

Expertise Matters

Graphic Design for the Non-Designer

How to design effectively if you're not a graphic designer

Not every company has a graphic designer on staff, and not every company can afford to have a marketing firm on retainer. For some projects, in-house design is a necessity. So in this article, we'll explain how to design when you're not a designer. First, a word of caution

Of course, this article can't replace a graphic designer's years of training and experience. Some forms of design are best left to professionals – especially anything with a really long shelf life. We especially do not recommend attempting a corporate identity – that is, a logo design – if you're not a designer. It's not that you can't have input into your logo, as good graphic designers will work with you to create a corporate identity that reflects your brand personality. But logo design is complex and challenging, even for designers.

That said, this article can help you competently execute a flyer, brochure, ad, and so on. Our goal here is to help you create something that looks professional and doesn't take forever to do.

How to start: Gather all the available content – text, logos, photos. Is there anything missing?

Review the copy and make it shorter. Inevitably your first draft will be too long, and you want to have plenty of room for images. Other copy-related things to check for:

- Grammar. Check word usage too.
- Tone. Is your tone right for the audience you're trying to reach? Is it too technical, too formal, too friendly?
- Information. Do you have all the relevant facts that your audience needs to do what you want them to do?
- Bullet points. Bullet points (like these!)

can really help your audience scan the information and come away with what you want them to know.

- Call to action. It should be crystal clear what your audience should do – buy now, call now, visit our website, come to our store.

Order your information. A common and effective way to organize is as follows:

- Headline
- Subhead
- Introductory message
- Additional details
- Call to action
- Contact details

About your images: Review the imagery. How good are your images, and are they a high enough resolution? If the images are bad, an award-winning designer won't be successful.

Take a look at the resolution and file type. You generally need a resolution of 150-300 dpi, or dots per inch, for pieces that will be printed – 72 dpi is sufficient for digital. The file types .jpg and .png are easiest to manipulate.

If your images are bad, stock photography can be a good option. It goes without saying that you cannot use images you find on the internet without permission. If you don't have a good original image, you can purchase stock photos from a variety of sources online. This is invariably a better choice than a poorly-done cell phone photo.

It may be tempting to combine several images into a montage, but we strongly advise against it. Montages almost always look cluttered and amateurish. But there should be a hierarchy to your image selection. Depending on the piece, one large and a few smaller images can be a good

place to start.

Placing borders around your images is a nice way to define them, and can really improve the look of your piece.

How to design the piece: Now that you have everything together, it's time to design. But first, do a quick image search online of the type of piece you're creating for inspiration and ideas.

Next, and this is critically important, get out a piece of paper and pencil and sketch your piece with boxes and lines. Once you have a rough sketch you like, you can open up your software application and recreate it. This is MUCH easier than trying to design using the software alone – so don't skip this step!

Spacing the piece: Margins make all of the difference, and be sure to give everything enough room to breathe. White space is a design element, and there should be a lot of it. Otherwise, you wind up with a cluttered, busy piece that no one will want to read.

Content areas should be easily distinguished from each other. This helps the audience scan the piece and find the information they want. The call to action should be emphasized in some way. Consider contrast to emphasize what you want people to see – contrast in shape, color, size.

Creating your design based on a grid will save you a lot of headaches. Your grid should include a generous margin, and



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organized interior space (such as columns). Photos and other design elements can stretch across columns, of course, but keeping things lined up with your grid will ensure a cleaner final design.

Notes on typography: Carefully choose two fonts for your piece, and you can use up to three different sizes. Do not make the mistake of putting everything in different fonts, and you want to stay away from overly stylized fonts. Also, minimize or eliminate the use of bold fonts – if everything's bold, nothing is.

One way to get good complementary fonts is to choose a serif and a sans-serif font. Serif fonts are easier to read in body copy, but sans-serif fonts are often preferred for online use. Compare what's known as the x-height – that is, the height of lowercase letters. Fonts with drastically different x-heights are more likely to clash than harmonize.

Don't justify your text. This is hard on the eye, creating irregular spacing that makes the copy harder to read.

About kerning: Another detail that separates designers from amateurs is kerning. Kerning is the spacing between letters in each word. When poorly kerned, the spacing within individual words is disjointed and legibility suffers.

There are two main challenges with kerning. First, the majority of standard fonts have poor automatic kerning, so out of the box there are bound to be problems (some fonts are far better than others in this aspect).

The second challenge is that there really isn't a standard correct distance within the letterset of a font. If every letter had the exact same precise spacing the resulting word would be poorly kerned. The reason is that our vision perceives spacing based on the space of the letter.

A capital "N" next to a capital "E" has two nice parallel lines. However, a capital "I" next to a capital "O" now has the spaces around the "O" which makes it appear farther away from the "I" than it actually is.

In other words, there isn't a hard and fast rule – you have to eyeball it. Here are some tips to help you do just that.

As letters increase in size, the problems with kerning are amplified. So, limit your concerns about kerning to headlines and subheads – not body copy.

Headlines can be best improved by looking at the actual letter shapes. In particular, the space between two letters. The goal is to have equal perceived spacing. Do all of the white spaces look equal? If not they need to be adjusted.

Letters with curved and slanted edges are places to really begin looking. A, K, V; G, O, D; y, o, a

Some letter combinations lend themselves to needed correction more often than not. oo, io, rt.

Perhaps the easiest way to get better is with some practice. This online kerning game is the perfect way to improve your skills.

<http://type.method.ac/>

Conclusion: It's a good idea to ask others for feedback, but trust yourself to come up with a good solution rather than taking their suggestions. For example, if someone says the call to action is too small and you should bold it, instead consider the problem (the call to action is too small) and think of a better way to emphasize it. You've thought about this more than anyone else, so trust yourself in the final design.



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