wayfinding system.

Signs and breadcrumbs



On some websites the wayfinding is subtle. But other sites will literally tell users 'you are here'. This is true of the *Cadbury UK*[1] website.

Visitors are told where they are via a small yellow sign saying 'here' that points to the page they are on. This contributes to a wayfinding system as it helps with orientation.

However, it's not a complete wayfinding system. There are no breadcrumbs, and no other signs for where to go next. The navigation is listed, but there is no way to differentiate between content areas – everything is purple (the deeper into the content you go the lighter the shade of purple becomes), all typography is the same, and there's no obvious hierarchy to the content. The site doesn't lead you on a journey. It just says, 'you are here'.

The same is true on the *Ben and Jerry's*[2] website. They make it very clear where you are, but again there is little clear signposting to further your journey.

But that isn't to say the site is ruined. Rather, it shows that not every site needs a complete wayfinding system.

The 'All About Us' section is clearly shown. But the navigation down the left-hand side is barely legible, thanks largely to the black text on the site's blue background. If that were a sign in an airport, I'd probably miss my flight.

[1] www.cadbury.co.uk

[2] www.benjerry.co.uk

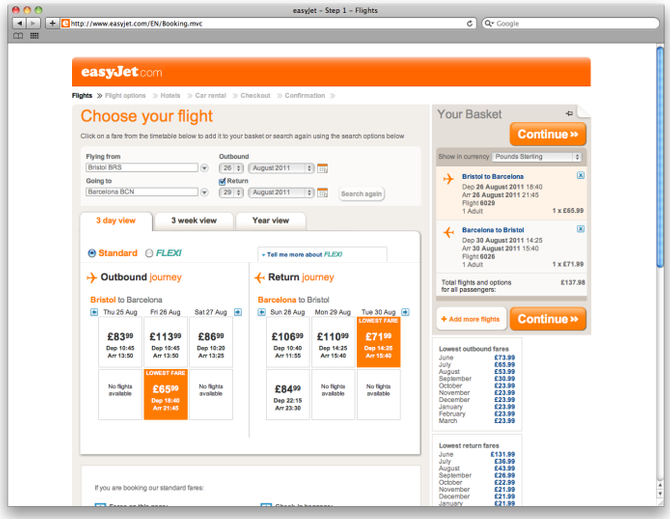
An example of a website that gives users a clear path, in terms of both where they came from and where they are on the site, is that of user experience blog, UX Booth[1].

As we can see from the screenshot, the site marks the user's current location by making the 'Blog' section title more prominent in the main navigation (*1*). And the breadcrumb trail shows not only where they are but also how they got there (*2*): Home –> Blog –> Visual design –> Design with the user in mind.

UX Booth uses arrows to show the journey that was made between these four pages. Arrows are the most obvious symbol for this as they show the way, point forward and have a universal meaning.

[1] www.uxbooth.com

Some sites are also good at showing the journey a user is yet to take. This is particularly important when they need to complete a specific process, such as when purchasing goods or searching for a holiday.



This page is from low budget airline, *Easyjet*[1]. As you can see, when users have been through the search process and would like to book a flight the steps to follow seem relatively clear. But it's also a good example of how small improvements could have a big impact.

The path ahead is shown to users but it is somewhat discrete in the top area of the page. The image above shows us that we are on the flight search page and that the journey ahead of us will include flight options, hotels, car rental, checkout and finally confirmation.

But is this enough? Easyjet have tried to discern the different steps to the process but it feels like a wayfinding system that could be improved. Perhaps if the stages were numbered or there was more distinction between current step and those that follow. They could even make it tabbed.

[1] www.easyjet.com

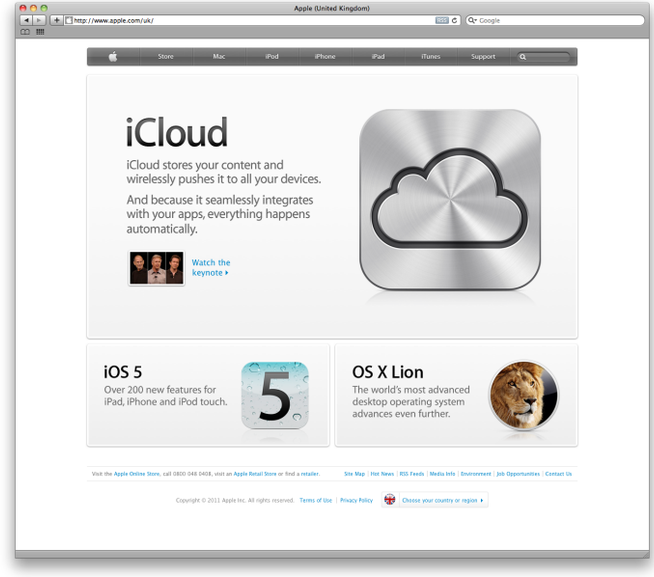
The stage you are on is made bold in the breadcrumbs and you can also click on any of the future stages to jump straight to those, but this isn't exactly clear.

For those who do get lost or stranded, there is no call to action available for help or more information. Which may result in users simply leaving the site without booking anything. Not good for Easyjet and not a good experience for their users either.

Information Architecture

Information architecture can also contribute to a wayfinding system. Even designs with little or no wayfinding in terms of signs can help users achieve their task if the information is in the right place. After all, words are also signs.

The *Apple* UK site is a good example of how information architecture can guide users without needing any colour coding or signs. The simplicity of its navigation makes it easy for users to get where they want to be.



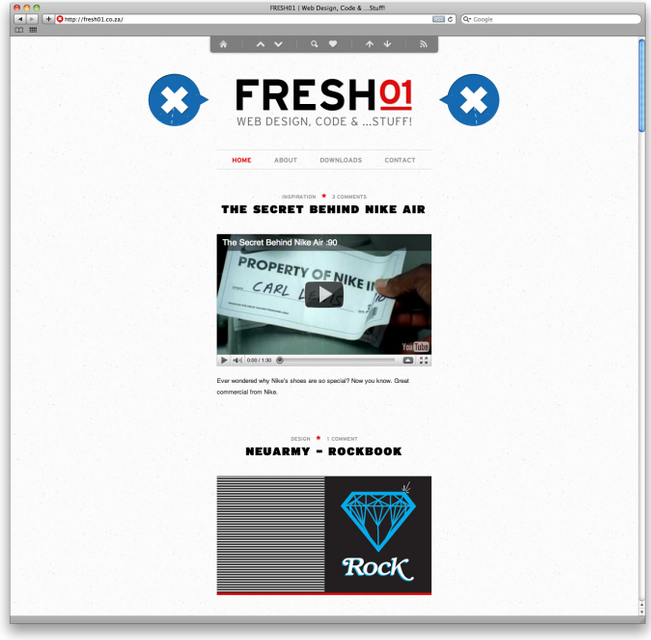
For example, there is no 'products' section. Instead, each product has its own main navigation item. Then when you click further into the site, such as by selecting 'iPod', the information architecture continues to show the way:

The iPod sub-menu for shows the available products and accessories. Again, the way the information is organised helps users achieve their goal, find the information they need, and also lets them know what area of the site they are in.

Icons

Icons can help users find their way. They are commonly used as calls to action and to represent tasks that users can complete. The meanings of these icons are, as previously discussed, learnt over time and agreed on by a culture or group.

Most websites support their icons with text to reinforce the meaning. A blog called *Fresho1*[1], from a South African design agency, uses only icons:



We can see that the Fresho1 homepage uses standard icons to represent 'home', 'search', 'next post', 'previous post', 'to top' and 'to bottom'. While this works reasonably well, having two different sets of arrows does make it somewhat confusing.

Relying on icons alone is challenging, so most websites support icons with minimal text anchors. Here's an example from the website of Tesco, the supermarket giant.

[1] http://fresho1.co.za/

From the image above we can see three icons being used to communicate three tasks:

- A computer mouse is used to show that orders can be taken online
- A phone is used to tell customers the number for phone orders
- A shopping basket with an arrow inside is used for in-store orders

These are relatively common icons for representing the corresponding tasks, but the accompanying content helps clarify them.

Wayfinding on the web

A wayfinding system on the web can consist of:

- Colour coding
- Icons and symbols
- Information architecture

To design a successful wayfinding system you must be clear about the journey your users will experience. Ask questions about where they are, where they need to go and what they need to get there. The Guardian website is a good example of how to design a successful wayfinding system, and it's the subject of the next chapter.

10

Case Study: *Guardian.co.uk*

To better show how a signage system can be applied to the web, I want to look at a site that's content heavy, with many layers and different categories of content. *The Guardian* newspaper website is the perfect example.

Here's the homepage:

Several wayfinding points of interest are at work here:

1. **Colour coding**

   The Guardian site is content rich. The website creates additional structure and wayfinding support by colour coding the different sections. News is red, sport is green, money is purple, and so on.

   You might argue they chose the colours to represent the sections they classify, such as green for environment. But ultimately the main purpose is to distinguish between different content areas within the site.

   For example when the lines, navigation and header are red, users should be aware they are in the main 'News' section. 'Sport' and 'Environment' are both green, though they are different shades. (Green represents sport due to the colour of pitches, so it is also relevant to this section on the Guardian website.)

2. **Icons**

   This isn't an icon-heavy website. The most obvious icons used here on the homepage are for the weather.

   This means users don't have to dig deep to get an update on the day's weather. Just by glancing at the homepage they can see what the forecast will be (in this case, rainy).

3. **Signs**

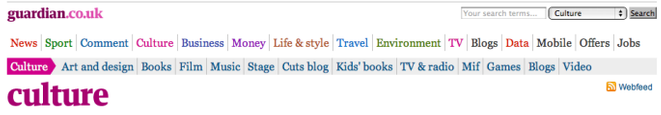
   Arrows are used in conjunction with colour coding to show the way. In this example we are clearly in the main section because of the colour red, the word 'News' and the arrow. This arrow shows we are on the main page but also points us towards deeper content where we can look specifically at UK news, world news, political news, US news, and so forth.

Navigation = wayfinding

Let's look closely at how the Guardian website's navigation clearly shows the way.

1. When users arrive at the Guardian site the navigation appears as shown above. They can select a top-level item such as 'Comment', 'Culture' or 'Travel' or delve deeper into the 'News' section.

2. When a top level item is chosen, for example 'Culture', the navigation changes:



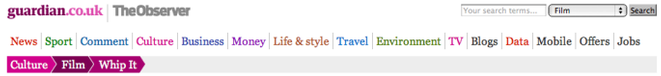
As you can see, the colour of the arrow has changed to pink. It also shows us we are now in the 'Culture' section, and points to further subcategories such as 'Art and design', 'Books', and 'Film'.

There has been a subtle but distinct shift in the information we are presented with. As we move further into the site the wayfinding becomes ever more clear:

Here we are reminded we are in the 'Culture' section, thanks to the consistent pink colour. The navigation above shows us where we came from ('Culture') and where we are ('Film'), which is marked in a different shade from the same palette . And it shows us where we can move to within the 'Film' section: 'News', 'Reviews', 'Features', and so on.

This is a clear past, present and future structure, as well as a clear signage system.

As we move to a particular article under the 'Film' subcategory we see one more sign showing us where we are:



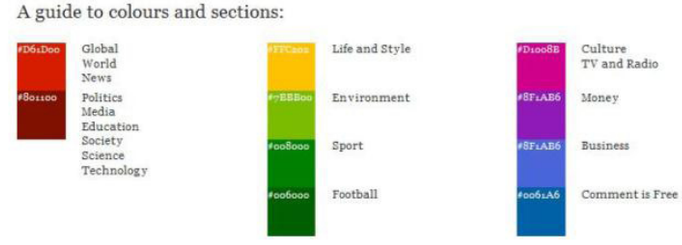
As you can see, 'Whip It' has now been added to the mix. This shows us we are on a feature about 'Whip It', that sits under the 'Film' category that is part of the 'Culture' section. Clear wayfinding supported by clever and considered use of colour.

Colour

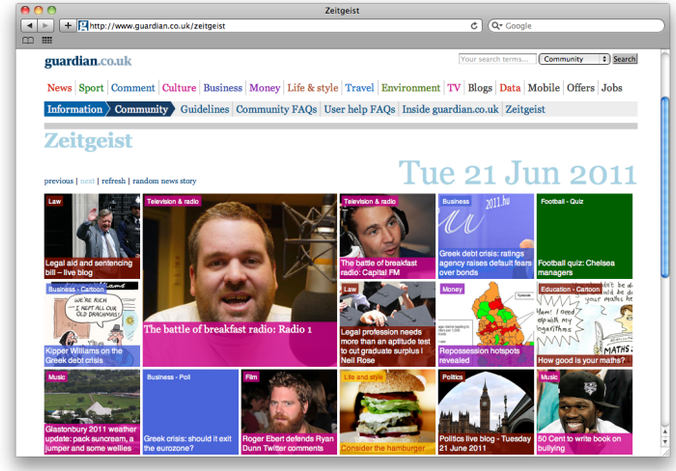
The way the Guardian site uses colour is one reason it's such a good example of wayfinding.
As we discussed earlier, they use it to identify the different sections on the site, such as pink for 'Culture', blue for 'Business', green for 'Sport' and purple for 'Money'.

Users may not immediately know which colour represents what section, but those who use the site heavily make the connection almost subconsciously.

In fact colour plays such an important part in distinguishing between content areas they include a colour guide on the site.



Even on their experimental 'Zeitgeist' section, which shows trending news, topics and articles from the Guardian, they use colour to show what category the trending content belongs to.



Icons

The Guardian site also uses icons to communicate quickly and efficiently, particularly in areas where users interact and generate content.

Here are some of the icons that pepper the Guardian site:

The icons are also supported by words, but differently to the Tesco example in the previous chapter. The words on the Guardian site aren't anchored to the icons, but rather appear when you mouse over them:

- The print icon is a well-understood online icon. Even without the words 'printable version', most users will know what it represents given its common use and shared understanding
- The mail icon for 'send to a friend' is relatively easy to decipher. Envelope icons are used to show that something can be emailed
- The 'share' icon is one point leading to two others. This represents one person sharing with two others, and hints at a network
- 'Clip' is shown with a scissor icon. Scissors are symbolic of cutting so the relevance here is self-explanatory. The clip function lets you send the article to your clippings file
- As there are numerous ways to get in touch with the newspaper, the Guardian has opted for a smaller version of its logo for the 'contact us' icon instead of the usual phone, email or pen icons

Any comments or content that users contribute to the Guardian site are shown using a speech bubble symbol, unless the users add their own avatar.

We associate the speech bubble icon with commenting and conversation. So when users see this icon they know it's somewhere they can share their opinions.

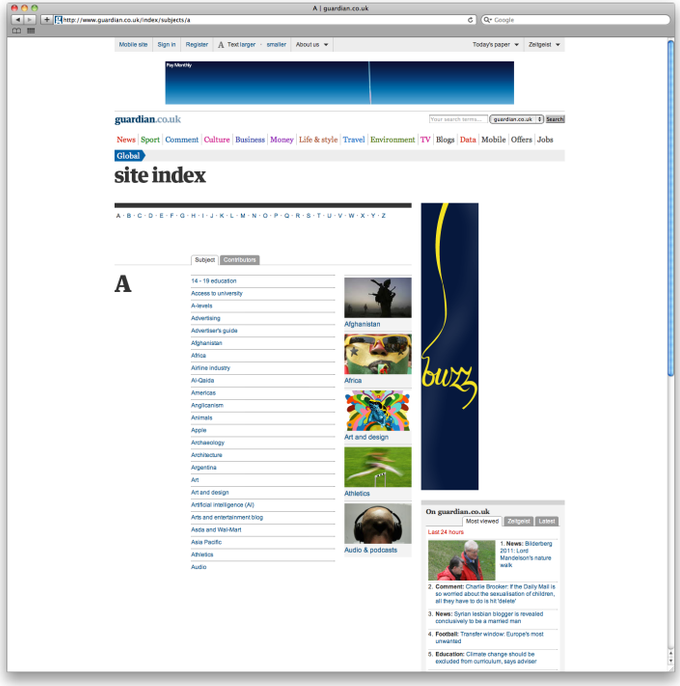
This convention makes it clear the content is user-generated, and not something written by a Guardian journalist. It also makes it clear the site is encouraging interaction. While we may take this icon and its use for granted, its meaning is only achieved by using it consistently in similar contexts. (It's also supported by text--'What You're Saying' at the top.)

Another content area where the Guardian site uses icons to communicate effectively is the weather page:

These icons quickly give users an overview of the weather, but are also anchored by more detailed information if it's needed.

Organising information

Despite the many signs, clues and cues to help users navigate and complete their required task, the Guardian site also has a detailed and well-designed site index.

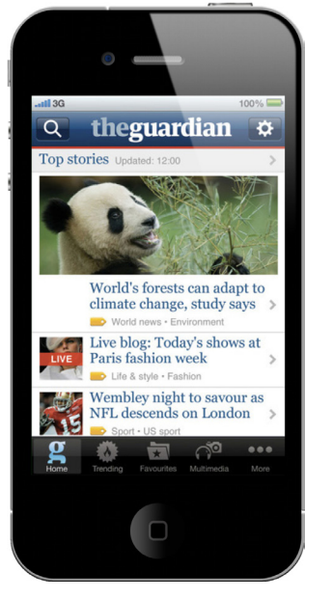


Here, the information is organised alphabetically, and then by subject or contributor. This is a good example of how to present vast amounts of information to users and give them clear pathways. Users need a quick and easy way to find what they want. If they use the site index to do so then breaking it down this way helps plot a route for them to get what they want.

Mobile wayfinding

The conventions the Guardian has employed on its website also translate to its iPhone app. The wayfinding components are similar, but given the nature of the platform they've put more emphasis on icons and symbols across the user interface.

The sections are coloured in the same way as the website. As we can see from the main page below, the search function and settings are symbolically represented. (These are *Apple* standard icons.)



The arrows at the right of the news title make it clear that tapping the news story will take us to the actual article with more information.

The menu at the bottom of the screen uses icons effectively, making it clear what each one will lead to.

If we move to a content page the wayfinding system is even clearer:

Here, red tells us we are in the 'News' section. Again, arrows show the route back and the route forward. The different sized letters in the footer show us that we can view the content with different font sizes, and the star lets us mark the page as a favourite. The star is a good choice for this icon because they are associated with good things, such as rewarding good behaviour in children.

The use of icons and symbols on the menu is the perfect example of where graphics can communicate, while contributing to a wayfinding system.

A wayfinding system

Whether on the homepage, a main topic or a specific article, there is a clear signage system at work. It shows users where they've been, where they are, and the options for where they can move to next.

