

Feb.  
2004

## Shakespeare could have used an art director

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*Special to Newspapers & Technology*

Much has been said recently about ways to attract and hold readers' attention in this day of instant Web gratification. Editors and advertising copywriters are doubling their efforts to craft eye-catching headlines and tantalizing leads.

But the truth is that little of those wordsmith efforts will do any good if the visual strategy isn't executed properly. As much as it pains me - a guy who has been paid to write or edit more than 950,000 words since 1979 - to admit it, layout, design, pictures and other art director tools do much more to grab readers than Shakespeare could have.

That's a fact that few marketing executives - and even fewer editorial managers - understand. When readers see an advertisement, a brochure or Page One of a newspaper or magazine, they quickly scan it and make quite a few assumptions about what it is.

Having spent their lives being exposed to print material, many readers know a lot more than we give them credit for.

If you drop in a dozen print products that have Greeked headlines and text, even rank-and-file consumers can identify those that were ads and those that were true editorial. Designs communicate a heck of a lot of information and credibility.

### Go far beyond

Those reader judgments go far beyond editorial versus advertising collateral, though. Based on design issues such as font, colors and images, readers draw conclusions about the company or the publication behind the pages. Big company or small? Young, hip image or more conservative, older image? Friendly or cold and corporate?

For years, I have seen editors spend days trying to set the exact tone with heads, decks and leads and yet all but ignoring - or spending ludicrously few dollars - on an overall look-and-feel. Please don't get me wrong. The right design and the wrong head/deck and lead will still destroy your efforts, but if the design isn't executed properly, nothing else stands a chance.

Take, for example, a piece of marketing collateral such as a brochure or a sales flyer. If it looks like it was typed and then printed on a mimeograph, no headline/deck in the world is going to convince prospects that the company behind the brochure is anything other than a cheap, tiny outfit.

I've worked with quite a few art directors over the years and the few that stand out were those that understood the value and power of design. They're what I call strategic art directors.

### Commitment

What's a strategic art director? The principle is the same with a strong, professional writer. A less confident, weaker writer - often inexperienced - will automatically agree with any changes.

"This last line here in the ninth paragraph. What is it doing there? How is it advancing the story?" is a frequently-asked editing question. A non-strategic writer is apt to answer, "Let's just take it out."

"No, no," I'll protest. "I'm just asking what it's doing there?" The writer clearly has no idea why he put that sentence there. That's not a good sign. A strong piece of writing wastes no words. Every sentence and every phrase is where it is for a precise purpose, such as "We need to say that here so that the next quote makes sense. I'm using it to introduce the cost factor."

The same concept works with strategic art directors. When I ask why the background is a

particular shade of blue, I don't want to hear, "We can change it. What would you like it to be?" I want to hear, "I chose that shade because it allows the text to pop the most, but it doesn't fight the colors on the left. I also looked the demographic of the audience and, based on its age and background, this color says 'energy' which sets up the point of the head/deck."

### **In the company**

Now that's the kind of thinking I need to go into every visual plan. That's how I know I am in the company of a strategic art director.

There's another way to tell if an art director is strategic, although it's much less reliable.

In the original "Columbo" television series, there was a great moment when the famed detective was talking with the owner of a wine shop. He asks, "How can you tell a good wine from a great wine?" The wine expert replied, "By the price."

I've often felt the same way about strategic art directors. Not that they necessarily improve with age, but it's rare to find a great one with a low price tag.

A picture may indeed be worth 1,000 words, but the person who strategically chooses that picture - along with the font, the background colors, the white space, the kerning, etc. - is worth a heck of a lot more.

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