Visual noise and real information: how to stay on brand in 2024

As 2024 starts, Hugo Timm, Senior Creative at Frontify takes a look at the creative landscape of brands to see things that will go, things that are here to stay, and reflects on a way to embrace it all

Temps de lecture : minute

20 February 2024

GO: the quirky shape

Thinking about trends draws me back to watching Masterchef. Every year a new bunch of aspiring chefs would disembark on the program ready to sprinkle the latest ingredient on absolutely anything and everything. They could call the TV seasons the same way the Chinese do with their calendar: the year of the samphire, the year of the celeriac, the year of miso.

In design, it's been a while we're living in the era of the quirky shape. It was only a few months ago that I saw a leading creative take the stage to say 'if I ever see one more quirky shape I'll go mad' — and proceed to showcase one of their projects, plastered with quirky shapes. It's hard to pinpoint where it all started, but it became an oddly essential part of a brand's toolkit.

The rationale behind each shape is diverse. For Coal Drops Yard, the inspiration came from architectural elements. In the case of the US Girl Scouts, the shapes reference patches and badges. For Cohere it's about representing cells, and in Klarna's case, a vague but transparent 'reference to the recognisable quirks of our brand'. I'm not questioning

how appropriate these graphic responses are, just amused that the answer became so ubiquitous.

It's easy to see the appeal, because graphic shapes offer designers a way to populate designs with ease. It's an element of little semantic consequence that can be thrown on pretty much any layout and make it more expressive. The quirkiness is important too, setting it apart from basic shapes like squares or triangles that are much harder to own — also reflected by the funky names these shapes tend to be called.

But what was born from a search for visual distinction became a shortcut, an automated response. Whereas before the quirky shapes brought spontaneity and graphic energy, today they are a sure way to make something look corporate, like an upscale powerpoint slide. Time to move on.

STAY: volume

On darker days, my job as a creative director doesn't seem too far from pushing leaflets through people's mailboxes. Digital advertising has become such a complex and layered monster that it's not uncommon for brands to resort to spraying content everywhere and hope for the best.

I appreciate this is the opposite of what the literature around contemporary digital marketing says. After all, there are numerous tools to track, target, measure, and iterate, giving the illusion of a system that can be perfected towards efficiency. But the reality is that the amount of knowledge it takes to parse this information isn't always at the reach of most medium-sized companies.

It's hard to separate good data from bad, and it's even harder to make the right use of it. There's so much noise mixed with real information, and it's hard to pinpoint whether something performs well because of the

theme, the image, the way it was written, the colours, or simply chance. There's also no guarantee that what works well in one channel works well in another, given how different each different platform is. The result is a scenario where it's easy to try everything, all of the time.

We might be in a situation where the more granular and specific the technology, the more it incentivizes the opposite of what it intended to do. Like emails were supposed to save us time, but we're just busier. More data, more targeting, and more control leaves us chasing the next decimal percentile of returns. In an unfavourable economic environment where each click is a result in itself, I can't see how the tide turns — particularly when the digital advertising market is dominated by 3 or 4 players whose business model relies on keeping audiences _and_ advertisers captive.

Content saturation is real, and brands are slowly starting to understand the role they play in it. On the other hand, the big promise of AI is to lower the barrier for the creation of ever more content. Unfortunately, I don't think the outlook is too bright for creative studios, who are already clogged up trying to manage an explosion of touchpoints.

EMBRACE: meaninglessness

The canon of brand identity is based on symbolism and repetition. It's how I always practiced design, trying to create meaning: this colour represents resilience, that shape indicates dynamism, the angles of the serif reference upward movement. It's a worthy pursuit, even if I never found out if Arnell's Pepsi Gravitational Field is a serious piece of work or a parody — which in itself is saying something.

However, these carefully constructs can be increasingly blunt tools in today's landscape — they rely on a level of control and predictability that's in the past. The ever-increasing volume discussed above requires

flexibility, improvisation, and a non-dogmatic approach that takes some adaptation to. Particularly because this way of working can feel inferior to the more intellectual aspiration of manufacturing meaning.

In other words, it's better to have a vibe than a theory. Agency portfolios are filled with case studies illustrating beautiful, theoretical applications that have little resemblance to the work their clients actually put on the street. Like a laboratory experiment, everything changes when it's in contact with the real world. The carefully crafted pieces, usually the ones that carry most of the conceptual weight, are often the first ones to be left on the cutting room floor because they are unwieldy for a creative team working on the day to day tasks. Two examples that come to mind are Squarespace's IcoNYC and Airbnb's Belong Anywhere by DesignStudio: to my eyes both seem to have been significantly stripped of their more intricate graphic elements over time, in favour of an attention to pure content itself.

I don't think this is a coincidence, and this isn't to say that the original work is flawed — both Squarespace and Airbnb have been doing consistently brilliant brand work for years. It's just that what defines being 'on brand' is less and less a set recipe of typefaces, colours, and shapes dipped in a sauce of symbology, but how a brand behaves, the spaces it chooses to participate in, and what it has to say.

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