Symbols and icons communicate calls to action and tasks quickly and efficiently, with the support of colour coding.

But don't forget that the content on the Guardian site is as much a sign as anything else. The information is organised sensibly and understandably so users will instinctively know where to go for certain content types.

The content is supported by a wayfinding system that, while it may well be dominated by colour, also uses icons effectively. And this wayfinding is consistent on the website, the mobile site, and even in the print edition.

The Guardian website succeeds by combining the value of all these signs and pointers. Collectively, they form a clear and useful method for users to find their way. The Guardian website has a lot of content to navigate through, so having an effective wayfinding system is vital.

Part 3

Using the right palette

The importance of colour

The colour of life

Connotation and Denotation

Colour in Cultures

Case Study: *Carsonified.com*

11

The importance of colour

Colour is an important element in design. Each colour brings with it psychological associations, cultural significance, and an influence that can affect our mood.

In this section I'll focus on the messages and values that colours can communicate subliminally through design. I won't be looking at colour theory, but will explain how there's more to colour than just the shades we perceive.

To discover how colour communicates invisibly we need to look beneath the surface. We'll start by looking at some basic notions of what colour can bring and its importance as a communication tool, both on the web and in our everyday lives.

Understanding the power of colour helps with design decisions and choosing the most appropriate colours for the task in hand. It's only when we appreciate the power and importance of colour that we can discover how it enhances the user experience.

Colour and evolution

Throughout evolution, colour has become a part of our genetic code. From the time the first humans began hunting and gathering, the varied colours of our surroundings helped them to survive. (For example, they quickly learned not to eat the red poisonous berries.) These days colour is used to teach us where to go and where to avoid, such as the red on road signs communicating the no-go areas.

Humans crave stimulation. As we receive most input visually, a lack of colour jars with our fundamental needs. Our world is full of colour, and we have evolved to use it to survive and communicate.

Communicating through colour

Colour can communicate meaning in two ways: natural associations and psychological associations.

Natural associations come from the associations we draw between colours and our surroundings. Psychological associations, however, are learned through life experiences and influence how we react to colours on a personal level.

Some of these associations cross cultures, while others are culture dependent. For example, the association between the colour blue and the sea is probably about as universal as we can get. But blue also has more specific meanings in different cultures, which I will talk about later in this section.

Often these associations and reactions to colour happen on a visceral level; we don't consciously realise we are doing it. But these associations are important from an invisible design perspective, because colours can evoke certain emotions in us. And it's those emotions that influence our opinions, buying decisions and user experience.

Storytelling

Colour associations can vary between gender and age. They can also be influenced by social and political ideologies. While single colours tell stories (such as using red in stories of love and green in environmental stories), colour combinations do the job even better.

Here's a perfect example: think of a red, white and blue combination. Those three colours combined are patriotism personified, thanks to flags such as the Stars and the Stripes or the Union flag, which represent a whole nation. Those flags embody complete cultural, political and social systems.

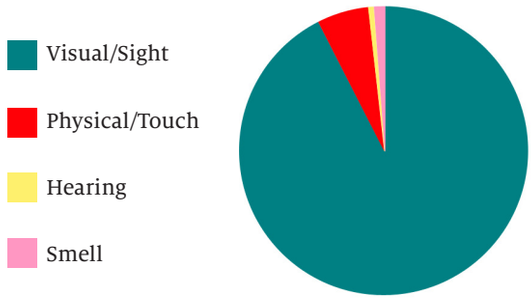
People connect colours to their everyday experiences. Colours add narrative to any text they read, and can help guide them down a specific path. Colour is just one variable in your story, but it's perhaps the one that will grab their attention and help them form immediate opinions about your product, service, or website.

Visual judgement

People make a subconscious judgment about a person, environment, or product within 90 seconds of seeing it. And between 62% and 90% of that assessment is based on colour alone. (Source: CCICOLOR – Institute for Color Research).

Despite my best efforts, I do judge a book by its cover. I also form opinions of products, including websites, within seconds. For branding and marketing, visual impressions are extremely significant.

A study carried out by the Seoul International Color Expo 2004 showed that 92.6 percent of participants placed the most importance on the way a product looks when buying things. Another 5.6 percent said how it felt when they touched it was most important. Hearing and smell each drew 0.9 percent.



With our eyes doing nearly all the work, colour clearly plays a part in our decision making process when shopping for physical products. Colour is just as significant online, if not more so, because we don't use the other senses on the web.

The art of communicating visual information is all about getting and retaining your audience's attention. And what catches the eye's attention in the first place? Colour.

My favourite colour

I wanted to learn more about the power of colour as a communication tool and what it means to people. So I used my blog and Twitter to conduct some lo-fi research, asking what people's favourite colours were and why.

Here are some of the answers I received:

- Orange: *warm, associated with holidays and the sun*
- Red: *warm, and the national colour of Wales*
- Purple: *associated with wealth and gorgeous sunsets*
- Yellow: *a happy colour*
- Black: *simple and understandable*
- Blue: *reminds me of the ocean and I love the ocean*

These answers show how important a colour can be to someone because of how it makes them feel. We're drawn to colours because of the places, seasons, objects, nationalities and brands we associate them with. Not to mention the emotions, behaviours and moods they evoke in us.

With colours communicating such an array of messages, there must be implications for design. Choosing colours is not a decision to be made lightly.

Uses of colour

Colour can help us to achieve a variety of design goals, both online and in the real world. They can:

- Improve memory
- Influence buying decisions
- Tell stories
- Communicate cultural and political messages
- Evoke emotions and influence moods
- Bring static content to life
- Attract attention
- Indicate meaning
- Group elements
- Help with navigation

In the next chapter we'll take a deeper look at how colour influences us.

12

The colour of life and the web

To discover how we can use colour online to affect moods, influence buying decisions and improve navigation, let's look at just what colour gives us.

Colour vs. Black and White

The differences between black and white and colour images seem obvious at face value, but the different ways they communicate aren't quite as clear. Why is colour so powerful? It's worth looking at an example to emphasise the importance of colour and help answer this question.

Here is a scene shown in black and white:

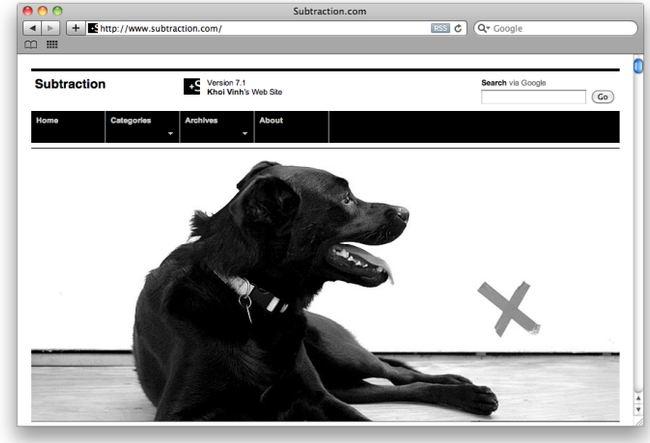
This image has its own charming qualities; indeed some images can be more striking without colour. Black and white photos, for example, hint at worlds gone by and conjure up feelings of nostalgia. The photo above may be charming, but it doesn't convey the atmosphere or energy of the place it depicts.

Here is the same scene shown in colour:

As you can see, colour adds atmosphere to the scene. It brings the static content to life, and emphasises the bright lights of the neon adverts, the shop signs, and even the movement at street level. We get a sense of just how bright, frantic, overwhelming and urban the place is – even if we don't know a thing about Times Square.

12 percent of people dream only in black and white.

This doesn't mean you should always choose colour over black and white. There is a place for monochromatic design, such as *Khoi Vinh*'s beautiful Subtraction website[1].



[1] www.subtraction.com

However, I find it harder to communicate through black and white because I can't connect a monochrome colour scheme to many emotions and life experiences beyond the feeling of 'retro'. Having missed the black and white television era I've always been surrounded by colour. So I immediately associate black and white with the past – a world I was never exposed to.

Colour brings things to life

Colour can affect every level of the user experience. It brings things to life and gives a sense of dimension and depth. It also creates a stronger connection between the user and what they see on the screen, as they can more easily relate it to something in the 'real' world.

Scott McCloud touches on this in his excellent book, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. McCloud teaches us that:

> *"Another property of flat colours is their tendency to emphasise the shape of objects, both animate and inanimate, as any child who has ever colored-by-numbers knows instinctively. These colours objectify their subjects. We become more aware of the physical form of objects than in black and white."*

While McCloud was talking specifically about comic book art, his point can be applied across other communication platforms, including the web.

Here's another benefit. Adverts, comics, websites, and other visual media usually have a lot of content that can't be processed all at once. Colour can give one area or specific piece of content more prominence over another. It can help us group content, and lead the user's eyes to specific areas by adding an 'invisible' hierarchy of importance to the content.

Colour aids memory

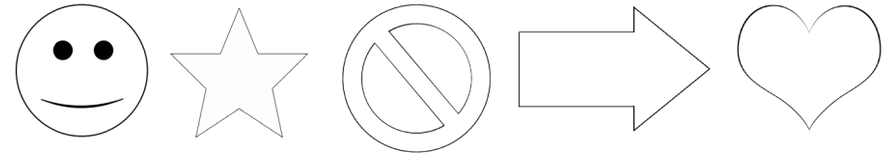
We've evolved to remember the colours of things that can help us (such as edible fruit in trees) and harm us (such as wasps and bees). It's an innate human ability to associate colours with feelings, danger, cultures and the world around us. So it's no surprise that we remember things better if they are in colour.

Studies have been conducted to test the theory that colour improves memory. While I won't be discussing the research in detail here, the conclusions are relevant.

A study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition, published by the American Psychological Association (APA)[1], reports how the visual system exploits colour information. Adding colour to a scene is like adding extra data that helps the brain process and store images more efficiently than those in black and white. And that in turn makes them easier to recall.

With that in mind, here are two sequences of symbols, with one sequence in black and white and the other in colour. In theory you should remember the sequence of colour symbols more readily than the black and white ones. (Don't worry, I'm not going to test you later.)

Here they are in black and white:



[1] May 2002 issue of the Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition, published by the American Psychological Association (APA)
"The Contributions of Color to Recognition Memory for Natural Scenes,", Vol 28. No.3., 5-May-2002

And now with a splash of colour:

Just as Scott McCloud stated, adding colour brings these symbols to life. It helps us relate them to our world, and improves our ability to recall them in test situations.

Pink and red connote love, so a pink heart is easier to remember than a black and white one. Similarly, we know red can also represent danger, which is why the third symbol is easier to recall than its black and white counterpart. We can link the red version to signs we see regularly.

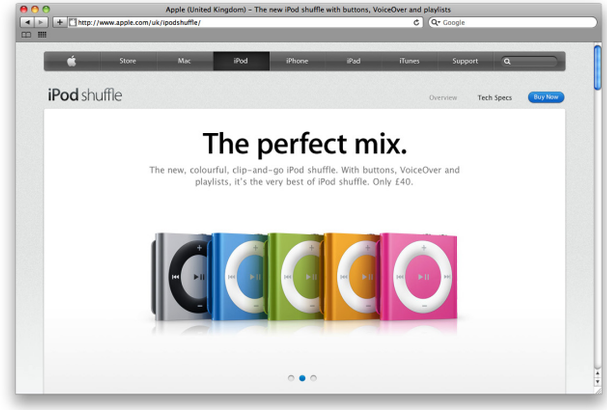
Green has come to communicate the process of moving forward, such as green for go on traffic lights. So an arrow pointing the way in a green colour lets us join the dots between the symbol, the colour and a real life example. A black and white arrow pointing in the same direction has fewer (if any) links to our world so we can't digest it as easily, making it harder to recall later on.

Colour influences us

Colour influences our moods and our spending habits. Let's look at how important colour is when trying to influence the latter.

Apple

Apple produces iMacs and iPods in a variety of colours. These colours say a lot about the item's owner, and they influence our decision on what product to buy.



The colours that iPods come in influence our decision over which product to buy. I would never buy a pink iPod for myself because it is stereotypically a girl's colour. Blue and black, on the other hand, are top of my list. For me, the fact such a choice even exists speaks volumes. As consumers we can now buy a music player that best reflects our own personalities.

This colour preference stretches beyond Apple products though. I'd never buy a pink t-shirt, but I have plenty of blue, black and grey ones. And it's not just because I prefer those colours. I'm also influenced by what different colours communicate and how they are linked to genders in particular. Call me stereotypical, but these are associations many succumb to and it has weaved itself into my subconscious.

Colour affects our mood

As we've already discussed, colour evokes emotions in us and affects our moods. A simple shade can make us feel happy. This is invisible communication, and while we may not enter a yellow room and think "That colour is making me feel cheery", it does influence us subconsciously. And the colours we see online will likely have a similar affect.

Let's now look at a real world example where colour is used to influence our moods.

Hospitals and surgeries.

Doctor's surgeries often have green or blue walls, as these tones are said to help people relax. Blue helps the muscles to relax and so the heart beats slower, thus inducing a sense of calm. It also causes the brain to secrete tranquilising hormones. Green creates an environment of emotional balance where the eyes relax and concentration increases. In many cases the uniforms for surgeons and nurses are also green for the same calming reasons.

It also happens at mental health units, where the walls are often beige with a pink tint. Combined with mint green floors, it creates a soothing, harmonious and calm area--important in an environment where unpredictable behaviour can be commonplace.

Hospitals and surgeries avoid using strong colours. Instead they use neutral tones, which help create a sense of wellbeing. Red in particular can make the heart beat faster (not advisable for people with high blood pressure) and so they avoid it. Similarly too much yellow is said to cause headaches, and studies have shown that babies cry more in yellow-coloured rooms.

Bright and bold for the young

In stark contrast, schools and play areas favour strong and bold colours as these are more appealing to children and create happy, bright environments for them.

Research has shown children don't like the colour green as they associate it with vegetables. In his book *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*, Faber Birren learnt that yellow is popular with children but as we move into adulthood it shows less popularity.

Birren found that:

> *"with maturity comes a greater liking for hues of shorter wave length (blue, green, purple) than for hues of longer wave length (red, orange, and yellow)"*

Colours will influence our moods differently as we mature. We also gain more life experience, and so have a greater range of colour association.

Colour idioms

Another example of how we associate colours with moods and emotions is in common sayings. I'm sure you've heard most of these:

- He was green with envy
- I'm feeling blue
- She saw red
- They were green around the gills
- We found him black and blue
- The black sheep of the family
- I caught her red-handed
- We were tickled pink
- She told a little white lie

We can use colours this way because we know the associations. For example, 'She saw red' works because we have learnt that red can represent anger and rage. Green is a colour that represents being envious. (It even appears in the Skype emoticon for 'envy'.)

In the next chapter we'll take a closer look at the connotations – the implied meanings – of various colours.

13

Connotations of colour

One thing that fascinates me is the connotations – the meanings – we associate with colour.

It's worth looking beyond the literal and investigating the hidden meanings of colours. Doing so can teach us valuable lessons, and help us create websites that not only look the part, but also target their audiences perfectly.

Connotation and denotation

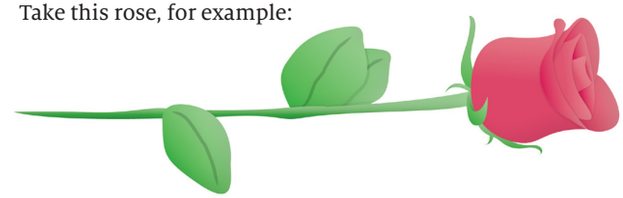
The denotation of something is its literal meaning – the most specific or direct meaning of a word, as opposed to its associated meanings, or connotations. For colour, then, the denotation of red is the literal shade of red.

Let's look at this symbol:

The denotation here is a brown cross. It is a cross and it's brown. But the connotation is that it's a religious symbol or, more specifically, the symbol of Christianity.

Connotation is the implied or suggested meaning. For red, the connotation varies depending on the context, but the two most common connotations for red are danger and love.

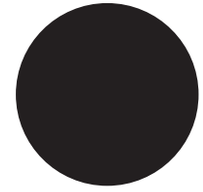
Take this rose, for example:



The denotation here is a red rose with a green stem. The connotation, however, is passion and love. A red rose is a symbol of these emotions, and that's what it has come to represent.

Red has many connotations, including stop, danger, and warnings. That's why it's commonly seen on road signs.

Is this a black circle?



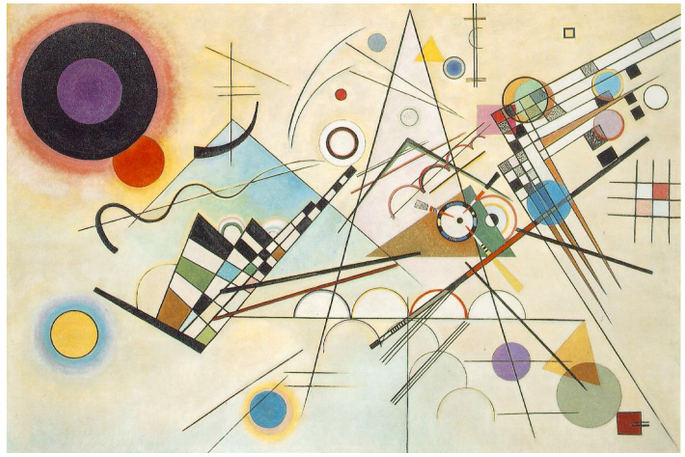
Yes, if we look at it literally. The denotation here is the absence of colour. It is simply a circle that is black.

The connotation, however, could be any number of things: fear of the unknown, a black hole, the dark, a void, or even space (a natural association often reinforced in media such as films, particularly science fiction).

Thinking of colours in relation to their connotations can help us make the right decisions when choosing colour in website design. Instead of choosing colours just because they looks good, we start asking ourselves whether they tell the right story, or represent the most appropriate mood.

I've already given some examples where colours can create a particular mood, such as in hospitals. But now we'll look at this aspect of colour theory in more depth, and across a wider range of colours.

The expert opinion



Wassily Kandinsky was one of the first pioneers of colour theory. A renowned Russian painter and art theorist, he is often considered the founder of abstract art. As an authoritative voice on colour, Kandinsky believed colours could have both emotional and physical effects on people. He thought that – alongside other formal elements, such as line, shape, and form – colour is a language that communicates to all.

As part of his theory, Kandinsky associated the following colours with certain qualities:

Warm, cheeky, exciting, happy
Deep, inner, peaceful, supernatural
Stillness, peace, hidden strength, passive
Harmony, silence, cleanliness
Grief, dark, unknown
Soundless, emotionless
Alive, restless, glowing, confident
Dull, hard, inhibited
Radiant, healthy, serious
Morbid, grief, sickness

The qualities Kandinsky describes aren't necessarily obvious connections. But they do show us how colours can connote emotions, temperatures, seasons, and moods, as well as make us think of specific objects, places, and animals.

