Dressing Your Book for Success

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One truism of graphic design is that you can't not communicate. What you wear (or your naked body), how you speak (or your silence), the way you move (or stay still)…every action or inaction tells people something about you. And what they learn affects how they regard everything you say. Although a book's visual persona may not be as complex as a person's, the way it looks will reflect, reinforce, or run counter to its subject and writing style.

There is no one simple set of rules for a book to "dress for success." Simple advice for graphic design is like simple advice for writing—often simply wrong. The problem with one-size-fits-all guidance—"Always write in short, punchy sentences" or "Your thesis statement should be your first sentence and the main and subordinate clauses should each list three items"—is that when it doesn't fit there's no other size to try on.

It should be obvious by now that I'm not about to offer you a neat formula for designing a book or even for what you should ask of a designer who is working on your book. In this article and next month (when I'll talk about ergonomics and book design), I'll try to offer a framework for thinking about the details of book design. In future articles we'll look at those details in light of aesthetic, communicative, and functional considerations.

Lessons from the competition

So if I'm not going to give you simple advice, how do you figure out what a book should look like? Maybe the best tip in those "dress for success" books was to dress like the person whose job you want. Unloading trucks in a three-piece suit because you'd like to be the shipping department manager doesn't make a whole lot of sense, however. It's worth checking out the competition but it's often more important to look as if you don't think your competition is even in your league. The logic isn't to be pretentious, it's to make sure that there's no dissonance between your aspirations and your image.

Look at what your direct competition is doing but also look around. If there are examples of a step up—more expensive, more advanced, etc.—look at them. If there are books in your field that represent something you want to avoid—cheaper, trivialized, overblown, self-important, etc.—look at them, too. Don't figure "This is my competition. My book should look just like it." Let yourself ask how those other books feel compared to the way your book should feel. Are they too formal? Too casual? Do they feel credible or do they feel unprofessional? Do they feel welcoming or off-putting? Your visceral reactions—and the reactions of people likely to be readers—are what's important.

As with dress, blandness is often appropriate with books but it will be understood as blandness, not just some default "way that books look." A few years ago it was hard to convince graphic design clients that there were choices of typefaces or that the choices mattered. With the proliferation of personal computers, people who have nothing to do with design or typography have favorite fonts. When you get a letter that uses Microsoft Word's "default" settings it no longer seems like just a letter. It seems like a letter that uses Microsoft Word's default settings. You can't not communicate.

Casting a book

What should a book look like? It's often better to start by asking how it should sound. What is the voice that that you'd cast for the books-on-tape version? What direction would you give the actor? In other words, what is the personality you want the book to project?

The image of show biz execs saying "Get me a young Mel Gibson but with Robert Deniro's intensity" may be the stuff of satire but that may be the best approach for casting your book. Look for other books that could play the role of your book's personality. Although there is plenty of room for innovation in book design, every book is, to some extent or another, related to hundreds of other books so starting with a book or books that feels a lot like you want yours to feel makes sense.

Next ask yourself how you'd describe the visual personality of the book you cast to play your book. Then ask what part of that works and what part doesn't. If you say "I want something that looks like this" you'll end up with a bad copy. If you say "I want something that feels strong and straightforward the way this does but I'd like it to have that welcoming feeling that the use of illustration gives this other one" then you're on the right road.

In the same way that an actor might be perfect for one role and just plain weird for another, the design of a favorite book and the right design for your book might not match. We're not looking for the book you love most, we're looking for the

book that could play the part of your book. (Merely sticking the illustration style of the second book into a copy of the design of the first probably isn't going to be the solution. It's easy to make a bad stew from good ingredients.)

Avoiding the merely okay

Next put together a list of adjectives that you think describe the way your book should be and note how the books you chose to play the role of your book deviate from your ideal: "I want my book to be informal and funny like this but this one is just too goofy" or "I want my book to feel like a medieval fantasy like this one but it should be more magical." Verbal goals may never replace the visceral "This is it" reaction when the design is right but they will help you figure out how things are going in the design process and keep you from saying "This is it" when what you have is merely okay.

Sometimes the realities of budgets get in the way of our hopes for a particular feeling. I had a museum director show me a very expensive five-color-plus-two-varnishes Japanese book and say "I want the show catalog to look like this" even though she didn't have enough budget for the two-color book I proposed.

The abstraction of describing goals can keep you from hanging on too tightly to unrealistic solutions. Translating your visual aspirations into words—"I want it to feel elegant but spare and dignified like this"—can allow alternative routes that make sense instead of to the "Sorry; we can't afford that" dead end.

Now look at the books that are the examples of the personality you're looking for. Try to identify what design elements make them feel the way they do. Over the months to come I'll be exploring some of these elements in more detail but one good place to start might not be obvious.

Painting the cracks

When I was a child my great uncle Freeman was a housepainter. He gave me some of the best advice you can get for thinking about or doing graphic design: "Paint the cracks. The boards will take care of themselves." The stuff that seems secondary is where the real action is and it's unlikely that you'll forget the obvious stuff anyway. So let's start with the cracks: the places where there is no ink on the page.

Look at how margins can say "This book is an island of tranquility" or "This book is overflowing with information." In a world of tight budgets and limited resources it's tempting to try to cram as much on a page as possible. Although you can make a crowded page feel exciting, no-nonsense, or festive, that's harder than it seems. More often, small margins make a page feel cheap, claustrophobic, and awkward.

From the standpoint of developing the right feel or subtext, you're usually better

off trying for margins that seem too big and shrinking them until they feel right. (There will always be pressure for higher word counts. The voices for liberating paper from ink will rarely be loud.) White space is not a waste of money and trees any more than having a bedroom bigger than your bed is a waste of flooring. It's the space around that make us feel at home. Books are all about creating particular space in the reader's head; the space begins on the page.

Leading (the space between lines of type), tracking (the space between letters), and word spacing all affect how a page feels. It's too easy to choose a typeface based on the shape of the letters; what's even more important is the shape the letters leave around themselves. The play between ink and paper gives an overall impression that typographers call the "color." If the color of a page is too black it can feel resistant to being entered; if it's too gray it can feel bland and wimpy.

The right personality has to do with your book and your readers. Just as the voice that's too meek to announce TV wrestling might be too harsh to read children's bedtime stories, the design that's too idiosyncratic for a book on general accounting might be too boring for a guide to punk clubs. This isn't to say that imitating the writing style is always the right design choice. Sometimes a strong writing style is best served by design that tries to stay out of the way. Some more gentle writing can use an extra push.

Another aspect of space is how continuous the book should feel. Some subjects and some writing should be collections of distinct parts, allowing for easy starts and stops. Others should feel like one object and encourage the reader to stay in the book's world.

The elements form the personality

In future articles we'll deal with various elements of book design. What does the typeface say? How about the stuff that isn't type—photos, illustrations, decorative elements, and the like? What does the choice of paper say? (If you are blindfolded and I give you three scraps of paper, I'll bet that you can tell me which is from a phone book, which from a cookbook, and which from a bible.) How about the color of the paper and the color or colors of the ink? Each of these has something to say and all of the elements and their arrangements add up to another statement your book will make.

If you can't not communicate, what do you want to say?

This was the first in a series of articles on book design for the newsletter of the Publishers' Marketing Association. This appeared in the October, 2001 issue.