Watch your image!

Visual design for churches

A2 Articles series: Communication

This is an article for beginners on the importance of creating a visual image and on how to go about it. It is divided into four parts: The importance of visual design, The use of logo's, Consistent design features, and Going to a designer.

1: The importance of visual design

McDonald's we are NOT

"Corporate image?" you query. "Isn't that something to do with spin? This chap will have the Church marketing itself as the new global McDonald's next. No fast religion for me, please. I'll stay away from such worldly thinking."

"But hang on," I cry. "I know that for some churches the notion of 'corporate image' sounds inappropriate and undesirable. I know that firms earn millions and companies pay hundreds of millions to give themselves a makeover.

"But your church (and the Church) present an image, a corporate image, whether you like it or not. If you want to know what that image is, stand on a street-corner with clipboard in hand and ask people, ordinary people, what their impression is of St Gabriel's Church.

"It could just be that you are presenting an image of total irrelevance. Or you may be thought of as a building not as people. It may be that national stories or media soaps create an unhelpful image

by association which you need to counter. If people come out of your building on Sunday morning dressed in a certain way or looking bored, and if they have parked across local driveways, all this creates an image in the locality.

"Perhaps you think you have an image of being welcoming and serving the local community well. But be aware that your impressions of your image and the reality may be poles apart.

"If you, as the people of God, are concerned to promote the gospel, your church's image matters."

What is truth?

A bright website design does not make a bright church! All that I cover in this article can only serve the real image you are presenting yourselves. If your church is dowdy, talking in an

outdated language and cold-shouldering visitors, to present an image of being friendly, positive and relevant is not going to hold out for very long. So be careful! Before you get carried away with your vision of the heavenly St Gabriel's, double-check that someone coming in to a Sunday service would find you as you put yourselves across.

The foundation: overall impression

The first thing to do is to set down four or five main points of how you would like to be seen (that are truthful!). If you have already listed your church's 'values', this list will be a visual form of that. It will follow on from your purpose (or 'mission statement' if you use that term). This is not the same as trying to be popular; one of your values may be to be counter-cultural.

I had to do this myself some time ago when I went to see a print designer for my own work as a church consultant and trainer. I said that I wanted:

1   No hype: something that was true to myself and not overstated.

2   An image that spoke of being neat, well-ordered, clear and professional. (Two of my stated values are 'quality' and 'simplicity'.)

3   But in being neat it must have no hint of being bland or boring. In fact I wanted something that had the spark of creativity in it, that was eye-catching. (Another of my stated values is 'innovative'.)

4   I was happy with a logo if he came up with a relevant one (that fulfilled points 2 and 3 above), but equally happy not to have one if nothing obvious came to mind.

That was what I wanted to convey, but you might want to put across something very different. For example, if you are running a youth club you might ask for something that was bright, brash, standing out from the crowd, with images of young people enjoying themselves and with a strong sense of brand identity.

Where you will use your design

- **Letterhead**

  In spite of the email revolution, letter-post is not yet quite dead. The basic letterhead design is still, I believe, the most important piece of image communication for churches. From it will come variations for mastheads for publications, website design, posters, and so on.

- **Signboard and signs**

  For churches the external signboard offers a wonderful opportunity to communicate image. Too often it communicates something that is tatty, out-of-date or cringe-making. But it is a clear opportunity by design and appearance for displaying corporate image, just as much as any shop-front would.

- **Website**

  Increasingly one of your church's main means of communication will be its website. Web design is a subject in itself, but the way your church comes across on its web pages, both in design and navigation, should be a crucial area of its image making.

- **Publications**

  Consider notice-sheets, magazines, welcome packs, leaflets promoting particular events, programme cards, minutes, accounts, PowerPoint presentations, etc.

- **Other promotional opportunities**

  Consider car and window stickers for your church, T shirts, general leaflets for letter-box distribution, design on your mugs/cups, advertisements on billboards.

There are two main ways of using print to create image. The first is the use of logo's or similar design features. The second is the consistent use of fonts, colours and design to create a recognisable feel. These form the topics for parts 2 and 3.

2: The use of logo's

A logo is a simple, visual design that can be used as a representation of the organisation. The link may be with the name of the organisation (consider Shell), or it may be with its business or what it stands for (such as BT). But logo's, even on their own, communicate a 'feel' which of course needs to match the culture of the organisations they represent.