But here's a question: Do we immediately associate the colours with the emotions when we see those colours in our world and online?

Colours and their connotations

Let's delve a little deeper and take a look at various colours and how they can motivate us emotionally.

Red

Connotes: *love, passion, desire, danger, war, blood, strength, power*

Red is an intense colour that raises blood pressure and increases respiration rates. Its high visibility makes it ideal for hazard and warning signs, as well as fire protection equipment.

Red can stimulate people, and lends itself nicely to 'Buy it now' or 'Click here' calls to action. It's also common in eating establishments because it's an appetite stimulant.

Yellow

Connotes: *sunshine, happiness, energy, cheerfulness, spontaneous*

Yellow is a cheery colour that many people associate with being happy. It stimulates mental activity, and also has a warming effect. In its brightest form yellow is an attention grabber, and objects in this colour certainly stand out from the crowd (such as the iconic New York taxicabs). It can be a very effective way to highlight the most important elements of your design. However, it also has connotations of spontaneity, so its suitability may depend on the story you are trying to tell.

It's also used with black for hazard signs, as it stands out against black more than other colours do.

Yellow is a contradictory colour. It's often associated with happiness, and yet using it too much can have negative effects, such as inducing headaches. Studies have shown that babies are more likely to cry in yellow rooms. Yellow is also said to increase metabolism and enhance concentration.

Blue

Connotes: *cool, icy, sea, sky, trust, loyalty, wisdom, heaven, truth, intelligence*

Blue has a calming effect, and so is commonly used in hospitals and surgeries. It also has connotations of purity and cleanliness, and its obvious association with the sea and sky make it an ideal choice for promoting airlines and cruises.

But blue can be cold and unwelcoming, depending on the tone. It also suppresses the appetite, so avoid it if promoting or designing food-related products and sites. And it's a stereotypically male colour.

When combined with other colours, blue can connote patriotic messages and political statements. People recommend wearing blue to interviews as it symbolises loyalty.

Green

Connotes: *nature, relaxation, growth, harmony, fresh, wealth, fertility*

Green is restful and harmonious, and is a recommended colour for improving concentration. Because of its connotations of growth and nature it is commonly used for topics such as recycling, organic, and being environmentally friendly.

Brides in the Middle Ages wore green to symbolise fertility.

Darker greens are usually associated with wealth and money.

Purple

Connotes: *royalty, luxury, wizardry, power, nobility, ambition, mystery, magic*

Fewer links exist between purple and the natural world than the other colours, and so it is often considered to be artificial. This may be why it is often linked to fantasy and magic.

Purple can also be a more feminine colour (depending on the shade), while brighter purple is used for children's products. (Let's face it: Barney the Dinosaur is about as bright as they come.)

Orange

Connotes: *warmth, sunshine, joy, citrus, Autumn, enthusiasm, success, stimulation*

Orange, like red, is a hot colour. So it's no surprise that it's used for fire and heat. It is said to increase the oxygen supply to the brain and therefore stimulate mental activity.

Brown

Connotes: *reliable, stable, earth, nature, natural, genuine, dirty*

Brown is warm and comforting. It can stimulate the appetite, and because of its associations with the soil it symbolises being down to earth.

Black

Connotes: *death, evil, mystery, power, elegance, space, voids, grief, mourning*

Black is associated with fear and the unknown. It usually has a negative connotation, although it can also connote strength and authority.

White

Connotes: *peace, elegance, innocence, purity, clinical, sterile, icy, light, virginity, transparent*

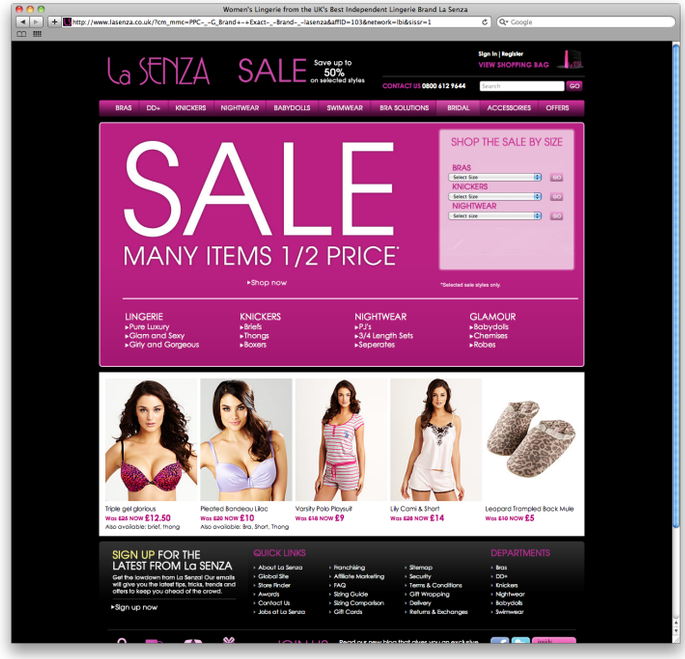
White is an innocent colour, linked to purity and neutrality. White 'goes with everything'. Doctors and nurses wear white to imply sterility.

It is also the most common colour for brides to wear. Bridal white is associated with being virginal, though red is usually the colour people associate with love.

Colours on the web

Let's take a look at some websites to see how they use colours to tell their stories:

La Senza is an underwear store and as expected the website is predominantly pink and black. Pink (along with red) has connotations of love and romance. Combined with black this then adds a sexy feel to the site.



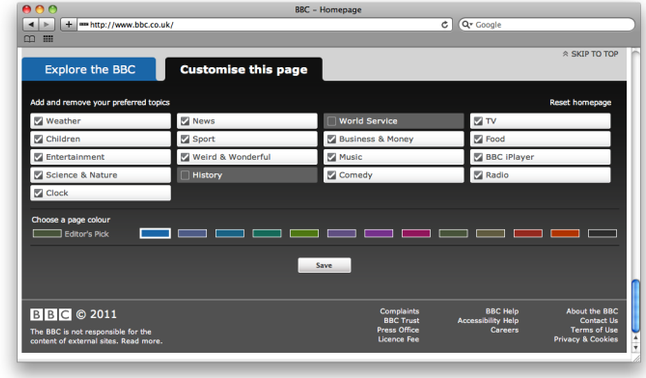
For seasons you can be sure that wintry websites will be blue and white, colours that connote coldness, ice and freezing. Autumnal websites will go for brown, red and orange to reflect the shades of trees during this time. Spring themed sites will use green, blue and yellow. Spring is all about growth. Green communicates that value.

But what if you could change the colour of a website? Would that also change the feeling it imparts, in line with the connotations discussed previously? Well, the *BBC* homepage allows users to change the colour, and the results are rather insightful.

The Users Decide

We choose colours all the time when buying clothes, decorating and designing. Now you can choose from 13 colours on the BBC homepage, or even have them on rotation. Users rarely get to make these decisions online.

Here is the BBC homepage. You can see the sections where you can change the colour. (You can't have one section blue and another one red. They all have to be the same colour.)
When these block colours change, the colour of the text links also change to the user's choice of page colour.



Everyone will have their own colour preferences. Personally I would select from the first five or the last five colours, and ignore the ones in between.

Why? Because to me the three middle colours connote feminine qualities. Pink tones are seen today as stereotypically girl's colours. The fact I am more likely to choose the blue shades or brown and black options is echoed in my choice of iPod colour, clothes and general colour preference in everyday life. Why should it be any different online?

People's choices could also be linked to how they perceive the BBC brand. For some it may always be the traditional red they think of, while for others it might be pink as per the BBC3 TV channel.

A simple colour change may seem insignificant. But it's amazing how different the homepage can not only look but also communicate and connote varying messages just by changing the colour.

Let's look at the BBC Homepage in six different colours and see how each one makes the site feel.

Red:

Red is the staple colour for the BBC. In this context it connotes trust and tradition, (values commonly associated with the corporation) rather than love and romance.

While the page does hint at romanticism it isn't screaming that message to us. For me the choice of red for the BBC homepage is the safest of all the colour choices.

Green:

The change in colour immediately shifts the tone of the site, making it look more like a nature website.

It's natural, earthy, and friendly – all connotations of green because most colour symbolism is linked to nature.

It also adopts a fresh feel and, more so than the other colours, makes me feel calm and relaxed.

Purple:

Purple makes the site more futuristic than the previous two colours, perhaps because there are few associations between purple and the natural world.

It gives the site a more feminine touch and reminds me of websites for cosmetic products, but also the sites of specific brands such as Cadburys.

Black:

This page tells a different story altogether. Using black instead of the other brighter options makes it look more traditional and less friendly.

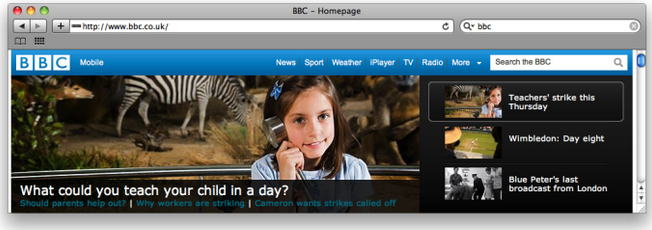
It also seems more masculine, and instils a sense of nostalgia in me. It also reminds me of a newspaper, which does fit the BBC's reputation of being a reliable news source.

For those reasons I struggle to feel comfortable with this option. I can't quite connect to it in the same way I can with the other colour options.

Orange:

Fresh, summery, bright. These are the messages I'm getting from this page. This is definitely one of the more eye-catching colours out of the six selected. It is warm and inviting, and has a happy vibe about it. It also feels quite energetic and youthful, though I wouldn't normally use those adjectives to describe the BBC.

Blue:



This is my favourite of all the colours. It feels fresh and relaxing, and I find it easier on the eyes than some of the other options.

I feel at ease with blue in general, so it's bound to influence my colour choice here. It hints at the ocean and blue skies, which both make me feel more positive.

What this little experiment shows us is that each colour hints at different qualities. They each tell a different story. The content is the same on all these pages, but changing the colour has changed the whole feel of the page.

Now let's look at how colour connotations can vary between cultures.

14

Colour in cultures

Many of the colour connotations we've discussed so far have been UK-centric and focused more on Western tradition. But some meanings are culture dependant, and a given colour can send very different messages in different places around the world.

As a designer you need to know your audience when choosing colours, or you risk conveying an entirely different message from the one you intended.

Worldwide differences

The most notable difference in colour connotations is between the Eastern and Western cultures, although this boundary is starting to blur. The differences can range from one colour representing opposite values to more subtle variations.

How a culture perceives a particular colour will influence its use as a communication tool. The branding on specific products can provide the best insight into this area. Green, for example, is seen on products targeted at Austrian or Turkish audiences. However, green is an unpopular colour in Belgium and France, and so wouldn't be an effective way to influence people's shopping habits in those countries.

Here's another example. Orange is the national colour of the Netherlands, and so often connotes patriotism there. In the UK, however, orange is the brand colour for corporate giants such as *Orange* and *EasyJet*.

This shows how the core message of one colour can vary between locations (and often does).

One of the best examples of a location where colour choice has a profound impact on the companies selling there is China.

Spotlight on China

Product and web designers can fall into a trap if they overlook the cultural differences between Western markets and China.

In China, red is a symbol of good luck and happiness. It's a powerful colour for branding and consumerism in China because of its positive effect on people's moods – ideal for subliminally influencing people to buy something.

Bright colours are used to great effect on food products in China. But personal care items tend to be dominated by pastel and diluted tones. In keeping with these values, *General Mills* changes its packaging for the Chinese market, opting for brighter colours. (For those not familiar with General Mills, its worldwide brands include *Betty Crocker*, *Old El Paso* and *Cheerios*.)

Kleenex, the tissue manufacturer, use bright colours on its US branding and packaging but favours pastel colours for the Chinese market.

Neutral – welcome to all

If there's one colour that can cross cultural boundaries, it's white. White is pure and clean. While it can have cultural relevance (such as being the symbolic colour of weddings in the UK), it's also used to appeal to the masses due to its inoffensive and calm connotations.

Official tourism websites often avoid using any strong signature colours in favour of white. Maybe it's because white is peaceful, neutral and inoffensive, and so will appeal to everyone.

http://www.visiticeland.com/

With other colours anchored to certain messages, it would be difficult to target different cultures with the same colour as they would each read it in different ways. For that reason, white seems to be a safe bet.

However, to better understand why white transcends cultures let's look at colours in relation to their cultural significance.

Colouring by cultures

In the next few pages I will look at several colours and give examples of how they are interpreted in different countries around the world. I'll also provide examples from the East and the West, and show instances where they match.

- China – *good luck, marriage (it's worn by brides), celebration ("paint the town red")*
- India – *purity, danger, symbol for a soldier*
- South Africa – *mourning*
- Russia – *communism. (Red means beautiful in Russia. The Bolsheviks used a red flag as their symbol when they overthrew the tsar in 1917, and so red became a symbol of communism.)*
- UK – *danger, passion, love, stop, Christmas*

Perhaps the most universal use of red is signalling stop on traffic lights. It's a colour that draws attention, highlights important objects, and is commonly associated with danger, no entry and stop – an association reaffirmed through road signs.

Red first became connected with stop signs in the 1830s when used for railroad signalling. Then in 1954 the *US Federal Highway Administration* (FHA) published *The Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* (MUTCD). It was in this manual that the stop sign was standardised as red with white type.

Red is also the most common colour in national flags.

- Japan – *courage*
- Egypt and Burma – *mourning*
- China – *royalty*
- India – *the symbol for a merchant or a farmer, Hindus wear yellow to celebrate the festival of spring*
- UK – *hope, hazards*

Yellow is highly visible, and so is often used to warn of hazards (especially when combined with black).

- China – *exorcism, cheating, disgrace*
- India – *Islam*
- UK – *spring, St Patrick's Day, good luck (four leaf clover), national colour of Ireland*
- USA – *wealth*
- Spain – p*erverseness*
- North Africa – *corruption*

Perhaps the most universal association for green is nature. Trees are the same colour around the world, and so everyone can make the same these association.

- Thailand – *mourning, orchid, royalty*
- UK – *magic, royalty, luxury*
- USA – *The U.S. military decorates soldiers wounded or killed in battle with a "Purple Heart"*

Purple is hard to deconstruct because it has so few associations to the natural world. (I can only think of beetroot.) Therefore its symbolism is learned through cultural association. It is often cited as being a plush colour with connotations of royalty, luxury and wealth.

In the late 1960s, purple became a symbol of gay pride, supported by the "Purple Power" catchphrase.

- UK – *Conservatism*
- USA – *Liberalism*
- Iran – *mourning*
- Ancient Rome – *public servants wore blue. Today police and other public servants wear blue*

Blue is very popular because of its association with the sea and the sky – representations that are certainly more universal than others. It is also most commonly linked to boys in the western world.

Regarding its political significance: Blue in the UK is associated with the Conservative Party while in the USA it's associated with the Democratic Party. This clearly shows how one colour can have a completely opposite meaning from one culture to another. The fact such a dichotomy even exists shows how much you need to think about colour choices in design.

- Netherlands – *Royalty*
- India – *Hinduism*
- Northern Ireland – *Protestantism*
- USA – *cheap goods, Halloween*

Orange is an appetite stimulant, so it's a useful colour for restaurants. Like red, it increases oxygen supply to the brain and stimulates mental activity. As it becomes brighter it also becomes more energetic.

It also gives the sensation of heat due to its connotations of fire and flames.

- India – *sorrow, unhappiness*
- UK – *marriage, angels, peace*
- China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan – *traditionally a colour of mourning*

White is commonly linked to marriage, as it's the colour most brides choose to wear. (This tradition dates back to Ancient Greece.) It is also symbolic of peace, due to the white flags of surrender.

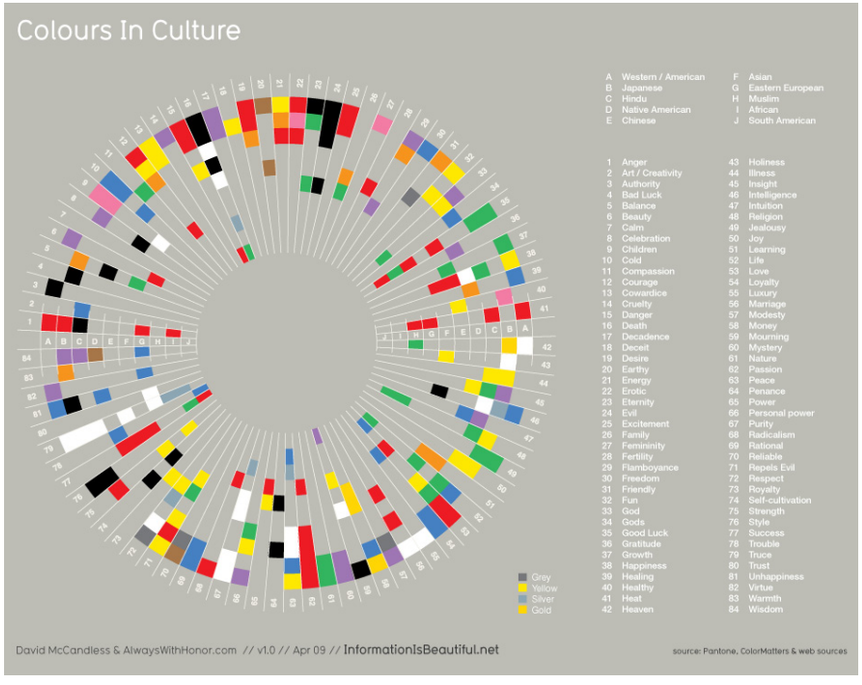
- UK – *mourning (funerals), intelligence (graduation robes)*
- *China – black is for little boys*
- Thailand – *unhappiness, bad luck*
- Kenya and Tanzania (tribes) – *black is associated with rain clouds and therefore symbolises prosperity and life*

Black, while often perceived as a negative colour, can also have connotations of sophistication, technology and gadgets.

It's also linked to elegance due to formal black tie events and little black dresses. (It's even said to make people appear slimmer)

Information is Beautiful is a website by *David McCandless* that 'visualizes information – facts, data, ideas, subjects, issues, statistics, questions – all with the minimum of words."[1]

On his website David produced a stunning infographic that shows what colours mean in different cultures.



[1] http://www.informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/colours-in-cultures/

Politically correct colours

A by-product of culture, politics can be represented through colour too. In the UK, each political party is associated with a specific colour. Labour are red, Conservatives are blue, Liberal Democrats are yellow and the Green Party are, well, green.

