VISUAL IDENTITY WHAT IT IS
&WHY IT MATTERS FOR YOUR BRAND

We as humans are visual creatures. Unlike dogs who rely on smell, or dolphins who depend on sound, we interact with the world through visual cues. From Renaissance paintings to TikTok reels, our cultural obsession with beauty is continuous. As we spend increasing amounts of time on social media channels, it's easier than ever to consume, create and share visual content.

With so much of it out there, it's no surprise that brands today need to develop a strong visual identity that can stand out and endure. As Paul Rand, iconic graphic designer and art director, once said, "Design is the silent ambassador of your brand." From the way you create a logo to the color palette choices you make, each visual element must be carefully considered.

Here we will explore visual identity, why it matters and how to design one that can evolve with your brand.

Visual identity is a collection of visual elements that serve to represent and differentiate a brand. More specifically, it refers to any visible components such as a logo or brand colors that help customers identify a brand. By consolidating each branding asset into a cohesive aesthetic, this develops brand recognition.

Built on the foundation of your brand identity, including your brand identity examples, and outlined in your brand style guide, visual identity reinforces your core values and brand promise through visible mediums. Using consistent and strategic visuals to help communicate, a strong visual identity also helps tell your brand story.

Over time, customers' continued exposure to your brand will foster associations and create emotional responses, oftentimes triggered by visual cues.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD VISUAL IDENTITY?

Suitable: Are your visual elements well-suited to your target audience? Does your design evoke the right emotion? Make sure each visual design associated with your brand is appropriate for a particular person, purpose or situation.

Distinct: Ensure that your visual identity differentiates itself from competitors, while also standing out in the minds of consumers. Is it recognizable? Will consumers remember it?

Simple: Good designs are uncomplicated and easy to understand. Both for the sake of your internal designers, and your consumers—keeping it simple promotes clarity.

Timeless: While visual identities should be somewhat flexible and adaptable, they need to evolve with a brand. Devise a visual identity that will endure and stay relevant over time.

Functional: Can it be easily reproduced for every medium? Remember that your visual assets will be used across digital, print and interior spaces. Your visual identity should allow for this.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BRAND IDENTITY & VISUAL IDENTITY

Since brands are like living and breathing entities, you can imagine your brand like a human body. Your brand and visual identities work together to sustain a healthy being. With this in mind, brand identity refers to the more "internal aspects" such as mission, brand voice and brand personality. Visual identity is what's used to express those "physically or on the outside" such a logo designs, brand colors and typography.

Together they create a complete (and unique) identity. These two frameworks work in tandem to support the same goal of shaping a brand.

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD VISUAL IDENTITY

Each branding element works together to create a unified identity that communicates your brand's visual language. Here are some of the components that contribute to your visual identity:

LOGO

In a nutshell, your logo is a symbol that instantly identifies your brand. Using colors, shapes, typography and sometimes a tagline, a good logo is one that holistically embodies a brand and evokes a positive feeling. No matter which type of logo your brand uses, it should help convey your brand identity.

For example, a wordmark logo which consists of a company name is a strong choice for brands that want their name to stand out. If your brand name is lengthy, perhaps a lettermark or a monogram logo would be better suited. Regardless, your visual identity should include a logo lockup, which includes all of your logo elements in a finalized position and can adapt accordingly to suit various contexts.

BRAND COLORS

The brand colors you choose will shape your visual identity at every touch point. Keep in mind that this color palette plays a major role in perception and how prospective customers may feel about your brand. Understanding the importance of color psychology and the feelings associated with specific shades will inform your creative process.

Be sure to choose colors that are functional and appropriate. Since your brand colors will be used in diverse contexts, the palette must be versatile as well. For example, your website's copy, social media posts and printed materials should all be taken into consideration when imaging how the colors will appear across different branding assets.

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TYPOGRAPHY

When it comes to selecting your brand's typography, there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, consider the impact typography has on the message being delivered. According to Robert Bringhurst, poet, typographer and author of The Elements of Typographic Style, "Typography is the craft of endowing human language with a durable visual form."

From the typeface to the kerning (spacing between letters), typography plays a major role in evoking mood, setting a tone and cultivating brand recognition.

Good brand typography should be:

.READABLE
.ENDURING
.VERSATILE
.FUNCTIONAL
.COMMUNICATIVE

PHOTOGRAPHY

You've heard the old adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words," and when it comes to your brand's photography, it's an opportunity to communicate your brand story through images and videos, strengthening your visual identity

When choosing imagery for assets like your website or social media posts, pay attention to style, composition and the subjects featured in the photos or videos, ensuring your content is visually consistent. This is the key to creating a branded and cohesive look.

Since photography can be so expressive, it's an easy way for customers to feel a sense of a brand. If you're using images of people, be sure to include a range of diverse models, so that anyone can see themselves reflected in your brand.