Good logo's will be instantly recognisable within the defined market-place for that product. This may be global or much more localised. So a church logo needs to be known within its locality – or perhaps within a wider area if, for example, its ministry includes regional or national events and conferences. Note the distinctive Alpha logo which appears across the nation.

The word 'logotype' is sometimes used to denote a special visual design of the organisation's name, rather than just the use of the same standard font which is a common design feature, although there is no fixed boundary between the two. Walk down any High Street and study retail outlets (eg. Next, Boots) or banks (eg. Barclays, Lloyds).

An angelic vision?

So St Gabriel's could have a logo of an angel. This might be a traditional design, or something much more modern and minimalist, or something based on a well-known image such as the statue of the Angel of the North if geographically appropriate. In these cases you would probably opt for the words 'St Gabriel's' to appear in the same font every time the name is used. The alternative is to design the letters that make up 'St Gabriel's' into their own distinctive design so combining logo and title in one (eg. Amazon).

But is 'St Gabriel's' a good name to be presenting anyway? Had you ever thought of presenting a different name or is this simply beyond the pale? Consider how names have changed in, for example, the financial world. Whereas safe, steady names like Legal and General or Prudential were all the rage 100 years ago current ideas are different as in Metro Bank or Virgin Money. Some independent churches use phrases like 'Christian Fellowship' in their title. I wonder if that is wise.

In any case you may need a strap-line to help describe you. It may be your geographical location: 'The church on the hill', 'The church in the market-place', although those take you back to buildings. Phrases like 'the church that cares' will probably not commend you to your neighbouring congregations!

There are endless variations for logotypes. easyJet have a lower case e to start their name and a capital J in the middle of it (consider what this does for the reader). The fact that this is, for purists, 'wrong' is of no matter in design! You can break rules of punctuation and lettering to give the right image.

I trade under my own name which appears as 'john truscott' – no capitals. I never use it like this when I write it, or when it appears in normal print. But my designer felt that putting the capitals in did not work to give an effect that was neat and imaginative (as I had requested). The lower-case approach looks better (he felt) and makes it stand out.

Principles for logo's

Here are some other points about logo's.

If it is going to communicate well, it needs to be very simple. It's an image you are putting across, not a work by Rembrandt. It needs to make a simple point, not preach a sermon.

- It is good if it can reduce in size without losing the impact. For example, my own logo (the letters jt in italic, with a feature of the dot on the i, reversed out of a solid circle) reduces well enough to use as a identifier beside my website name in normal sized print (but only just!).

- It is best if it is unique to your church, rather than simply a crown, a cross or a dove (three visual features often used to represent Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

- Many churches pick on a visual feature of their building (such as a spire). This can be very helpful to distinguish you from others, but be aware that you are then communicating an image of buildings when you may want to put across something to do with people.

- Remember, it is vital to set down what image you do want to put across rather than leaping to a picture straightaway.

- If you cannot think of one, don't force one. They are far from essential, as many High Street stores demonstrate.

So what is your church's image in your local community? What would you like it to be?"

Exercise

Even if you know nothing about design, you can teach yourself a great deal by observing and analysing examples of it. Here are some ideas to help you learn.

1   Whenever you see a company logo, ask what it conveys to you. Does it succeed or fail in being instantly recognisable, and in communicating a key feature of the company? If it fails, how might it be improved?

2   Do the same for company logotypes. If you were responsible for design for Boots the

Chemist, would you keep their present curly style (very dated in its look, but instantly recognisable and very conspicuous) or change it to something more modern but risking the loss of identity?

3   Compare the different oil companies through their petrol stations. Which stand out? Which communicate little?

4   Research other local churches and undertake the same analysis.

3: Consistent design features

The second feature of design concerns consistency. Here are three different aspects.

Consistent fonts

Come back all you Baptists! I'm not talking about those stone things in parish churches.

Most good design keeps to just one or two different families of fonts and uses them in most print coming from the particular organisation. Unless you want to appear wild and unconventional, you would be wise to stick to reasonably standard fonts for most text, although there is scope for putting the main title of your church in something a little more out of the ordinary. The important point, though, is consistency leading to recognition.

It is helpful to understand some basic terminology. A 'serif' typeface is one, like the main numbered headings in this article, where the thickness of the strokes that make up each letter varies significantly and there are little finishing strokes at the ends of the stems called 'serifs' (look, for example, at the top and bottom of an i,n,r above). The various 'Times' fonts are the best known (and easiest to read). You probably use Times Roman on your computer but there are many others. My logotype uses a serif font known as 'Bodoni' for my name and the headings in this article are in 'Georgia'.