The political connotations of colours could be significant (depending on your target audience), and knowing the political conventions will help support your message rather than contradict it.

For example, if you were designing a website for a left-leaning think tank then you probably shouldn't use a lot of blue, as this is associated with the Conservatives (the right wing).

Changes through time

The cultural significance of colours can change. Never assume that what a colour represents now is the same as 10, 50 or 100 years ago. Cultures evolve, and the cultural significance of colours can also shift over time.

For example, white has traditionally been the colour of mourning in China. But young Chinese brides are now wearing white gowns to emulate the Western tradition. White was also the colour of mourning in Japan many centuries ago, but it has since changed to black.

Colour selection

You could spend days researching the meaning of every colour throughout the world. The key is to focus your attention on the audience you're targeting, and determine the significance of colours to them in relation to their culture.

Some projects bring with them brand guidelines, and you may well be tied into a certain colour or combination of colours. Even then it is still worth conducting your own research to ensure the colours you have been told to use support the brand, company, or story you are designing for. Be informed, and your designs will be relevant.

15

Case Study: *carsonified.com*

So far we've established:

- Why colour is important
- How it can communicate to us
- What it tells us
- How the messages it communicates can vary between cultures

Now let's look at a real-life example of just how powerful colour can be.

While researching this book I got to speak with *Mike Kus* (one of my favourite designers) about the role colour played in the redesign of the Carsonified website. What followed was a fascinating insight into the power of colour, and why it is so important in design.

The brief

The new Carsonified site had to:

- Express the company's character
- Communicate what they do on the homepage (Carsonified is an events company)
- Include links to the 'Home', 'Events', 'Mission', 'Jobs', 'Contact' and 'Team' pages
- Communicate the specific message, "We are passionate about what we do"

Carsonified also has a popular online blog for designers and developers called 'Think Vitamin'. This was being removed from its own domain and included in the new Carsonified site. But still had to retain its own identity.

The aim of the redesign was to express the feeling of Carsonified, make a statement with the holding page and provoke a reaction in the audience.

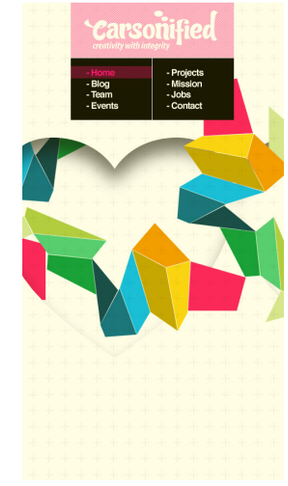
I talked to Mike in some detail about the redesign process, and he confirmed that from quite early on in the project he wanted to use colour effectively to show Carsonified's bright personality. But it also had to communicate the organization's serious side.

And that was the challenge Mike faced – striking the right balance between designing a colourful website and keeping it simple. The redesign process came up with a number of different concepts. Many were rejected because they didn't fit with the story that needed to be told. Some of the earlier designs were also too personal and more sketchbook – they didn't have a strong message.

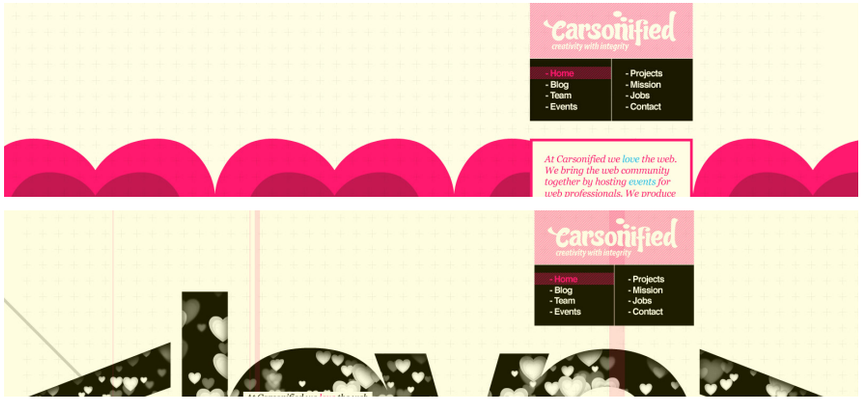
Storytelling and colour

They decided to bring more colour into the design, and to use the content itself to communicate the desired message. By working on storytelling and the use of colour, they turned designs that weren't hitting the mark into the final concept.

With this goal in mind, they created these options:



That last concept illustrates the problem Mike was trying to solve. Wanting the site to be bright and bold, Mike opted for a multi-colour approach. But the simplicity was lost, as the two don't go hand in hand. The multi-colour option does connote playfulness, but it was too fussy.



As you can see, the designs became bolder and the use of colour more important. But these are still a long way from what the finished site looks like. The use of pink, red, the word 'love' and the heart shapes all reinforce the notion of passion. But while Mike had the story nailed, he felt he needed to inject Carsonified's personality into the design.

That personality came in the form of illustrations. Mike added them to one of the concepts centred around passion, and produced two options for the homepage:

As the design was refined the use of colour was honed, which led to an unlikely source of inspiration.

Mike explained how he saw these for sale posters in the window of a Gap store and was immediately hit by how simple they were.

> *"The posters were brash and in your face and you wouldn't necessarily associate this style with beautiful design. But I realised how powerful bold simplicity could be when used in a creative way."*

This triggered another inspiration. The United Colours of Benetton advertising campaigns relied heavily on colour, but in the form of simple, flat colours. According to Mike, "You need to think outside the box when designing for the web as you are more likely to come up with something original and apt."

With these posters firmly in mind, they tackled the redesign with a new approach: include bold colour in a simple way, and keep the colours used on each page to a minimum.

This concept evolved to become one colour per page. Within hours the final iteration was completed and Mike knew it was the one that would go live. He continued producing illustrations to tell the story in combination with the copy and the colours.

The homepage

When we chatted about the homepage it was interesting to hear how Mike consciously chose black to make it different from every other page.

Here's the homepage how it looked when the site was launched:

Black and white can have negative connotations. But Mike's goal was to make a statement, and so he chose to make the homepage "an anti-page" in the sense that every page would feature a bold colour except the homepage. If users landed on the homepage they would see a black and white site, but as they moved further into the content the colours would reveal themselves page by page. (The white was also an off-white colour, to give it a retro feel.)

And here is the most recent version as of June 2011:

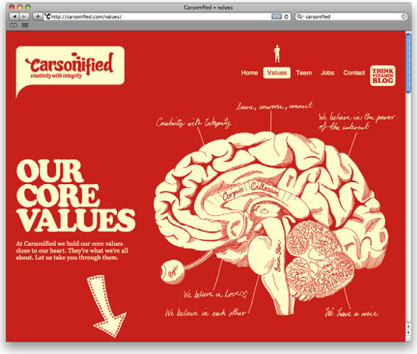
The lack of colour here does indeed jar with the other pages, but that was the whole point. When users landed on the homepage it was meant to provoke a reaction (good or bad), which would hopefully lure people in to explore the rest of the site and reveal the colour and story beyond.

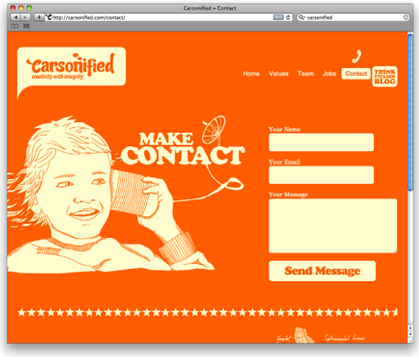
Showing the way

A conscious decision had clearly been made about what colour each page would be, and I wanted to know if the selection was random or influenced by the meanings that colours communicate. I was pleased to hear the colour choices were not random, but purposefully used as a way finding technique. As Mike explained:

> *"The top level navigation is bright, and no two pages have the same colour. Then, as we move to the team pages the colours become less bright and more dull, but also more personal."*

Top-level navigation:



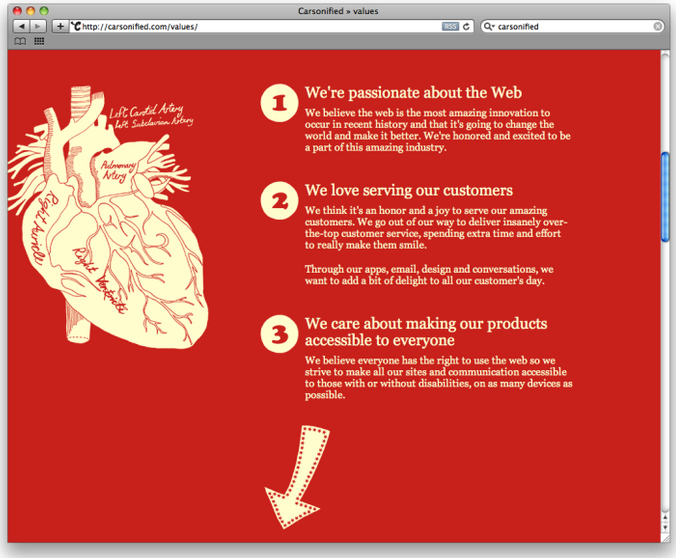


Secondary Navigation:

The clever use of single-colour pages leads the user through the site. There is no colour merging between content, and users will instinctively know where they are by the page colour alone.

Matching content to colour

A fundamental part of choosing the right colours was to look at the content of each page. As you can see, the colours chosen support the copy and echo the story on each page.



The 'Values' page does this by using the colour red. The content is all about Carsonified believing in what they do and having a passion for their work. And no colour connotes these values better than red.

Similarly, Mike chose blue for the 'Events' page because 'it is centred around the notion that we live and breathe what we do. I chose blue because of its associations with air and breathing.' This page is no longer live on the current Carsonified site.

The 'Jobs' page is all about the team expanding and growing. This is communicated through the colour green because of its associations with nature. The word 'grow' dominates the top of the page, along with an image of a tree. These three elements all emphasise the notion of growth and new beginnings – the perfect message for a jobs page.

People often take colour for granted when it's used correctly. And that's the beauty of colour – peopledon't think about it unless we break a convention that makes them notice.

Here's Mike's perspective on it:

> *"If you challenge peoples preconceived notion of colour it makes them talk. We believe the jobs page wouldn't have worked on dull grey."*

The original version of the contacts page featured a dull, muted colour. A user noticed this, and contacted Mike to say it was out of place with the other top-level navigation pages. As a direct result, Mike changed the page to its current orange shade.

Team Pages

On generic pages and pages about the company, a single colour was used to communicate the desired message. Selecting a colour for the team pages was more difficult because each person couldn't be defined or represented by one colour alone. According to Mike, the colour choices in this section were made more with a sense of fun.

The final design definitely offers a solution to the problem presented in the brief. In particular, using one colour per page allowed the site to be bright and full of the Carsonified personality, but also simple – something the earlier designs failed to achieve.

Knowledge is colour

I was impressed by Mike's knowledge of colour and how important it was in his designs. It was never a secondary thought or a passing idea – it was a fundamental part of his design process.

I asked Mike what his best colour tip for other people would be. His response? "Keep it simple."

The Carsonified website couldn't use any fewer colours – it's as simple as it could be. Yes, colour does dominate and is a major reason the site works so well. But it uses only one simple, solid colour per page. Mike summed it up perfectly:

> *"The simpler you keep colour, the more you can say to everybody. You don't want to have to get users to work things out if they are only on your site for a few seconds. I believe colour has helped me create a design for Carsonified that people will remember in just those few seconds of seeing it."*

Part 4

Using the correct language

The invisible side of language

How the words look

The Periodic Table of Typefaces

Tone of voice

Case study: *Innocent Drinks*

16

The invisible side of language

How can language be invisible?

When we talk to someone in person, our words are supported by body language, tone of voice, pitch, volume, accent, expression and cues – all forms of invisible communication. By using these invisible cues, we can convey emotions and moods such as sarcasm and anger without having to say we are being sarcastic or feel angry.

When writing for the web, we can still communicate invisibly through the tone of our writing voice, the look of our words, and the overall design of our website.

Some common definitions of 'language':[1]

1. A body of words and the systems for their use common to a people who are of the same community or nation, the same geographical area, or the same cultural tradition.

2. Communication by voice in the distinctively human manner, using arbitrary sounds in conventional ways with conventional meanings; speech.

3. Any system of formalized symbols, signs, sounds, gestures, or the like used or conceived as a means of communicating thought, emotion, etc.

How language communicates invisibly depends on the words we choose and how we use them. We can't convey pitch or volume when we write, but our writing can still convey tone of voice, pace and mood.

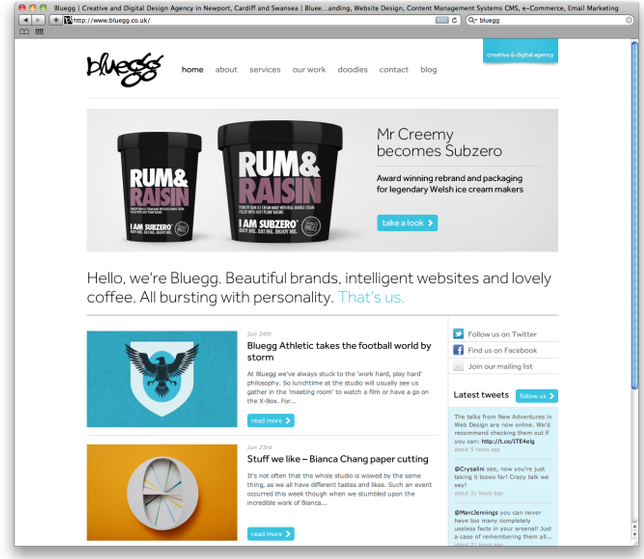
[1] http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/language

Why written language is an important part of your invisible communication toolbox

While the written word is obviously valuable because it's the most literal way to tell your story, it's also important because:

1. **The words that you choose can communicate the personality of your company/brand**

If you want your company to come across as approachable, fun and passionate, your language needs to express those values.



At *Bluegg* where I am Studio Manager, we often get comments relating to how we accurately market ourselves through our website as we use language that expresses our personality, such as:

- Hello, we're Bluegg. Beautiful brands, intelligent websites and lovely coffee. All bursting with personality. That's us
- Come see us, the kettle's on and the Wii is loading
- Still use a fax? Really? Fair enough

As you can see, the language is chatty and friendly. But it also communicates that Bluegg are passionate and approachable, reinforcing the branding and visuals on the studio website.

Humans use around 370 million words in an average lifetime. (Source: BBC Focus Magazine, October 2009)

2. Certain words and phrases are more effective for engaging your audience

For example, the most effective headlines for engaging readers often start with phrases such as 'How can you…', 'The secret of…' and 'Your guide to…'.

Asking questions is a good way to draw people in. *Yahoo* does it on its homepage with news items and feature articles:

- 'Dying hair grey is becoming a hot new trend among celebs - but how well do they pull off the "granny' look"?'
- 'Plan a trip to these European locations that inspired some of the most iconic film scenes. Where are they?'

See no evil, hear no evil

With written language, the reader has to make assumptions about the context and tone of voice the words are implying. This is why you must carefully consider your copy, as readers can easily misinterpret what you've written.

This problem is made worse by the fact that readers expect web copy to be concise and to the point, which means every word counts.

When we write for the web we need to keep in mind user behaviour; users tend to scan pages rather than read them in detail. We have to adapt how we communicate on the web and that includes our use of language.

When writing for the web our copy should be concise, objective and an aid for users rather than a distraction. Using invisible communication methods to augment our copy will help us say more with less.

Supporting the words

Using other forms of invisible communication (e.g. symbols, colour, typeface, branding and imagery) can support the written copy and help you tell your story.

For example, a dating website would likely have specific words in its copy that helps to tell the story of the site: 'companion', 'relationship', 'match', 'love', 'partner', 'search' and so forth. The copy could be supported by images of happy couples and the colour red, which represents passion, love and romance.

Targeting the words

In real life, we talk to with all sorts of people, both verbally and in writing. How we communicate varies from person to person, depending on the relationships we have with them. An email I write to a friend will be far more informal and chatty than one I write to a client.

To communicate effectively you need to appreciate and understand the relationship between you and your audience, so you can you make informed decisions about the written language you will use.

17

How the words look

When we communicate in person, our body language, facial expressions and gestures all reveal our true thoughts and feelings. We can provide similar cues when we write through our handwriting and typefaces.

Online, the way your words look – the typeface, essentially – will communicate invisibly to your audience, as people associate different typefaces with different sets of values.

Serif versus Sans-serif

A serif typeface is one that has 'serifs' – smaller lines used to finish off the main stroke of a letter. Examples of serif typefaces include Times New Roman, Georgia and Garamond. Here is the letter 'm' with serifs:

m

A sans-serif typeface is one without any serifs. Examples of sans-serif typefaces include Arial, Helvetica and Tahoma:

m

Tip from UX Booth[1]

> *"Whereas an ornate font may make you stand out, if your users are unable to read your content, there is no point having it. A good sans serif, like Helvetica, is easy on the eyes and won't make your readers strain to decipher your information. Unique fonts work well in banners or graphics, but the actual content should be simple and not tiny".*[2]

[1] UX Booth is a user experience and usability blog
[2] http://www.uxbooth.com/blog/11-quick-tips-for-more-usable-content/

In most cases, serif fonts tend to look more formal than sans-serif fonts. So if your website is aimed at professional corporate bodies, a serif font may help convey your message.

Typeface Tales

As well as the sans-serif and serif categories, it is also worth looking at specific typefaces to better understand how they can communicate invisibly and reinforce specific sets of values.

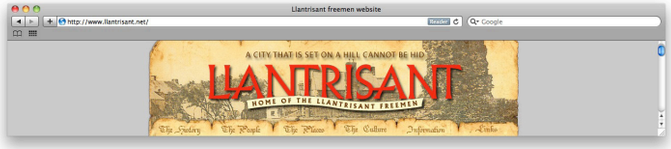
For more on different typefaces and their stories, see chapter 18, The Periodic Table of Typefaces.

Comic Sans, for example, is often bemoaned for being a hideous font. But it serves a purpose: the way it looks hints at an informal, friendly and fun set of values. With that in mind, it's no wonder typefaces like Comic Sans find themselves on so many items aimed at children.

Because so many businesses use Comic Sans on products aimed at young audiences, the values associated with that typeface become reinforced, and it will keep being used in that context.

Here is one example:

Similarly, we often see historical texts and periods represented by an Olde English or calligraphic typeface. (Films and books in particular reinforce this representation.)



If a website was being designed for a medieval banqueting event company, a calligraphy-style typeface would be suitable. It communicates quickly to the audience by using knowledge and expectations they already have.

