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True colours

by Debra Blundell.

A life without colour would be, quite frankly, pretty grey. Colour brightens up your day and helps get messages across instantly and memorably.

Research by Xerox shows that colour in documents makes people more likely to read them and increases recall of information by a staggering 82%. Design without colour would be like a pencil with no lead – pointless.

But with millions of shades to choose from, designers don't always make the right choice: that purple and orange combo your MD finds so fetching might not be doing your company any favours.

Taste and the desire to make an impact aren't the only factors dictating your choice of corporate colours, of course. Fashion will always play a part and its role has to be considered carefully. For instance, greens are currently very fashionable in our eco-friendly age. But fashionable colours quickly become over-used, diluting their impact, and then just as quickly date.

There are also practical constraints. Brand identities must work on everything from letterheads to plastic bags, from billboards to bus stops. Other logos might have to be used alongside yours, instantly ruling out some colours. Visibility may be an issue if, for instance, your audience is visually impaired. Designing for the Web has its own set of constraints.

But these considerations can often overshadow another important and powerful factor in choosing

your company colours: psychology. Colours have a universal language that can be harnessed to strengthen our own design messages. The psychology of colour is all about the connections and associations we make subconsciously when we see a certain shade, as well as their measurable physical effects. Ignore it, and you could unwittingly send out completely the wrong message.

It helps to have some general understanding of the main colours:

Red represents fire, passion, power, desire, love and sex as well as danger, debt and the Devil. It quickens the pulse, raises blood pressure and encourages risk taking.

Yellow is associated with sunlight, warmth and happiness. It is extrovert, creative, inquiring and loyal. Negatively, it conveys cowardice, sickness and disease.

Blue is the colour of calm, lowering the pulse and aiding concentration. It represents safety, reason, strength and authority, as well as sadness and introversion.

> Continued on following page...





EDITION 10

id.ology

Green stands for regeneration, recycling, ecology, balance, tranquillity and freshness. But beware – it's also the colour of envy, aliens, slime and is an unlucky colour for cars.

White represents purity, chastity and innocence. It is modern, hi-tech and associated with space, infinity and spirituality, but it can be cold and sterile.

Black is sophisticated, chic and confident, conveying power and persuasion. In the wrong context though, it stands for dominance, darkness, death and evil.

Even armed with this knowledge, colour psychology is a complex subject and there are no hard and fast rules as to what works where. But with a few key pointers and consideration of the successes and failures of other companies, you can begin to get a handle on it.

Make positive associations:

Sometimes the right colour choice can be directly linked to the bottom line. Supermarkets Asda, Waitrose and Spar use green because it screams fresh and natural and is the colour of health-giving vegetables. See some green signage by the fruit and veg counter and you might just pop some broccoli in your weekly shopping.

Use colour cleverly:

Orange may seem a much less likely choice for a food retailer than green but research shows that orange doesn't just make you think of food because it's the colour of fruit and carrots – it actually stimulates the appetite, making it the perfect choice for Sainsburys.

Target your audience:

Some colours may be more or less appealing to different age groups. Older people are more likely to feel comfortable with safe, reliable colours like blue or various neutrals. The young may have more adventurous tastes. A survey by Pantone found orange to be the least-liked colour overall, but the favourite of young people and trend-setters. When a new mobile phone operator declared the future

to be Orange, it cleaned up – particularly among the young who loved the brand's energetic, optimistic overtones.

Watch those double meanings:

Double meanings, and different meanings in different cultural contexts, need to be carefully considered or you may send out the wrong messages. HSBC's red logo, with its connotations of debt and risk, may seem too close for comfort for some. But in the East, where the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation started, red is synonymous with luck and good fortune. HSBC's reputation overrides this but a new bank might not get away with it.

Beware of the boringly obvious:

Blue is valued for its safe, reliable overtones, which is why it's the colour of conservative politics. That's also why so many big computer companies, who trade on their reliability, use it. The colossal IBM revels in its safe-as-houses corporate blue identity – it's not called Big Blue for nothing. But do we really need another company that chooses blue to convey safety, dependability and downright worthiness? Live a little... bend the rules.

Changing the colour of your company ID isn't a magic formula. It's unlikely to change the fortunes of your business overnight. But as part of an identity overhaul, choosing a colour scheme that speaks volumes about your business ethos, expectations and aspirations can have a surprisingly positive effect. It's like getting a new haircut or swapping your usual dull grey suit for something a little racier. People will see you in a whole new light.

If you would like to discuss your corporate identity in greater detail, please contact Gilles Guilbert on 020 8858 5100 or email gg@indigocreative.co.uk