A 'sans serif' (ie. without serifs) face is one that looks less fussy, where the thickness of each letter remains more constant and where there are no extra bits added on to the ends of straight strokes. You have probably come across 'Arial' or (more dated now) 'Univers' and 'Helvetica' but there are many others.

I use a little-known sans-serif font called 'European' for much of my work (such as the text of this article). This is rather more square in shape than most similar fonts and therefore more distinctive. The text on my website is Roboto.

Sans serif faces look modern and 'clean' but rather lacking in character compared with serif ones. They are fine for headlines and short

pieces of text, but not so easy to read for long passages of small print (so you rarely find them in books or newspapers).

You can sometimes mix the two quite well: headings in a serif face, text in sans-serif (as I do) or vice-versa. Or text in one sort and special features or boxes in the other. But it looks a mess if you muddle them up too much and some pairings just do not work together.

Bold and/or italic versions (instead of what is normally termed 'Roman') can be helpful if used wisely. *Italic creates ideas of movement*, **bold of stability**. Whatever you do the simple rule is to limit the number of fonts to one or two and then be consistent in using them in all printed output.

Exercises

1   Look at the various fonts on offer on Word or equivalent software. Note which are conventional serif fonts, those that are conventional sans serifs, and those which might be termed 'fun' fonts. These include a wide variety from ones that look like handwriting script to ultra-modern jokey looks. Use them only with care!

2   Look at the printed output from well-known companies, charities and other organisations. Which fonts are they using? Are they building up a clear image through consistent use? Why do you think they chose this particular font?

Consistent colours

It is amazing how much recognition can be achieved through the consistent use of one colour, especially if the colour itself is not a standard one. Most High Street banks and retail chains keep firmly to one or two corporate

colours for their name or logo so that the mind of customers, and potential customers, links the colours with the firm (eg. John Lewis). Different colours speak different messages.

easyJet (as I have mentioned them already) present a message of almost cheeky innovation through the use of orange in their name, throughout their website, in all advertisements and in their uniforms. The colour is exactly right for the image they wish to give (at least, for the moment). A more mature and a safer organisation might choose a blue or green instead. On the other hand, where would Royal Mail be without their pillar-box red?

It is such a simple idea, but churches can use it to their advantage. One church has used a deep blue for signboards outside the building, letterhead, and all distribution literature. Coupled with a simple but fixed shape and a standard font, the image in the area is strong. Given a reasonable length of time, a glance at a leaflet from this church produces instant recognition.

My own designer chose a very standard red for the logo and rules (ie. lines) on my letterhead, as this helps produce an image that is attractive and neat (part of my request for the kind of image I was looking for). I then take this on in, for example, reports I write by using this heading for the cover, plain red card for the back cover, and red dividing sheets. Here the use of a standard colour has a specific advantage: I can match it in standard cards and coloured papers. A more distinctive red would have other advantages, but I could not match it so easily.

Exercise

Which firms or organisations are particularly successful in the use of one or more colours?

Which firms' lorries on the roads are immediately recognisable by their colour?

Consistent design features

Apart from the use of a logo, there are many other ways of creating recognition. A particular shape, if unusual, can be used powerfully. Or a motif, such as double rules (ie. lines) with different thicknesses, can be incorporated into every piece of literature.

My designer very cleverly used a circle motif round the letters j and t (for my name), and then for a folder-cover makes this very large in a light tint, fitting the much smaller solid version into the dot on the j in the larger one. (See the heading on any of the main pages on my website for how this has been achieved.)

Standard computer software enables us to copy many design features, from gradient tints, through reversed-out print (where the letters are white with a black or colour surround instead of the other way round), to all kinds of line designs.

Exercise

Look through the main display advertisements in the national, local, educational and church press. Some will have been typeset by the publication itself, but some will have been designed by the organisation responsible for the advertisement. Of these study the design features that make them recognisable: use of solids, lines, shapes.

Check back over all three of font, colour and design for logo's you come across each day.

4: Going to a designer

Most of us need someone especially skilled to bring off a good design using features such as these. Here I write as a client of designers and with a keen interest in using print well, but not as a designer myself. From this perspective here are some tips on how to approach such a person for ideas for letterheads, brochures, websites, posters, or whatever.