Context is key

To decide what typeface would be most suitable for your story, you have to know your audience. The words themselves are key, of course, but knowing certain groups of typefaces communicate certain values will help improve the user experience you are creating.

Part of this decision-making process comes down to genre and context. Let's look at some examples from the web.

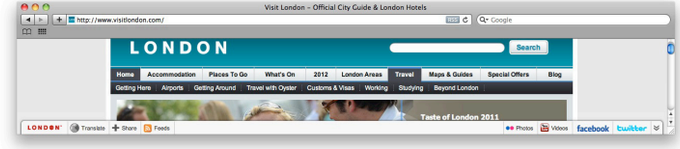
Here the designer has opted for a serif typeface for the headings. That's a suitable choice for an official government website, as it would want to be seen as intelligent, professional and formal. The site may come across as being stuffy, but would you have any faith or trust in your government if its site were set in Comic Sans?

Let's look at a site aimed at a completely different audience to the Downing Street site:

This is the website for the BBC's *CBeebies*, a television channel produced by the BBC for children aged 6 years and under.

As you can see, the typeface is bubbly and rounded. It comes across as fun and informal: a good choice for a website aimed at children who want to learn and have fun. If this website were in Times New Roman or a similar serif typeface, it would immediately conflict with the character of the site and the target audience.

This isn't to say that sans-serif typefaces can't look sophisticated. This website for London tourism adopts a sans-serif typeface, but thanks to the colours and design it still manages to look trustworthy, reliable and appealing.

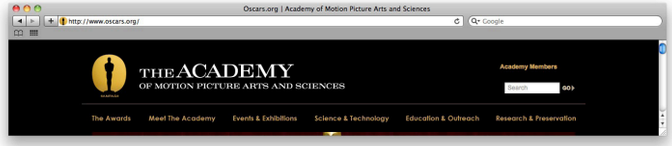


Start at the top

I think website headers act in the same way as newspaper mastheads. They can represent the values and tone of the content that follows, largely due to what the header's typeface communicates.

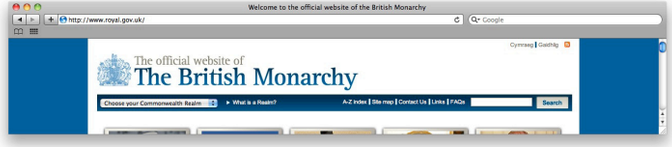
By communicating the right values in the header through the typeface, it sets up the user experience that follows.

Here are a few examples:

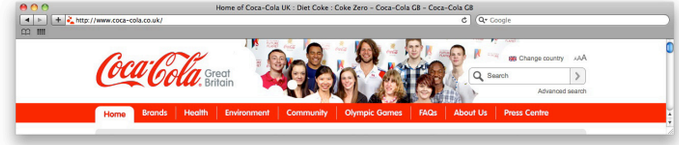


The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has adopted a serif typeface with gold, black and white colours. These elements combine to communicate sophistication, professionalism, intelligence and formality – all perfect connotations for such a prestigious organisation.

Haribo is a sweets manufacturer. Its homepage header is brighter, and the sans-serif typeface connotes fun, informality, and being childlike and approachable – values that sit perfectly with its products and the target audience.

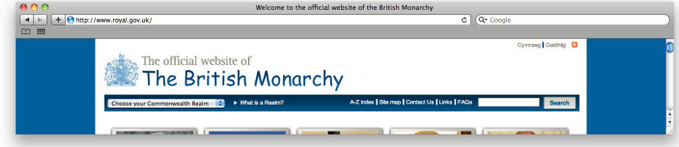


The official website for *The British Monarchy* is one example of where a serif typeface is a must. The typeface and colours communicate sophistication, luxury, formalness, wealth and (perhaps less obviously) freshness. (The latter is thanks largely to the connotations of the colours blue and white.)



The *Coke* header is bright, rounded and fun. The typeface for the navigation is approachable, clear and simple. It immediately communicates a message about the brand, and sets the tone for the rest of the content.

These examples all show typefaces we would expect to see. If the British Monarchy were presented in a less formal typeface, you can clearly see how it would invisibly communicate the wrong messages: In Comic Sans, the header looks inappropriate.



Following the rules

Whether copy is bolded, italicised, underlined or a different size also communicates to your users. They may make assumptions based on common practices, such as underlined words being links or bolded words being headings. Make sure you make it clear what the rules are within your site, and be consistent.

Making the right decision

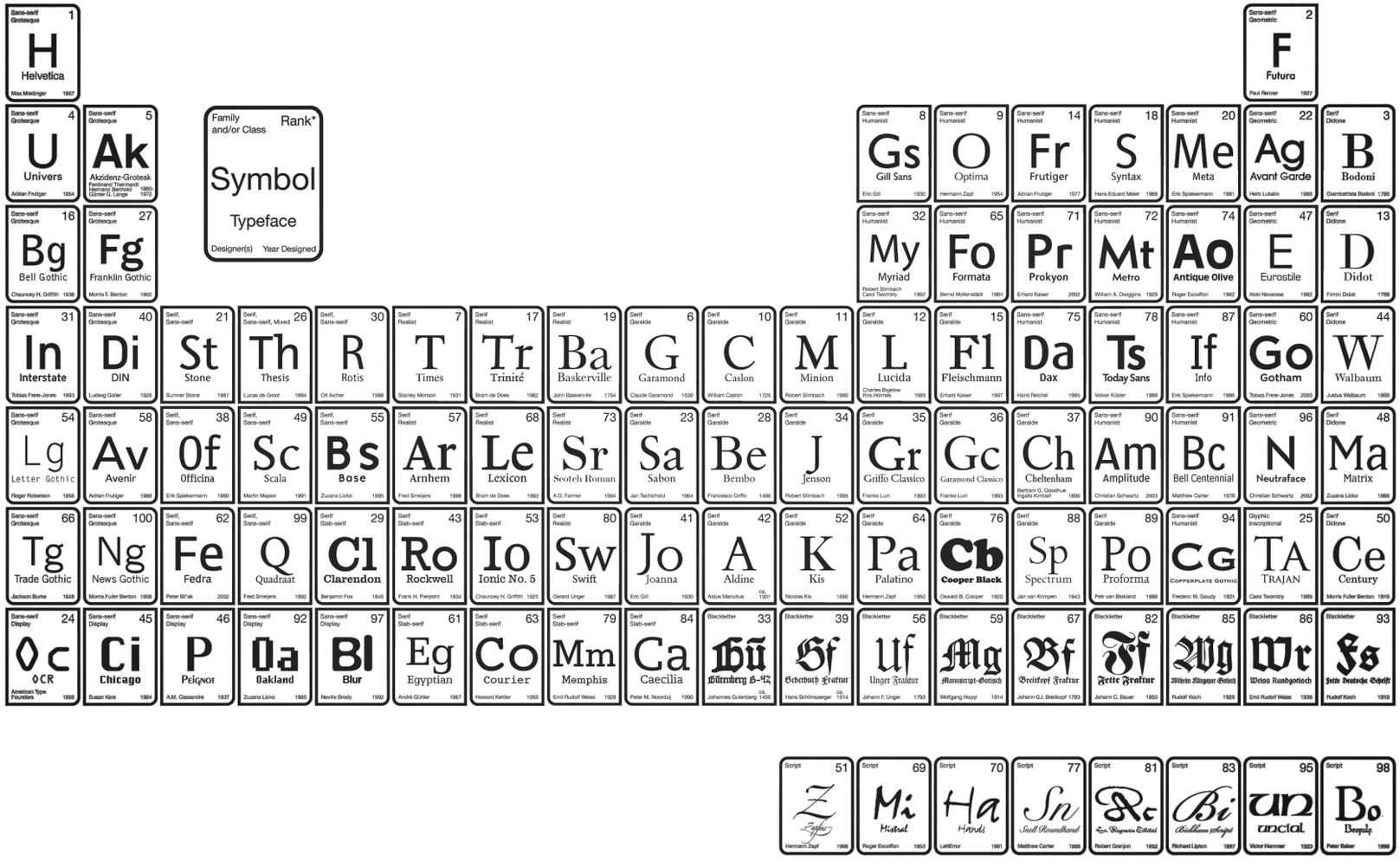
If the typeface you choose doesn't sit with your company's values and brand, or if it conflicts with other design elements, the messages your site communicates will be inconsistent. And it will have a negative impact on the user experience.

Choose typefaces carefully, and remember they also have to be legible. This isn't to say the importance shifts from the actual words to their aesthetics – what you say is still crucial. But consider how the words look, as they will help you tell your story on a subconscious and invisible level.

18

The Periodic Table of Typefaces

The typeface you select can really add another layer of communication to your design.A great visual reference tool for selecting an appropriate typeface is the *Periodic Table of Typefaces*.[1]



[1] http://www.behance.net/gallery/Periodic-Table-of-Typefaces/193759

What is the Periodic Table of Typefaces?

Created by Camdon Wilde of Squidspot.com, the table brings together the 100 most popular typefaces and categorises them in a similar way to the periodic table of elements used in chemistry.

The table groups typefaces into families and classes, such as sans-serif, serif, script and glyphic. Each cell lists a typeface, a one or two-character symbol, the designer, the year it was designed, and its ranking out of 100.

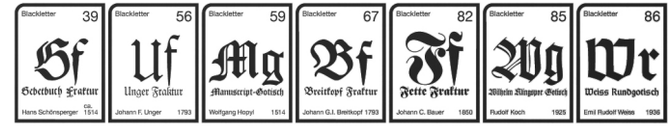
Here are the sites used to determine the rankings:

- The 100 Best Fonts Of All Time – *www.100besteschriften.de/*
- Paul Shaws Top 100 Types survey – *www.tdc.org/reviews/typelist.html*
- 21 Most Used Fonts By Professional Designers – *www.instantshift.com/2008/10/05/21-most-used-fonts-by-professional-designers/*
- Top 7 Fonts Used By Professionals In Graphic Design – *justcreativedesign.com/2008/09/23/top-7-fonts-used-by-professionals-in-graphic-design-2/*
- 30 Fonts That ALL Designers Must Know & Should Own – *justcreativedesign.com/2008/03/02/30-best-font-downloads-for-designers/*
- Typefaces no one gets fired for using – *www.cameronmoll.com/archives/001168.html*

A quick glance at the table clearly shows there are differences in how different typefaces communicate. Some are traditional, while others are more informal.

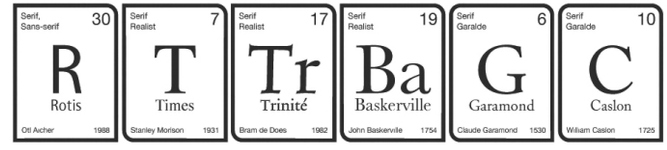
Alluding to time gone by

Typefaces such as Manuscript-Gotish and Unger Fraktur hint at times gone by, as they are derived from the calligraphy we see on ancient scrolls and manuscripts.



Formal and traditional

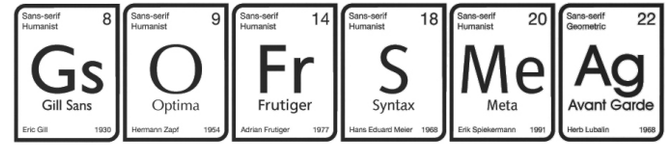
Other typefaces are more formal and traditional, such as the examples below.



These typefaces are often used in broadsheet newspapers and their corresponding websites. They hint at sophisticated, high-brow and professional content.

Informal and modern

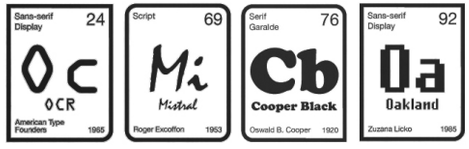
Many sans-serif typefaces feel more informal and modern. They are clean, less 'fussy', and approachable.



These typefaces would complement a friendly tone of voice, and hint at something more casual.

Context specific

Other typefaces are so strong in their visual appearance they would only work in a limited number of contexts.



Thanks to its rounded edges, Cooper Black connotes values of playfulness and child-like qualities. It would work well on a website aimed at youngsters, but would be completely out of place on a news or other 'serious' website.

Oakland, Mistral and OCR have such specific looks they would be detrimental to most design contexts on the web.

As we discussed earlier, while the words we use are crucial, how they look can also communicate to audiences. A particular typeface may work well in some contexts, but in others it may well communicate values that contradict the subject matter or even the words themselves.

Next we'll look at tone of voice, which is also more about how we communicate than what we are saying.

19

Tone of voice

When writing for the web, tone of voice is an important tool you can use to communicate beyond the actual words used. But getting the tone of voice right can be challenging, even for experienced writers.

What is tone of voice?

Tone of voice isn't what's said but rather how it's said. When we speak to people, we can use the tone of our voice to express emotions such as happiness, seriousness, sarcasm and anger. We can use the tone of voice in our writing to express those same emotions.

Studies by *Albert Mehrabian* show that when we converse with others in person, only 7% of what we communicate is through our words. The other 93% is made up by our body language (55%) and our tone of voice (38%)

Why is tone of voice important?

The right tone of voice will draw users in, connect with them, and give them a better user experience. It can also create an identity that sets you apart from everyone else.

But choosing the wrong tone of voice can create conflicting impressions of your business. You wouldn't want to create an informal and visually friendly website and then use a formal and corporate tone of voice.

While your tone of voice should be consistent, it can vary slightly depending on the context. For example, your blog may be more chatty and informal than the copy on your main website. But you still need to make it clear that both platforms are from the same organisation.

How you 'speak' to your audience will affect their overall user experience. If your tone of voice is friendly and personable they may feel more comfortable using your site.

Picking the right tone

When writing for the web, the tone of voice you adopt depends on:

- Your product/service
- The personality you're trying to convey
- Your audience

The decisions you need to make about your tone of voice include:

- How formal/informal will it be?
- How much jargon will you include?
- How friendly or amusing will it be?

Before you can make any decisions about the most suitable tone of voice, you need to understand those three points. What is your story, who is it for and how should you tell it?

For example, the tone of voice used on the website of *The Sun* (a UK tabloid newspaper) is significantly different to that used on the website of *The Times* (a UK broadsheet newspaper), even though both websites are owned by the same parent company.

Why? Because they have different target audiences, values and positions within the news market.

The Sun's website has an informal, chatty and less sophisticated tone of voice than The Times' website, where the tone of voice is more formal and professional. But this is to be expected, as these newspaper websites are mirroring the tone of voice used in the print editions.

One thing to remember: whatever tone of voice you choose, you still need clear and accurate content, usability and SEO.

If a company has brand guidelines to follow they should outline the tone of voice used for the website, including the language used (and not used) and who the audience is.

You need to make sure your copy still does its job, whether it's providing information or getting users to register.

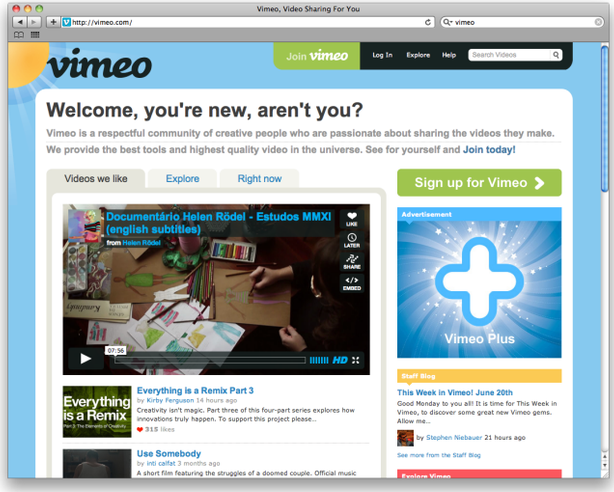
When writing for the web you should be concise and accurate as possible, as users scan the pages rather than read them. This means every word counts, making it even more difficult to get the tone of voice right.

Doing some audience research beforehand will help you decide on the tone of voice to use. You can ask simple questions, such as:

- Can I use humour?
- Should I use jargon?
- Can I use slang?
- What punctuation should I use?

Getting answers to questions like this will help you set your boundaries and how you should pitch your tone. Let's look at two websites and discuss the tone of voice they use:

Vimeo[1]



[1] http://www.vimeo.com

The tone of voice here is friendly and informal. Sentences such as 'Welcome, you're new, aren't you?' are inviting and sound like they're coming from a friend. Similarly, Vimeo has chosen 'Videos we like' rather than something like 'Recommended videos'.

This creates a feeling that your friends are suggesting something they think you'd enjoy, whereas 'Recommended' would feel much more impersonal.

Vimeo uses this tone of voice throughout their site, both in the navigation (the option to 'Explore' as well as search) and in their calls to action ('Join' rather than 'Sign up').

When you click to join Vimeo you are asked, 'which Vimeo is right for you?' The site talks directly to you, which makes it feel like a one-on-one conversation that draws you in. All of this complements the community feel of the website and service it provides.

After signing up, you see this:

'We're glad you're here' is, again, friendly and approachable.

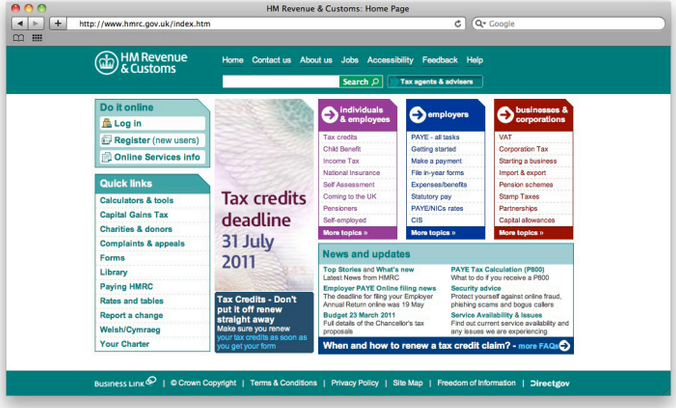
A large part of Vimeo is user-generated content and interaction, and it has chosen the perfect tone of voice to achieve this. It appeals to its target audience, and encourages them to join the community, share videos and interact with others.

Here's some of my favourite copy from across the Vimeo website:

- 'We are the staff. These are the videos we like the bestest.'
- 'Uh oh, wait a sec' (when an email address is not verified)
- 'Vimeo + awesomeness = Vimeo Plus'
- 'You have no recent activity and that makes us sad'

Vimeo has successfully considered its audience and created a tone of voice that makes it almost impossible not to get involved or move deeper into the website.

The second website we'll look at uses a more formal tone of voice.



The website for HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) needs a different tone of voice to Vimeo because it serves a far more serious purpose, and has a very different target audience.

In fact, it has a few different audiences: individuals and employees, employers, and businesses and corporations. The site uses colour to segment these audiences on the homepage, but the tone of voice is consistent throughout.