When creating branded photography, some images to include are:

INTERNAL HEADSHOTS
LIFESTYLE/PORTFOLIO IMAGES
PRODUCT PHOTOS/VIDEOS
SOCIAL MEDIA POST PHOTOS
STOCK PHOTOS/VIDEOS

GRAPHICS, ILLUSTRATIONS AND ICONS

These visual elements serve as stylistic extensions of your brand. From simple lines and shapes to particular icons, these forms can carry very specific functions. For example, icons and buttons on your website will impact your customer's user experience and interaction with your brand. In addition, the way you visually denote content on marketing materials, internal training documents, presentations or social posts can all be influenced by your graphics.

Hand-drawn illustrations can also bring a sense of personality and individuality, adding a more human and relatable touch when they're used in the right context. Regardless of how you integrate graphics and illustrations, these details contribute to your brand's overall visual identity and support continuity across every platform.

WHY DOES A VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY MATTER

Your brand's visual identity is what influences perception and leaves a lasting impression. It's beneficial for several reasons:

DIFFERENTIATION

Creating a unique and recognizable visual identity is what sets brands apart and promotes differentiation. Cohesive brand collateral that effectively represents your business will not only stand out in the marketplace, but in your consumers' minds.

RELATABILITY

If your target audience finds your brand appealing and easy to understand, it will make it that much easier for them to relate to it.

You can imagine that your visual identity serves to represent your brand and evoke a more personalized experience. For example, your logo often stands as the "face" of your brand. With this in mind, designing a visual identity that emphasizes your brand identity will foster a sense of understanding between you and consumers.

CONSISTENCY

Consistency is key in all aspects of branding, but when it comes to your visual identity, this is particularly important. Maintaining a consistent visual identity will support a reliable customer experience, ultimately fostering brand loyalty. The more consumers recognize your product, the easier it is for them to seek it out or prefer it to others.

Furthermore, as your brand evolves over time, having a familiar and deeply rooted visual identity will support growth. Even if your visual identity adapts, having a steady foundation will offer familiarity and prevent customer confusion.

LOYALTY

Simply put, customers are loyal to brands that they know and trust. According to this survey, ⅞٨ɛ of customers are more inclined to stay loyal to a brand whose values align with theirs. A strong and well-defined visual identity makes it easier for customers to depend on a brand. The more your customers recognize and familiarize themselves with your product or service (through visual and experiential means), the stronger their connections to it become.

HOW TO CREATE A STRONG VISUAL IDENTITY

.USE YOUR BRAND IDENTITY
.KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE
.UNDERSTAND YOUR BRAND PURPOSE
.ADAPT YOUR ASSETS
.STAY CONSISTENT

01. USE YOUR BRAND IDENTITY

A well-defined brand strategy will help you curate a brand identity that amalgamates your purpose, values and goals in one place. Within this framework, you'll be able to anticipate your visual identity and keep it all aligned.

02. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Imagine you're getting ready to go to a party, and you need to decide what to wear. First, you might consider where the soirée takes place, and who will be there. Is it a casual outdoor barbecue with a few friends or a large black-tie affair? Once you understand the context of the party, you can choose your outfit accordingly.

The same is true when designing your visual identity. With a deep understanding of your target market, you can create an appropriate visual language that effectively communicates with your desired audience.

In order to better understand and resonate with your target audience, you need to first develop your buyer personas. Narrowing down their age, gender, income, education, values, beliefs and motivations, you'll create clear guidelines for who your brand is talking to. In turn, this will inform your visual identity choices.

03. UNDERSTAND YOUR BRAND PURPOSE.

Knowing the purpose behind your business will guide your branding decisions from every aspect, from how to design your business card to your logo. For instance, new-age mental wellness platform Real is destigmatizing mental health and revolutionizing the concept of online therapy. The brand's mission to "not just normalize mental health care, but celebrate it" impacts each touchstone.

From Real's blue color palette—a hue associated with calmness or serenity—to their use of hand-drawn imagery, each visual component thoughtfully reinforces the brand's goal to make therapy more approachable for a new generation. Their design style is humanistic and warm, just like their product and purpose.

04. ADAPT YOUR ASSETS

In order to optimize your visual identity, understanding the nuances of each medium will not only help you design better, but communicate better, too. While your brand may have a very clear brand style guide, understanding how to use it is just as important.

Since different designers will work on different assets, they need to understand the core visual identity to adapt each asset accordingly. This can be as simple as sizing or resolution for your logo design across different mediums, or ensuring the right color palette for online materials compared to printed ones. You can explore some strong brand style guide examples to see this in action.

Paying attention to consumers' behaviors, habits, and the purpose behind each branding asset will result in a stronger visual identity that resonates with your audience.

05. STAY CONSISTENT

Consistency in relation to your visual identity is two-fold. First, as mentioned above, it reflects inwards towards your branding team as a roadmap for design decisions. Guiding the creative process with purpose, consistency ensures that all branding collateral is homogeneous.

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SHOUT YOUR BRAND

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