Two preliminary points: first, many print firms will offer this service from one of their staff who has some design skills. This may be quite adequate for what you are looking for, but unless the firm employs qualified designers you may end up with something less than satisfactory.

Secondly, it is vital to remember that graphic design is very much a matter of taste. One person's great idea will not cut ice with another. So dialogue is essential. In the following I have in mind the concept of a corporate design, but the same principles apply for any one piece of print.

Select your possible designer(s)

If you do not know where to start, you can try the yellow pages approach, but I would advise you go to someone who has been recommended to you for work he or she has already done. Or you may have someone in your church who is a designer whose work you have seen and respect.

Ensure that the one or more you go to see understand the field you are working in. A brilliant designer in national advertising may not be so good for a church letterhead. Someone working alone from home may take more time and care over an assignment than a big firm where the work is handed over to a junior member of staff.

A face-to-face meeting is essential, preferably at the designer's studio so you can see over it. The designer needs to understand what kind of people will see your print: a church should primarily be seeking to create an image for those who are not church members. Does your designer understand such people? Does he or she understand the ethos you are working in? A piece of print, or a website, for teens will need to be very different from another for all church members. A leaflet for people with no church connection may need to have a different feel from another for the church's internal use. You may have to compromise if seeking to reach a wide range of different people.

Tell the designer what you want the design to 'say' and 'do' for you

This is the key point. What is the 'message' that you want the design to say to the market you have identified above? When people log on to your website or receive a leaflet from you, what is the 'image' that you want to come across, whatever the words say? If you have an agreed set of values, this will be your starting point here.

If you have little idea as to what this image should be, do not be surprised if the designer, working in the dark, comes up with something which does not convey what you were hoping for.

You may find that two or three of the following 'image ranges' will be relevant for you:

- safe and trustworthy through to risky and unusual;

- neat and well planned through to 'take it as it comes';

- clear and straightforward through to creative uncertainty;

- strong and 'in your face' through to subtle and hidden;

- simple and in outline through to complex and detailed;

- active and busy through to contemplative and peaceful.

Within your own church's portfolio there will of course be variety. Some churches offer what I term a 'menu' approach to Sunday services: a quiet contemplative early morning service (safety, peace, beauty), an all-age service for families later in the morning (open to all, simple) and an evening service for teaching (thought provoking) or one more on the wilder side (noisy, unpredictable, high risk). Are any of these more important than others? A designer needs to understand such things.

A conventional image demands a conventional typeface (and vice versa). A straightforward image may be put across by neatly lined up type, with straight rules and strong colours. A wild and risky image would be better served with unusual fonts and strange designs. And an image of misty beauty will need more subtle colours and colour that fades out at the edges.

Explain budget and your preferences

The designer will tell you a possible fee for a basic design. If you want to use this for poster headings, newsletter covers, brochures and any other items, you will then need to discuss these with him or her. The budget will also affect the type of paper the letterhead will be printed on and, for a website, the kind of professional service you are seeking for hosting the site and updating it.

Most designers will be happy to be shown a sample of something that uses an idea or creates an image that you feel could be adapted in some way for your piece of work. Some prefer to be left to do their own thing, others value your input. The chemistry between the two of you needs to be good. Ask to see preliminary ideas so you can say which you like and which you do not. It is good to work in partnership, but don't try the designer's patience too much!

Expect to be surprised, and do not reject a design just because it is not what you had in mind. I understand that some of the best company designs were at first dismissed instantly by the Board. In this way you can usually come to a final piece of work that achieves what you want it to.

Final warning

The image you create in print should of course seek to back up an image that is true, as I pointed out earlier. If St Gabriel's Church, with its bright orange headings, its no-nonsense fonts and its innovative design features is in fact a gathering of people who look miserable before the Sunday service and even worse afterwards, what's the point?

Perhaps I should have added another heading to the ones about consistent fonts, colour and features: consistent people! They are, after all, what corporate image is all about.

This article is available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index then A2. You might now like to read Article A29, *A basic guide to paper and print.* Other resources include Articles A9, *A church members' newsletter,* A21, *The use of print in outreach,* and A39, *A plan for your communications.* Relevant Training Notes include TN22, *Appoint a church photographer!*, TN82, *Print or screen*, and TN113, *What to avoid on your website.*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services within these subject areas.

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