HMRC has opted for standard navigation and traditional titles such as 'Contact us', 'About us' and 'Help'. The tone is professional, clear and approachable – no quirky alternatives here.

The distinct lack of jargon makes the often complex information easier to digest, partly helped by the tone of voice. It has to be professional because of the services it provides, but it never becomes intimidating or too corporate.

While the tone of voice is professional, it lacks the personality that other sites (such as Vimeo) are able to use.

Both Vimeo and HMRC have pitched their tones of voice perfectly. The sites communicate their content in the most appropriate manner, making them more effective at promoting their services. Different tones of voice, but both equally important.

20

Case Study: *Innocent Drinks*

Innocent Drinks is a UK-based company that produces smoothies, fruit juices and veg pots. Founded in 1999, the company pioneered the informal, chatty and friendly tone of voice other brands have been quick to adopt.

Innocent is a particularly interesting example because its brand is far more than just its visual identity. In fact, the way it uses words on its website, advertising and packaging is a major contributor to its success. The copy is as much a part of the brand as any visual elements, and this coherent storytelling sets the Innocent brand apart from its many competitors.

The Innocent Typeface

The first thing to note about Innocent's marketing material, both online and offline, is the typeface. As we talked about in chapter 17, an appropriate typeface can communicate certain values and create a specific mood.

Innocent uses a very informal, sans-serif typeface. It's rounded and fun (much like their logo) and reflects the values they want the brand to portray. A more formal typeface (such as Times New Roman) simply wouldn't work. We'd still be able to read the content clearly and find what we wanted, but it wouldn't have the same feel or reflect Innocent's brand values.

The Innocent brand is playful. The company can have fun with both how it presents its brand visually (such as with its typeface) and how it uses words in its copy.

In his book 'Building a Brand from Nothing but Fruit', John Simmons asked Will Awdry, one of advertising's finest writers, how he would describe the Innocent tone of voice. Awdry answered:

> *"Innocent's great power is its consistency of voice. The accents in the voice are innocence, truth, fun, wholesomeness, wit, spirit, lack of pomposity, honesty and lightness of touch."*

Awdry hits the nail on the head with that description. Let's take a look at some examples and find out why.

The Innocent tone of voice – offline

Before we look at how important Innocent's tone of voice is to its brand and to invisible communication, let's look at some examples of how it uses tone of voice in its offline marketing materials and on its product labels.

Innocent's marketing copy is simple, which is why it's so effective. One poster advert from 2006 said:

> *"Easy as pie. Tasty as pie. Healthy as mung beans. Innocent smoothies. Nothing but nothing but fruit."*

The copy is friendly and chatty, but also communicates a serious message that anchors the Innocent brand: Innocent smoothies are healthy with no additives, just fruit.

In 2003 Innocent ran a series of adverts with simple imagery and short messages that set the tone for future ad campaigns. Here are the visually simple yet high impact adverts:

Even as early as 2003, Innocent's tone of voice was one of fun, humour and playfulness. It's also a little bit cheeky at times.

Innocent recently embarked on an advertising campaign featuring rabbits and more of the friendly, informal statements they have become known for.

Here are some examples:

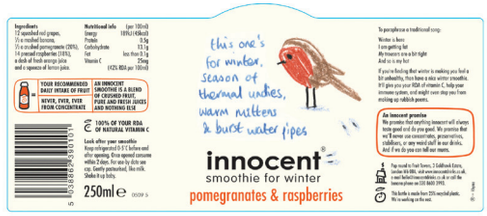
These adverts stand out thanks to the single bold colours, the imagery of the rabbits, and the statements they make. 'We put the banana skins in the bin for you' is a great way of telling consumers the hard work is already done so they can just enjoy the healthy drinks. These statements start a relationship between supplier and consumer, but it's a relationship framed more as a friendship.

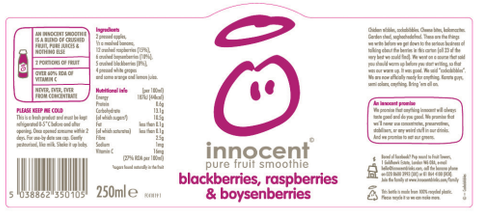
You can see some of the previous labels, complete with their stories, in the label gallery on the Innocent website: *http://www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/bored/gallery/labels/*

The labels on the bottles continue the approach, but with a greater emphasis on storytelling. Even on its labels, where space is limited, Innocent has mastered the ability to tell stories that promote and reinforce its own brand values. Innocent also give each label a name such as 'communal showers', 'charades' and 'Thai bus drivers'. It's almost like a story title.

The labels all have the same quirkiness and playful writing, such as 'never, ever, ever from concentrate', 'This bottle is now made from 50% recycled plastic. We're still working on the rest', and 'Shake it up baby'. But some stories also change over time as more labels are produced.

Here are three labels, each with a story to tell:





Here are some more examples of their copy, taken directly from Innocent smoothie labels:

> '*My mum's started buying our smoothies (and that's after 5 whole years, the skinflint).*'

> '*This means that I've got to behave and not say anything too rude or controversial. So, mum, they are really good for you. They are made with 100% pure fresh fruit. They contain loads of vitamin C (a day and a half's worth). They are as fat-free as an apple or banana and that's because they are just fruit. Is that good enough for you mum?*'

> '*Right, I'm off to smash some windows and have a fag.*'

> '*... and step away from the desk 2 3 4, come on, really work it ... now, off to the shops, oh yes, keep those knees up, keep it working 2 3 4 ... stop at the lights, mind the cyclist ... and into the shop, just grab the bottle 2 3 4 ... feel it in the triceps, oh yeah ... you're feeling good now ... stepping to the till, ignore the chocolate, keep stepping, let's see those glutes shake 2 3 4 ... and we'll finish with the unscrew, pop those wrists 2 3 4 ... looking good ... and relax.*'

Innocent's copy is humorous, light-hearted, fun and a talking point. It's also very clever, because people will buy another smoothie to read a new story.

It doesn't end there, though. The Innocent tone of voice is also evident on its website.

The Innocent tone – online

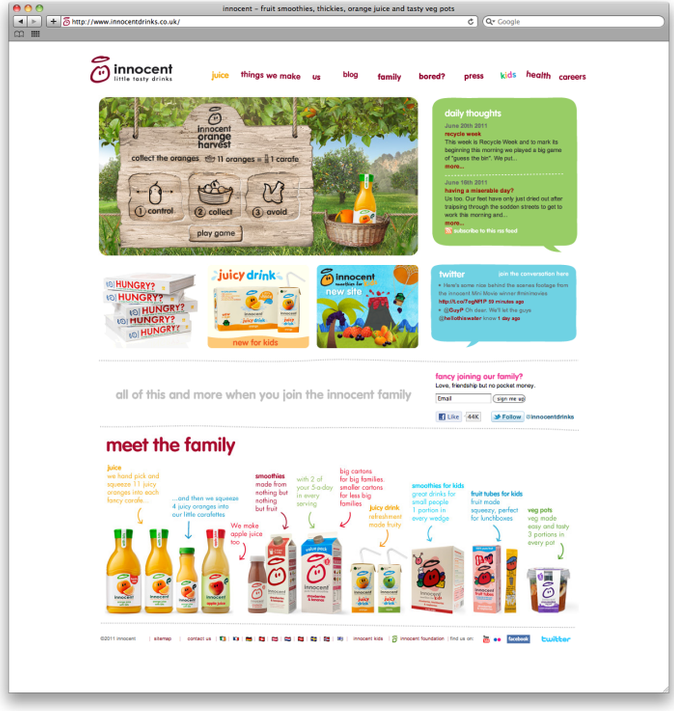
The Innocent website is a fun place to visit. Sure it has information about the company, the brand and the products, but the way it shares this information with users is a joy to read. Innocent has nailed it again.

Let's see how Innocent has achieved a tone of voice online that's consistent with its offline marketing activity. We'll start at the homepage, and then move on to examples within the site.

The Homepage

The homepage immediately creates a sense of fun. This is down to the graphics, the typeface (as discussed at the start of this chapter) and the words themselves.

Here's an example of the homepage from June 2011:



What you can't see in this static image is the words moving in the navigation. They wobble from side to side, which adds to the fun factor.

If we look specifically at the words, we can see how the navigation again adopts a playful, informal and friendly approach. Innocent could have used the word 'products' in the navigation, but instead opted for 'things we make' – a much friendlier way to lead users to that area of the website. Similarly, instead of 'fun stuff' the site poses the question: 'bored?' It's a more effective call to action.

The Innocent tone of voice is evident throughout the homepage, with copy such as:

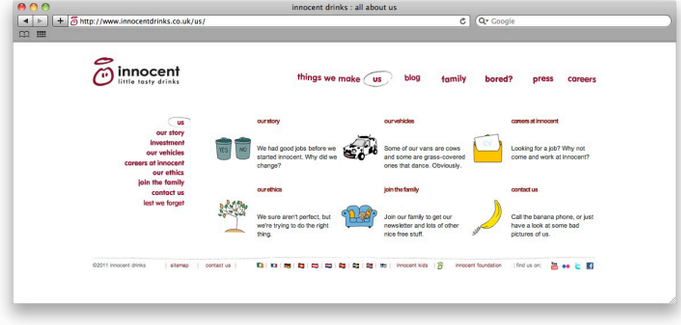
> '*Fancy joining our family? Love, friendship but no pocket money.*'

It really does make it sound like a fun place to work. The 'Us' page contains my favourite examples of the Innocent tone of voice. Again, these examples are taken straight from the page:

> '*Our vehicles. Some of our vans are cows and some are grass-covered ones that dance. Obviously.*'

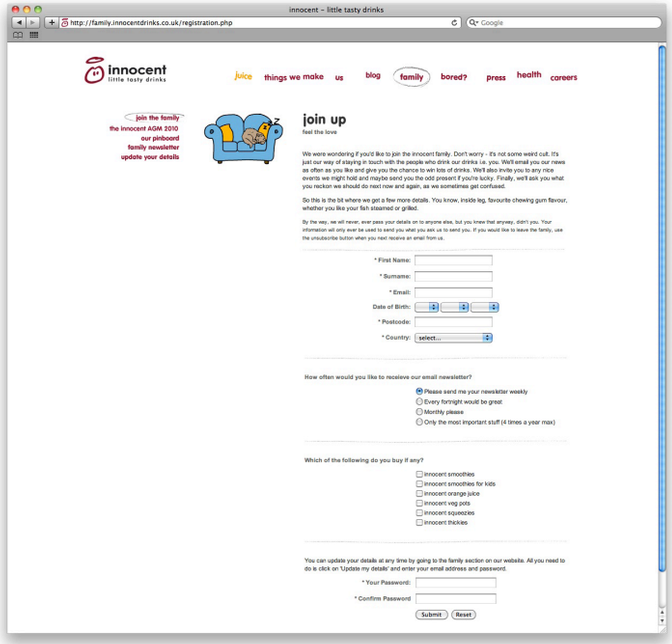
> '*Call the banana phone or just have a look at some bad pictures of us.*'

> '*We had good jobs before we started Innocent. Why did we change?*'



The way these sentences are written, and their tone of voice, adds another layer to the storytelling. The tone of voice is friendly and playful, which also hints at the Innocent brand values and ethics.

This playful tone continues on the 'Family' page:



This is where users can sign up to the Innocent newsletter. But rather than the usual 'sign up here to receive our newsletter' copy, Innocent has come up with a much more imaginative way to get users to sign up. Again, the content is gold:

> '*We were wondering if you'd like to join the innocent family. Don't worry - it's not some weird cult. It's just our way of staying in touch with the people who drink our drinks i.e. you.*'

> '*So this is the bit where we get a few more details. You know, inside leg, favourite chewing gum flavour, whether you like your fish steamed or grilled.*'

How could you resist after reading that?

There's more to Innocent than just the humour, though. It's now a large and successful organisation, so it has a duty to be responsible and professional. Its copy is both of these things, but in the Innocent way.

For example, by law the website needs to tell users that if they sign up to the newsletter their details won't be passed to third parties and they can unsubscribe at any time. This is how Innocent lets their users know:

> '*By the way, we will never, ever pass your details on to anyone else, but you knew that anyway, didn't you. Your information will only ever be used to send you what you ask us to send you. If you would like to leave the family, use the unsubscribe button when you next receive an email from us.*'

Innocent can still be playful and friendly, even when addressing more serious issues.

Innocent's invisible communication

Invisible communication plays a key role in the highly successful way Innocent builds a relationship with its audience. Ultimately, Innocent is just a manufacturing company. Yet the way it tells its story makes it more than just a manufacturer, and demonstrates the power of words in communication, branding and marketing.

The words in the copy, and the tone they are written in, portray Innocent to the world as a friend. While Innocent might well be the pioneers of building a brand largely on the strength of language, many have since followed in its footsteps.

Let's remind ourselves of the three elements of Innocent's invisible communication methods:

1. Typeface – *how the words look*
2. Language – *the actual words on the page/screen*
3. Tone of voice – *how those words sound*

But there's one more element at work here. One that ensures the other three invisible communication methods work. One that we've already touched on in this chapter.

Consistency.

Consistently friendly

The consistent tone of voice, typeface and language used across their adverts, labels and website are paramount to Innocent building and maintaining a brand with strong values that appeals to consumers.

The correlation between tone of voice and consumer appeal is explained by *John Simms* in his book *Building a Brand from Nothing but Fruit*. As Simms explains:

> '*Perhaps a brand's 'tone of voice' could not only help differentiate it from competitors but also create bonds of affection and loyalty with different audiences.*'

And that's why Innocent is so successful: its tone of voice is consistent across all consumer touch points, including the website.

The Innocent personality is communicated not only visibly in its imagery and marketing materials, but also invisibly through its typeface and tone of voice. It's a two-pronged approach to storytelling where both conscious and subconscious elements combine to tell a complete story.

Part 5

Telling the best story

Introduction to storytelling

Storytelling conventions

Storytelling on the web

Storytelling through brands

Case Study: *Squaredeye.com*

21

Introduction to storytelling

From the day we are born we hear stories. At first they are simple nursery rhymes and fairytales. As we mature so to do the stories we hear, bringing with them added meaning, hidden messages and subliminal communication. This exposure to stories makes our ability to understand them practically innate.

We've all learned the conventions of storytelling, and so we recognise story structures, events and characters almost instantly. And absorbing information from those stories happens almost subconsciously. We quickly piece together the story, make assumptions about the characters (based on whether we see them as a hero or a villain), and create expectations of how the story will end.

We can also use storytelling on other platforms, such as the web. The challenge is to understand storytelling methods enough to apply them so users can digest the story easily. We have to carefully construct a story and use our narrative to make the story seem natural.

Each storytelling platform brings along certain conventions. Some apply to several media, while others are exclusive to a particular platform. We can apply traditional storytelling techniques to the web, but we need to adapt them for the new parameters that online storytelling brings with it.

But before I discuss how we can use storytelling on the web, I want to look at the advantages of using it as a communication tool and how it works in the invisible sense.

What is storytelling?

In storytelling there are three strands to consider:

- Narrative – *A term referring to a sequence of events organised into a story with a particular structure*[1]
- Story – *All of the events in a narrative, those presented directly to an audience and those which might be inferred*[2]
- Characterisation – *The method used to develop a character*

[1 2] Branston and Stafford. The Media Student's Guide.

Let's examine these concepts using a story with a familiar structure: *the fairytale of Little Red Riding Hood*.

The story is the events that occur, the little girl in the red cloak meets a wolf in the woods. The wolf later pretends to be the little girl's grandmother and eats them both up. The hunter cuts the wolf open and both the girl and the grandmother emerge unharmed.

The narrative is the way these events are told. For a fairytale, the most common method is starting the story with, 'once upon a time', presenting the events in chronological order and concluding with, 'and they all lived happily ever after'.

Characterisation reveals information about the characters in the story, how they look, the things they say, their thoughts and speech.

The story is the elements or events that make up the tale, while the narrative is how it is told. This is a key distinction to keep in mind when telling stories online because there will often be a number of ways to tell a particular story. Knowing what you want to say (your story) is the first thing to understand. Only then can you address how to tell that story in the best way for your audience.

Where do we find stories?

Stories are told all around us. We hear them during our daily commutes, in the workplace, in the media we consume and in our social interactions. We don't always recognise them as stories because they are such an integral part of how we communicate.

Offline, storytelling is evident in:

- Books and magazines
- Films and TV programmes
- Adverts
- Chatting with friends
- Photos

Online, we can share stories through:

- Blogs
- Tweets
- Forums
- Social media status updates
- Websites as a whole

Storytelling is an integral part of our communication.

Why do we tell stories?

Storytelling is a valuable and useful communication tool, both online and offline, for two reasons.

1. **Finding order in the chaos**
Storytelling can help us make sense of the world around us. The pace of our lives is increasing, and information overload is a problem for many people. We need a way to organise the information we receive.

Stories are frameworks for interpretation that help us find meaning and understanding. We can process information more efficiently by organising it in a way that is familiar to us. By bringing structure to our lives we can position ourselves to cope better during times of hardship or drama. We can anticipate the next part of the journey and act accordingly.

The web often has more information than we need. Websites can target a range of people, each with their own needs or task to complete. Users need to discover the information relevant to achieving their goal. If the website's story incorporates symbols, key words, calls to action and well-crafted copy, finding order in the chaos will be much easier for the user.

2. **The emotional connection**
Stories can induce emotional responses in people. They make us laugh, make us cry and sometimes even shock us. This ability to make us respond emotionally is useful because it can help us engage with the story.

Stories have a unique ability to appeal to our emotions, motivate us and persuade us. Our brains are seemingly wired to understand and enjoy stories, and as people we have a predilection for storytelling.

The emotional relationship between stories and their audiences can transcend platforms. Admittedly, we aren't as likely to be as involved in a website as we would a film or a book – it's a different kind of relationship. But good storytelling through colour, symbols, and text can still evoke emotions in web users, or at the very least help them engage with a website.

How can stories be invisible?
If we're surrounded by stories, how can they be invisible?

Many stories are invisible because the person hearing it doesn't realise it is one. Magazine adverts, for example, are carefully constructed stories, but most readers wouldn't see them that way. And a story in a website will also be invisible a lot of the time because the person visiting the site doesn't see it as one.

That doesn't mean invisible stories aren't important. In fact, they can be more important than traditional stories because they help the audience or user engage and achieve their goal more efficiently. They just doesn't realise they're being guided by a narrative or a well-considered story.

22

Storytelling conventions

In the last chapter we defined story and narrative, looked at why it's such a valuable communication tool, and how it works on a subliminal level. Now it's time to talk about storytelling conventions that will help us design stories relevant to our target audience.

Media studies textbooks usually discuss narrative theory as it relates to film. We can also use it on the web, but we need to keep in mind that:

> *'Narrative theory suggests that stories share certain features, regardless of media and culture. Particular media are able to 'tell' stories in different ways."*[1]

This means that while we can learn from the narrative theory of other media, we have to modify it to suit the web. Our goal – engaging an audience with our story – is the same, but we must tailor our stories to suit the media we're telling them with.

Narrative Theory

Traditional narrative theory came from studies into folk tales and fairytales. These types of stories are primarily concerned with character function and plot development. We can't just take these and apply them to the web: when would we ever design a website with a clearly defined hero and villain?

What we can take from these stories is how a set of conventions exist for each media. This consistency will help audiences engage with, and understand your story.

For example, if you go to see a disaster movie you probably know enough about that genre to have certain expectations about what will happen. Similarly, many users these days know different types of websites, and so will have a level of expectation about how they will function.

[1] Branston and Stafford. The Media Student's Guide.

Learning from other media

Narrative is evident in many media including photography, comic strips, and films. We can learn from these to improve our online stories.

Photography

Narrative is usually thought of in relation to movies and books. But it is also present in photos. A photo captures a moment of time, but a great photo makes us imagine what happened before the moment was captured, or what happened soon after.

Narrative is signalled here, depending on the content of the photograph. Don't underestimate the power of imagery as a contributor to your story.

Film

The power of film is how much it can communicate at once through visuals, costume, cinematography, dialogue, character function and story.

Films can teach us the art of slowly revealing a story, piece by piece. They can also teach us the value of deciding what to

show (and not to show), what adds to the story, and what is simply 'noise'.Like film, the web is really visual storytelling. A great example of visual storytelling in film is the *Disney Pixar* production, *Wall.E*. The movie has relatively little dialogue, with emotion conveyed through expressions and gestures.

The Director of Wall.E, *Andrew Stanton*, knew the story had to be engaging for the film to work without dialogue. He says "action is more generally understood than words. The lift of an eyebrow, however faint, may convey more than a hundred words".[1]

Online, we don't even have the luxury of expressions and gestures. That means we have to focus on the details. Great storytelling doesn't come from dialogue alone.

The lack of dialogue in silent movies, Wall.E and on the web, forces the creator to tell the story in other ways: through visuals, colour, hierarchy of information, content and so on. As Stanton says, "simplicity and clarity give the visual storyteller room to grow".

On the web we can't just throw in some dialogue to explain everything. It has to be inferred and laid out by carefully choosing:

- Imagery
- Tone of voice of the copy
- Symbols, icons and colours
- Hierarchy of information
- Navigation

As you can see, we need to bring together a number of elements to tell stories online.

The lack of dialogue is also a limitation of the web as a storytelling medium. We need to consider what the web can do that other media cannot, as it will have a significant impact on our story and how we tell it.

[1] The Art of Wall.E, Tim Hauser

Storytelling constraints online

In many ways the web is an ideal storytelling platform because it's largely concerned with presenting information. But there are some constraints you need to be aware of when storytelling on the web.

Truncated communication

Sometimes the web restricts the amount of information we can give. (As I said in chapter 19, every word counts.) This, along with it needing to be scannable so users can find the information they need, means we need to tell our stories quickly and efficiently.

Non-linear narrative

There's no guarantee that users will land on your site's homepage. They could land anywhere on your site, which means they may be joining the story partway through. Your site need clear signposts and well-considered navigation to let them know not only where they are, but also where they can move to next (and how they can get there).

You need to decide where your story begins. This will have a profound impact on the story that follows. Thinking back to Little Red Riding Hood, imagine how different the story would be if it began with the wolf eating Little Red Riding Hood.

Communicating the tone of voice

As we discussed in chapter 19, you can achieve tone of voice through the words you choose – informal or formal, full or jargon or easy to read. Even the sentence structure can influence the tone and pace of the voice.

Finding your story

Before you can know what conventions will help you tell your story, you need to know what that story is and, just as important, who it's being told to.

Once you understand that, you can start applying the conventions. Who are the characters? What codes will be useful? What will the tone of voice be? Learn from other media, but don't forget to adapt the conventions to suit the online environment.

23

Storytelling and the web

We've looked at storytelling techniques in other media, and how some of those techniques can be carried over to the web. Let's now look at some practical examples of storytelling techniques on the web.

Use Cases

Use cases are different to personas. A use case helps you understand the interaction between the user and your web site: their story. A persona is more to do with generating characters based on behaviours, data and assumptions.

Use cases can help you define the stories within your website. By focusing on the users, how they interact with your site and its content, you can discover the best ways to help them.

A use case is 'a methodology used in system analysis to identify, clarify, and organise system requirements. The use case is made up of a set of possible sequences of interactions between systems and users in a particular environment and related to a particular goal." In other words, they bridge the gap between the needs of the user and the site you are designing by listing their intentions and the website's response to each one.

To put it another way, use cases focus on the journey the user will take, whereas personas use data to create people representing the audience.

Incorporating use cases into the project is a practical way to express its requirements, and can help you design your story.

As well as your overarching story, specific stories underneath will relate to certain groups of users. Use cases let you explore these stories, and determine what a group of users will want to achieve. This will help you design to their story using copy, imagery, icons, colour, hierarchy and navigation.

How to write use cases and define your story

No two people will write use cases the same way, and no two projects will be alike. But here are some pointers for writing use cases with storytelling in mind.

1. **Don't be a perfectionist**
   Use cases can be refined through iterations. It might take a few attempts before you find a method that suits you, but that's okay. Don't overthink it, just get going.

2. **Define your use case actors**
   Who will use your site? Depending on the scope of the project, you may need several actors. Try to focus on the core actors first. For example, if we were creating use cases for *eBay* or a similar auction site, our actors could be bidders, sellers, suppliers or wholesalers. But the core actors would be buyers and sellers.

   For sites where there could be a lot of actors, focus on the main roles. This will help you define the most important stories within your site and content.

   Don't give the actors names. Instead, focus on the role they will play when carrying out their tasks (in this case, buyer and seller). If we name them John and Jane then we're straying into persona territory.

3. **Define what their goals are**
   What will our buyers and sellers want to achieve? They may have several goals, so again focus on the core behaviours. An eBay buyer might need to create an account, log in, search for an item, place a bid, and purchase an item. They may also need to carry out a few smaller tasks , but it's the core behaviours that will power the story.

4. **Consider the crossovers**
   If two or more characters have many shared goals as well as individual ones, then it might be worth creating a generic actor for those shared goals. We can then eradicate any duplicate behaviours by streamlining the story.

   For our eBay example the buyer and seller both need to create accounts, but after that their stories are quite different so we don't need a generic actor.

[1] http://searchsoftwarequality.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid92_gci334062,00.html

5. **Prioritise use cases**
   Once we have our list of behaviours (creates account, searches listings, places bid etc.), we can prioritise them according to the scope of the project. What tasks are essential for getting your site live? What tasks will have to be part of your story? What tasks can wait until a phase two? Number each use case, name it and include a short description.

   Both the buyer's and seller's behaviours are crucial, and would be high priority before our eBay site could go live.

6. **Create the basic flow**
   Outline the site's story when everything goes to plan. What stages will the user go through to complete their task if there aren't any problems along the way? (Think of it as linear narrative.) For our eBay buyer the flow could include creating an account, searching for an item, comparing items, selecting one, bidding for it (or buying it immediately), moving through the checkout process, and leaving feedback when the item is received.

   For our seller, the flow could include creating an account, adding a listing and entering information, defining a price, adding an image, and so on. It could finish with either removing or re-listing the item (if it isn't sold), or invoicing for a sold item, receiving payment and dispatching the item.

7. **The alternate flow**
   This is the non-linear narrative. Here we need to outline the story when things don't go to plan. These problems may never occur, but it doesn't hurt to plan for them. In our eBay example, the user may be forced down an alternate flow if their session times out, or their payment is refused. Perhaps they've been outbid at the last minute – what are their options now?

8. **Present your data**
   Once you've determined your use cases and their stories, you can represent them either graphically or by writing a simple outline. In any case, you now understand your users and their stories, which will in turn help you figure out the best way to tell your own.

Telling stories to your clients

Use cases are all about your users and their needs. We can also tell stories to our clients, and the best way to do this is through personas. (You can also use them to make design decisions, but here I'll just be discussing them in terms of informing clients.)

Personas give both the project team and your clients a shared understanding of your end users or audience groups. The information can be used to create coherent stories to help clients understand more about their users and what they need. It will also help them understand the design process.

Here are some guidelines that have helped me generate personas on past projects:

1. Have around six key personas. If you have too many you'll lose focus. Have too few, and you could leave out a vital audience segment

2. Personas should be based on actual data (from censuses, surveys or audience research). This adds credibility, and ensures your personas are representative

3. Consider what people say – this reveals their goals and attitudes. You could run focus groups to hear what people think, or maybe you have questionnaires or data where they share their thoughts with you

4. Consider what people do. Actual behaviour reveals more than what people say. Depending on the project at hand you may want to look at online shopping habits – what they buy, where they buy it from, and so on. Or perhaps you need data on specific habits to cross reference with other research. Do people actually do what they say they do?

5. What people say isn't always what they do. When placed in a research situation, people often say what they think you want to hear rather than being honest about what they do

   Here's some anecdotal evidence of that last rule from *Steve Mulder*, author of *The User is Always Right*. Mulder often uses this story at his seminars to emphasise the gap between what users say, and what they really do.

   > *'An electronic company were testing for a new boom box they hoped to start selling. Their research included focus groups where they showed the two colour options, yellow and black. The participants were in agreement that yellow was the best colour because it is a vibrant and energetic colour. At the end of the focus group they were each allowed to take a boom box home, and could choose yellow or black. They all chose black.'*

   Your personas (preferably generated in conjunction with the client) will help the client see users as real people with real needs. It moves the discussion from 'User A will need to book a ticket online' to 'Sophie needs to buy three tickets for herself and two friends as a birthday present'. There's a lot more of a story included with Sophie than with User A, which will help your clients better understand their site, their goals and their content.

   A little story goes a long way.

Understanding your audience

The best way to tell an immersive story and connect with your audience is by understanding them and knowing what their goals are. This concept is known as qualia.

Qualia is to put yourself in someone else's position to experience what a situation is like for them. If you do this through use cases and personas, you'll understand your audience much better. The more you understand your audience, the easier it will be to tell a story that engages them.

Knowing the conventions

Films can be classified into genres: horror, science fiction, romantic comedy, and so on. Each genre has its own conventions – a set of criteria that helps audiences recognise the genre and better understand the story. A film that opens with a spacecraft whizzing through space will give the audience a totally different expectation to one that opens with a man proposing to his girlfriend.

While I'm not suggesting websites can be classed by genres, they do share some conventions that can influence and inform your story. A social networking site, for example, will need to let users interact, comment on each others' lives, share photos, and so on.

Of course there are no rules, and to blindly follow convention is to risk diluting creativity. But being aware of conventions will help you include elements in your story that will let your users engage quickly and set their expectation level.

Planning the story

Films have scripts that dictate the order of events, who says what, when, to whom, and so on. They provides the structure for the film. Books have outlines and a table of contents, which act as a structure for the content. Websites have sitemaps.
Sitemaps seem to be waning in popularity, but they serve an

important purpose: they outline your site, which ultimately is an outline of your story. Even if you don't want one on the finished site, generating a sitemap in the early stages of the project will help you understand the site's needs, goals and content: the story. It will also help the client understand, and to focus on the most important needs of their site.

Linked to the sitemap is the navigation, as discussed in chapter 9. There's no guarantee users will land at your homepage so you need to show them where they are, where they have come from and where they can move to next (the beginning, middle and end of the story).

A few simple signposting techniques and breadcrumb trails will act as narrative to guide the user through their story to the desired result. If they get lost along the way, the sitemap and well-considered navigation should get them back on track.

Designing the story

Designing the story is a very involved process. It takes on board all the planning and research, the many hours with the client, and the many days of preparation.

Here are a few elements that can not only contribute to the story design process, but also help create an all-encompassing story:

- Your elements need to be consistent – the tone of voice, the images that anchor the copy and the colour palette, and so on. You also need to consider how to structure the information and present the hierarchy to best tell the story

- Each design element – information architecture, content, colour, typography, branding and so on – may not be relevant to every story. It really depends on the project at hand. But when they come together the story becomes most effective and clear

Evaluating your story before the launch

Before you launch the site, you can evaluate how relevant and accurate your story is through user testing.

You need to test two elements:

1. What story did the users really experience?
2. Is your story still relevant?

The first question is important. Even though you've worked hard to understand your user's stories, in practice testing may reveal processes and needs you didn't consider.

This leads to the second point of assessing what parts of your story are still relevant (based on the test findings) and removing anything you no longer need.

Evaluating your story after the launch

The work doesn't end when the site has been launched. Client and user needs will change, changes in society and culture may influence the story, and things simply stop being current. Keep your story accurate and relevant – otherwise what purpose does it serve?

Tools such as *Google Analytics* can show us how users move through the site, what content they look at, how they interact with it and how long they stay. We can then use this information to make any necessary changes to our story.

That's one of the web's greatest advantages over films and books. We can change the story *after* we've released it.

24

Storytelling through brands

While most people think of a company's brand as just its logo, it's actually a lot more than that. By considering all the elements that make up a brand – logo, colours, tone of voice, typefaces, etc. – we can tell a coherent story.

How brands communicate invisibly

What is a brand?
A brand is a name, sign, symbol, slogan or anything that is used to identify and distinguish a specific product, service or business.[1]

In our lives we become familiar with various brands, and we grow to understand the experience and values those brands represents. This recognition comes down to storytelling, consistency and reinforcement.

When a company decides on a brand story, that story is consistently communicated and referred to whenever the brand is used. Audiences soon develop an understanding and expectation of the brand, and every time they come into contact with it the story is reinforced.

But you don't have to be a big corporation to use a brand to tell a story. The key is to make sure the brand story is told consistently.

How do brands tell stories?

A brand represents the values of a company or product. It tells its story through slogans and visual elements (such as logos), and communicating invisibly using colour and icons. Here are some brand elements that contribute to the overall story:

- **Values**
  A brand should be born from carefully chosen values. They may not be explicitly written on the product or in its marketing material, but any brand worthy of success will be underwritten by a mission statement and values that represent the company.

- **Mission statements**
  These summarise everything a company is striving for and should tell its story succinctly.

- **Slogans**
  The short snappy text that anchors a logo or adorns a company's printed materials adds to the brand's story. In fact, the slogan can encapsulate the story, just in very short form (for example, *Nike's* 'Just do it' and Apple's 'Think different'). Successful slogans work independently of the logo – the few words selected for the slogan communicate a lot about the brand story and bring added context to the logo.

- **Colour**
  Colours have hidden meanings and can connote certain values and messages. So choosing the brand's dominant colour, in its logo and elsewhere, is important in telling the right story.

- **Logo**
  While a logo represents the brand, it isn't the sole vehicle for it. It just happens to be the most visual and widely-used way for many companies to communicate their brands.

[1] Aaker, David (1991). Managing Brand Equity.

Brands by colour

Here's a chart showing some common brands and the colours they use. You'll notice that both *BP* and *Friends of the Earth* have adopted green as their brand colour, most likely due to the natural associations of that colour.

Google, eBay and *Windows* have multicoloured logos. This might be to demonstrate they are about communities, and appealing to many people in more than one culture.

Services such as *AA Motor Rescue* and *Yellow Pages* are yellow and food manufacturers such as *Coca-Cola* and *Walkers Crisps* are red.

Different types of story

Brands can tell their stories in a very literal way or a very subtle way.

Drupal's[1] branding, for example, is quite literal. The name Drupal, 'derives from the English pronunciation of the Dutch word druppel, which means drop'.

The logo (more fondly known in the Drupal community as the Drupalicon) looks like a droplet of water, and is blue – a colour synonymous with water.

FedEx however has a more subtle storytelling approach, especially when it comes to its logo.

Here is the same logo but with a certain section highlighted in black. This very clever and subtle use of white space creates an arrow inside the logo, which represents the notion of moving forward, progression and delivery.

Telling a story

In branding, there has to be a story to tell. But how you tell the story is almost as important as the story itself. You may never explicitly reveal your brand values or mission statements your to users/customers, but they will influence (and provide the basis of) your story.

If you're creating a new brand, think about your story as early in the process as possible. If you're refreshing a brand, ask yourself if the story is still relevant or whether it needs to be re-imagined.

It all comes back to two things: knowing your story, and knowing your audience. This is something *Matthew Smith* of *SquaredEye* does know, and his website is one that tells the right story in the best way to the target audience, as we'll discover in the next and final chapter.

[1] Drupal.org

25

Case Study: *Squaredeye.com*

I'd like to finish with one of my favourite examples of storytelling: the website of design studio Squared Eye.

As you will see, Squared Eye paid a lot of attention to detail while knitting it all together. This, along with the imagery, copy and colours, have all been combined to reveal a well-crafted and rounded story.

This case study focuses on a redesign of the Squared Eye website in Spring 2009. You will learn not only about a website that tells a story, but also about the story discovery process itself (which is just as important).

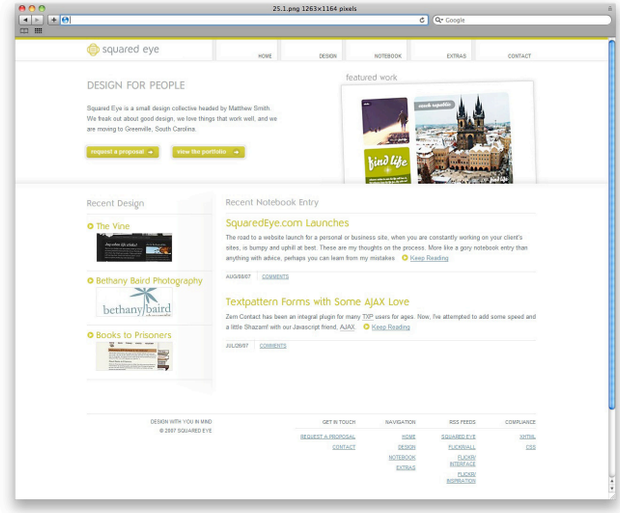
Squared Eye is a design studio headed by Matthew Smith, and based in Greenville, South Carolina. Matthew gave me permission to include Squared Eye in this book, and his answers to my questions reveal a great deal of the subtleties of storytelling, the ability to tell stories on the web, and how one image can tie it all together.

This chapter was written in early 2011. Since then SquaredEye has joined forces with Zaarly. Fear not though, the SquaredEye website discussed in this chapter can still be viewed here: *http://old.squaredeye.com/*

I asked Matthew to define the Squared Eye story

> *"A monstrous appetite for the tiniest details. We love to provide the magic moments for our clients customers, and even for our clients during our design process. We're craftsman in every sense of the word. It even gets worked out when we make mistakes, we want to learn from our mistakes with care and detail. Nothing gets swept under the rug. I think a big part of what gets passed via word of mouth from client to client, is the fact that we understand business, not just visual design. This keeps surprising our clients in the best ways, and when we finish their projects, they often tell us that they could immediately start another - just to keep working with us. It's amazing, but I think it's all about people feeling taken care of, and understood, and provided for professionally. I don't think it's magic or rocket science, it's just good work."*

That's quite a detailed answer, and communicating it all through the website without reams of copy is no easy task. Matthew thinks the company has captured the entire story in a solitary brand mark: *the whale*.



Then.

Now.

Then and Now

The motivation behind the redesign was simple: Matthew wanted Squared Eye to grow and earn a reputation for producing wonderful work. And he didn't think the branding – such as it was – did justice to his hopes for the company.

When I asked Matthew about the motivation behind the redesign, his response was quite clear:

> *"I knew it was time to be surer of what I was doing with my freelancing. I have been raised to offer clear expectations and follow through on them, and that's what I felt was missing in what I was doing with Squared Eye prior to re-branding."*

What Matthew realised was that to successfully tell a story, you need to fully understand it. He continues:

> *"Re-branding would be a research project into knowing better who I am. My goal wasn't to nail it down perfectly, but to make a clear mark in the sand – from this point forward, I'm going this way."*

Despite being quite a capable designer himself, Matthew trusted the redesign of the brand to an external company: *Able*, led by *Greg Ash*.

Able came up with the entity that would bring the brand and the story together, and later communicate it in one lone image: the whale.

It was created for the logotype and business cards. But the website implementation and everything else Squared Eye achieved was all completed in-house.

Finding the story?

Matthew is often asked why he outsourced the creation of his own brand. Surely he knew his story better than anyone else could? Matthew admits others were sceptical of his decision. 'When I started the re-branding process with Able, many of my colleagues, and even some clients, were confused. Why would I hire someone to design the Squared Eye logo and help me think through an identity, when I am a perfectly capable designer?

Before you can decide how to tell your story, you need to know what that story is, inside and out.

> *"The answer was clear. I've learned that, in my personal life, external counsel is the most effective way to get to know myself, so why would business be any different?"*

When researching and planning your story, look beyond your own knowledge. This will help you develop the story, and sense-check your own opinions.

Finding the story, fine tuning it and then presenting it via the website took several steps. Here's the process Able used, which can be applied to other web design projects.

Able began their research by speaking to Squared Eye's clients, families and colleagues. This is where they learned Squared Eye's current story. Matthew saw this step of the process as "the equivalent of good user testing, but for identity rather than interaction."

This part of the process really delved into the finer details of the Squared Eye story. Just as importantly, it helped them discover the company's identity, its audience, its competitors, and the companies it aspired to. This became invaluable for Matthew as he 'knew more about Squared Eye than ever before. By simply listening well, Able helped us start to become what we wanted to be, not just ease into what daily business would make us.'

Able also helped Squared Eye choose a mood. Matthew spent several weeks with Able to work out the 'particulars of the brand rationale and from there, the brand's visual presence and identity.'

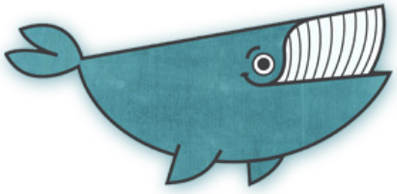
It was at this stage that Matthew really felt confident about the Squared Eye brand and how to "articulate to clients just how Squared Eye was going to help them bring their sites to life – and give them products their users could really dive into."

Even when your story is clear, you need to keep your audience in mind, as they will have an impact on how that story is told. Tools such as use cases and personas can help you understand your audience.

By the end of this discovery phase, the Squared Eye story was well and truly mapped out. Even though the words 'story' or 'storytelling' hadn't been discussed, Able and Squared Eye had already defined the current story, researched and analysed the company, and started to visualise the new version of the story.

Telling the story

The one element that ended up binding everything together was Levi, the whale.



Levi is short for Leviathan. For Matthew, "he perfectly represents the Squared Eye presence and everything we want to be. In Levi, Able helped us articulate our appetite for detail. Just as the Blue Whale chows down on 250,000 pounds of tiny krill a year, so Squared Eye thrives on the little nuances that change a simple interaction into an experience, and a regular user into a believer."

That's the Squared Eye story they would eventually tell on their website. But while Matthew felt the whale perfectly encapsulated that story, it soon became apparent that for users to make the connection the storytelling needed to be a bit more literal.

Levi was not only a character in the story, but also embodied the story itself. His role was integral to communicating what was needed.

Matthew believes 'the whale says it all' but Levi alone wasn't enough to tell the story. The name 'Squared Eye' doesn't immediately suggest whales, and so they needed the copy on the site to tell the story about what the whale represented to their audience.

The tiniest details

If we focus on the Squared Eye homepage and the 'About' page, we can see clear storytelling elements at work, all combining to tell one coherent story.

The homepage:

Five key areas on this homepage tell the Squared Eye story.

1. Levi the whale. The image is a pleasing one that captures the user's attention. It immediately sets a tone for the website, and its presence on other pages lets the story unfold as users move through the site
2. The attention-grabbing headline: 'We have a monstrous appetite for the tiniest details'. This is where the whale starts to make sense. You don't need to be an expert on whales to know they too have a monstrous appetite. Through this headline we are starting to learn about the brand values of Squared Eye
3. Some of the site's copy was written by *Carolyn Wood* of *Pixelingo*, in response to specific needs Matthew discussed with her. More than copy, she helped by bringing critical questions to Matthew – questions that informed his story and helped him think through issues ahead

As well as writing for a few other sections, Carolyn wrote the paragraph on the home page to help Matthew tie together all the visual images and words on the site for his visitors: squared, eye, appetite, a grid image, details, waves, and an invitation that uses the word, 'You,' to speak directly to them.

This is where the storytelling becomes more literal. 'Make waves!' has obvious ties to the whale and the sea. The copy beneath this says:

> *'You've got the captivating tale to tell, we've got the design that makes it move. From square one, our eye is on the nuances that, byte by byte, add up to a site your users will love to dive into.'*

That one paragraph explains the connection between the whale and Squared Eye, the needs of the clients and Squared Eye's services, as well as a little about their work process.

While a strong brand shouldn't need a detailed explanation, the copy hints at the story and brings a slightly subtle narrative to the homepage. Once users are familiar with the brand they won't need to read the copy to get the full story. They'll get it all from Levi instead.

4. The colour blue and the ocean themes are the most graphic and immediate elements of the story. They both have close obvious ties to the whale. But even without the wave shape between the header and the main content area, it still has connotations of the ocean, especially as they use a marine blue throughout the website. (If you look closely, you'll see the blue background is actually a tightly woven grid of tiny squares.)
5. The copy further down the page has two important functions: a call to action that leads the user further into the site, and adding to the story. The three areas are:

- Learn about our process
- Take a swim through our featured projects
- Read a few deep thoughts

The 'About' page

The 'About' page reinforces the story first told on the homepage, and also reveals a little more detail. As we learn more about Squared Eye and the people who work there, we also learn more about their work methods and the importance they place on paying attention to the finer details.

1. Once again the story is reinforced by consistently using and positioning both the Squared Eye name and Levi the whale
2. The copy continues the theme from the homepage. For example, instead of using 'our process', Squared Eye have used 'our appetite'. A small difference, but think how much more the word 'appetite' tells the Squared Eye story than 'process'
3. The 'monstrous appetite' headline is again used to full affect here, along with the blue ocean-inspired background

4. The copy in this area explains the story in a little more detail. I'm not convinced it needs to be so descriptive or laid out so literally, as the more subtle stories are often the most enjoyable. But it's the last chance to tie everything together before the user moves to deeper pages that focus on the company's work and services. Here the copy tells us:

> *'The whale keeps a sharp eye on tasty, tiny creatures that together make him colossal as he glides through the big, blue sea.'*

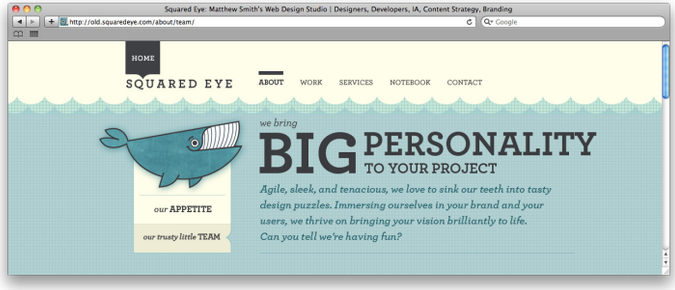
> *'We keep a close eye on each square little pixel and grid that, arranged with intelligence and inspiration, form a design that helps us – and your company – grow.'*

The story unfolds

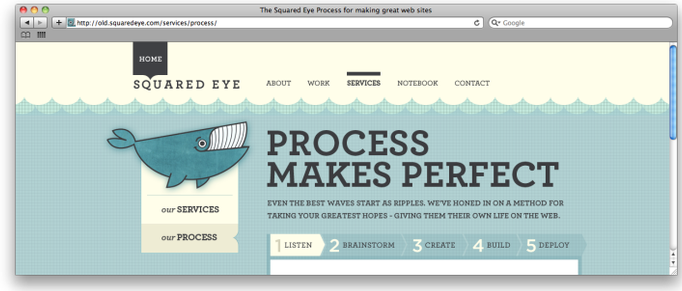
It would be easy to have a whale and a few chunks of copy explain everything on the homepage, then revert back to the typical copy you see on this type of site – 'this is how we work', 'look at some of our projects', etc. But as we have discussed earlier, there is no guarantee your users will start your story at the beginning.

Squared Eye allows for this by using the same tone of voice, choice of words and theme in all of its copy and supplementary content throughout the site. Here are some examples:

Here is the copy from the 'Team' page. I've highlighted the words that continue to tell the story:



> *'We bring the* **big** *personality to your project. Agile, sleek and tenacious, we love to* **sink our teeth** *into* **tasty** *design puzzles.* **Immersing** *ourselves in your brand and your users, we thrive on brining your vision brilliantly to life. Can you tell we're having fun?'*



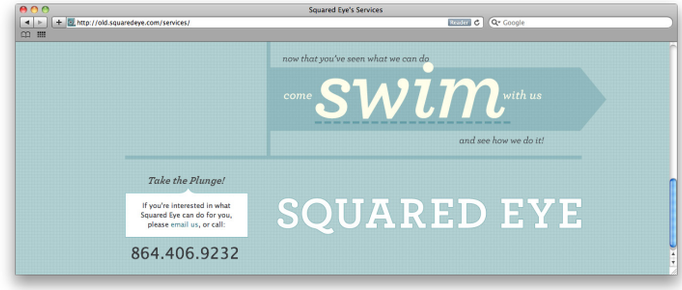
The copy on the 'Our Process' page tells us:

> *'Even the best* **waves** *start as* **ripples**. *We've honed in on a method for taking your greatest hopes – giving them their own life on the web.'*

On the 'Services' page the most obvious story connection sits at the bottom of the page.

> *'Now that you've seen what we can do,* **come swim with us**, *and see how we do it.'*

The 'Services' page also tells the story, with '**Take the plunge**' having an obvious connection to both the ocean and the whale.

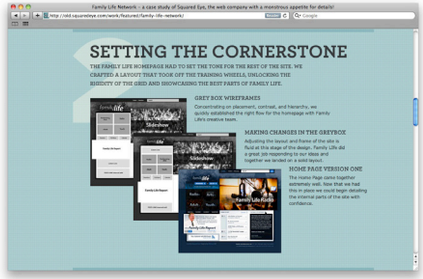


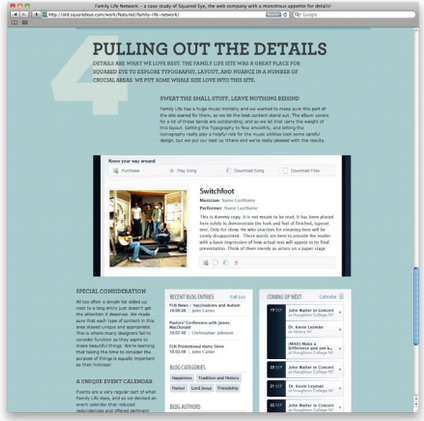
The story within the story

The beauty of this website isn't just how it tells the Squared Eye brand story, but also how it tells stories within that story. Specifically, how the company works on projects and what the end results are.

Case studies are stories, too. They have clearly defined narratives, leading the reader step-by-step through a specific process. Sometimes they have characters and, depending on the project, may even have twists in the tale.

The case studies on the Squared Eye site are great examples of simple storytelling on the web.





This case study shows how a story can be segmented, provided the order is clear. Simply adding the numbers 1-4 here immediately create a narrative to tell the story of this particular project.

I was particularly impressed with the storytelling on the Squared Eye site, and asked Matthew if this was a conscious part of his redesign process.

It wasn't.

The focus was on defining Squared Eye, and then communicating it in the best way possible. He may not have called the process 'storytelling', but that's exactly what Matthew was doing.

The success of the story

I was particularly interested about whether the website redesign produced any tangible results for Matthew. He told me the new brand turned him from an outsider to an insider within the design community. Matthew also believes "the story of Squared Eye really compels people to think differently about design, and for that matter, about freelancing and business."

The situation speaks for itself. Matthew's business has tripled in just two years, leading to bigger and more challenging projects for the team. The stats also show the redesign attracted more potential customers as they went from an average of 40 visits a day to around 530 a day.

Almost there

We've now reached the end of not only the Squared Eye story, but also my own.

Along the way we have looked at a broad range of topics including signs, colour, tone of voice, typefaces and branding. Broad, yes, but all ways we can communicate invisibly. And they can all be used as storytelling devices to improve and enhance how we communicate on the web.

Stories are a vital part of how we share information, preserve cultures and communicate with others. As the web becomes more and more a part of our everyday lives, we would be silly to ignore the power of storytelling. We should try and tell great stories online in the same way we have done offline for centuries.

Everyone has a story to tell, and the web lets us share them with a much wider audience.

This has been my story.

I look forward to reading yours.

Attributions *In order of appearance*

1. Invisible communication 101

7-38-55 rule - *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Mehrabian#7.25-38.25-55.25_rule* || Religious symbols - *http://makeready.wordpress.com* ||

2. Following the right signs

Definition of semiotics - **The Media Student's Book** - *Gill Branston and Roy Stafford* || Statue of Liberty icon - *http://www.123rf.com/photo_3452242_white-silhouette-of-the-couple-doves-on-sky-background.html* || Printer Icon - *http://www.iconarchive.com/show/dragon-soft-icons-by-artua/Printer-icon.html* || Sundial - *http://ccphysics.us/henriques/a105l/Sundial.htm* || Podcast icon - *http://thinkvitamin.com* || Tsunami sign - *http://yourtown.pressdemocrat.com/2010/03/bodega-bay/why-no-tsunami-warning-signs-on-sonoma-coast-2/* || Hindu Swastika - *http://photobucket.com/images/hindu%20swastika/* || Swastika flag - *http://www.clipartguide.com/_pages/0512-0709-1217-2411.html* || Photograph of Schipol Airport Signage - *Robert Mills* || **London Underground Map** - *http://www.tfl.gov.uk/assets/downloads/standard-tube-map.pdf* || Photograph of Schipol Airport Signage - *Robert Mills* || **Carsonified** icons - *http://carsonified.com/* || **Apple UK** - *http://www.apple.com/uk/* || **Tesco** icons - *http://www.tesco.com/groceries/* || **Guardian** - *http://www.guardian.co.uk/*

3. Using the right palette

Photograph of Times Square – *Glenn R Carter* || Illustration of rose - *Gareth Strange* || Stop sign - *http://www.clker.com/clipart-6863.html* || Slippery road sign - *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Singapore_Road_Signs_-_Warning_Sign_-_Slippery_road.svg* || No smoking sign - *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:No_smoking_symbol.svg* || **Kandinsky** painting - *http://marialaterza.blogspot.com/2010/10/wassily-kandinsky.html* || **La Senza** - *http://www.lasenza.co.uk/* || **BBC** - *http://www.bbc.co.uk/*

4. Using the correct language

Bluegg - *http://www.bluegg.co.uk/* || **Zoe's Place Baby Hospice** - *http://www.zoes-place.org.uk/* || **Llantrisant Freemen** - *http://www.llantrisant.net/* || **Downing Street** - *http://www.number10.gov.uk/* || **CBeebies** - *http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/* || **Visit London** - *http://www.visitlondon.com/* || **Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences** - *http://www.oscars.org/* || **Haribo UK** - *http://www.haribo.com/planet/uk/startseite.php* || **The British Monarchy** - *http://www.royal.gov.uk/* || **Coca-Cola** - *http://www.coca-cola.co.uk/* || **HMRC** - *http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/index.htm* || **Innocent** - *http://www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/*

5. Telling the best story

Photograph of biker - *http://www.officeforward.com/the-moment-just-before-the-pain-begins/* || **Coca-Cola** ©2011 The Coca- Cola Company, all rights reserved. || **Virgin** ©2011 Virgin, all rights reserved. || **Walkers** ©2011 Walkers, all rights reserved. || **The AA** ©2011 The AA, all rights reserved. || **McDonald's** ©2011 McDonald's , all rights reserved. || **Yellow Pages** ©2011 Yellow Pages, all rights reserved. || **Starbucks** ©2011 Starbucks Corporation, all rights reserved. || **Friends of the Earth** ©2011 Friends of the Earth Trust/Limited, all rights reserved. || **BP** ©2011 BP p.l.c, all rights reserved. || **Facebook** ©2011 Facebook, all rights reserved. || **Skype** ©2011 Skype Limited, all rights reserved. || **Twitter** ©2011 Twitter, all rights reserved. || **Orange** ©2011 Orange, all rights reserved. || **easyJet** ©2011 easyJet Airline Company Limited, all rights reserved. || **Blogger** ©2011 Google, all rights reserved. || **Google** ©2011 Google, all rights reserved. || **Windows** ©2011 Microsoft, all rights reserved. || **ebay** ©2011 ebay Inc, all rights reserved. || **FedEx** logo - used with permission by it's creator - *Lindon Leader* || **SquaredEye** – All imagery supplied by and attributed to - *Matthew Smith* - *http://old.squaredeye.com/*