

tutorials

OUR GUIDE TO ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS FOR EVERY DESIGNER

METHOD: How the colour of a brand affects our perception

Red is passion, orange is cheap, and green is eco-friendly – all colours have a psychological impact on our emotional responses, so use them wisely.



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There are two ways to choose the predominant colour for a company logo, website or corporate identity. The first is to use the favourite colour of the CEO's spouse. A better way is to think about it.

The choice of colour can have a dramatic effect on the number of visitors a website retains, the message a logo gets across, the character and personality of an identity as presented to the public. Each colour, each nuance of hue, will produce a different emotional response from its audience.

Here, we'll give a brief outline of the effect of different colours on the typical reader or web viewer. None of these rules are set in stone, since even small variations in colour can greatly alter the effect, but the general outline impression should hold water.

Red

The colour of blood. And, by extension, passion, virility, energy. It's no surprise, then, that red is the most popular colour for sports cars. It's associated with speed and excitement, so is a good colour to use if you want people to take a risk.

Red also happens to be the strongest, most noticeable colour in the spectrum, so

it's used for everything that wants to gain our attention in a hurry, from warning signs on roads to tabloid newspapers competing on newsagents' shelves. These days, its over-use and brashness makes it look cheap and lacking in subtlety; you'll see few websites using red as a predominant colour.

Blue

The colour of security, propriety, loyalty. It's a good colour for gaining trust. This is why it's used by so many banks and other financial institutions. On a website, blue will encourage people to trust it with their credit card details.

Blue is also a calming colour. When blue lighting was installed on the streets of Glasgow in 2000, the authorities reported a greatly decreased incidence of crime in these areas. The Japanese Keihin Electric Express Railway Company of Yokohama installed blue lighting on station platforms in 2009, since when there have been no suicide attempts.

Green

The colour of freshness, confidence, tranquility. Political associations have hijacked the colour and lent it a planet-saving aura of sustainability and ecological responsibility.



▲ Red: excitement, virility, passion, romance, sleaze.



▲ Blue: propriety, trustworthiness, security.



▲ Green: fresh, eco-friendly, caring.



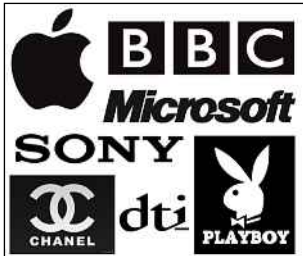
▲ Purple: prosperity, opulence.



▲ Pink: girly, girly, girly.



▲ Gold and silver: luxury, sophistication.



▲ Black & white: authority, intelligence.



▲ Orange: cheap, fast, must-buy.



▲ Yellow: energetic, motivating.



▲ Multicolour: diverse, multicultural.

There are more variations of the colour green than any other. Which is another way of saying that, with our limited colour vocabulary, we assign the word 'green' to a large spectrum of hues. And which is also a way of saying that it's easy to get green wrong: because the word can mean so many different things, it's a colour that must be chosen with care to avoid it looking too acid or too cool. The green that suggests freshness and eco-friendliness has a lower blue content than the green of Starbucks.

Purple

Associated with royalty since Roman times – and probably even earlier – purple suggests prosperity, sophistication and luxury. It's the colour used by Cadbury's to promote the smoothness of its chocolate and by Yahoo! to suggest a more exclusive web portal.

A popular colour among teenagers, purple needs to be used with care when dealing with an adult market: it can easily look outdated and cheap if handled without due sensitivity.

Pink

Pink says pre-teen girls. And that's about it. Such is the buying power of this demographic that pink will forever be associated with Barbie. If your product, website or company focuses on this age group and gender, pink is the colour for you. Otherwise, stay clear.

Gold and silver

Luxury, of course, with silver adding sophistication and restraint. These colours were historically expensive to reproduce on paper, which meant that only those companies who could afford expensive foil-blocked notepaper were able to use it. Now that full-colour printing is affordable, and now that designers are more focused on the screen than on paper, these shiny colours are easier than ever to simulate.

Black and white

When the online and telephone bank First Direct launched, with its black and white logo

and entirely monochromatic colour scheme, it was revolutionary: seemingly, no company had ever deliberately eschewed colour to such an extent. Black on its own suggests intelligence, stability and of authority. From Playboy to Chanel, the colour black has always lent a logo an air of sophistication.

Orange

A vibrant colour suggesting speed, freshness, economy. Psychologically, it's also the 'cheapest' of all colours. Orange is suitable for any companies for which speed and cheapness are key concerns. This is, perhaps, why it's the house colour of both Amazon and easyJet. It's also the colour of action: a Buy Now button in orange is more likely to have the desired effect.

Yellow

Bright, cheerful and optimistic, yellow is the colour that makes people feel energetic. It's very brightness makes it stand out, which is why it was the perfect choice for Batman's logo. Due to the difficulty of reading yellow on white paper, it's always bordered by another colour; 99% of the time, that second colour is black. From police warning tapes to markers on the tailgates of trucks, black and yellow have always been an arresting combination.

Multiple colours

Using a wide range of colours in a logo suggests variety, openness, inclusivity, multiculturalism. From the Olympic logo onwards, the combination of more than two colours in a logo has been a sign of a company that specialises in generality, one that offers a range of goods or services too wide to be encompassed by a single hue.

Using a lot of colours is tricky, though: what started as a rainbow can too easily end up looking like a scribbled mess. It takes the restraint of Google to use several colours effectively. In practice, multicolour means using just red, green, blue and yellow: the designer who strays beyond these primaries is likely to come unstuck.

Colour combinations

Some combinations of colour have specific meanings that can no longer be dissociated from their common use. Red and yellow, for example, are the colours not only of McDonald's and Burger King, but also – with a rather muted yellow – Kentucky Fried Chicken. It's hard to see these colours without immediately thinking of fast food: the only major corporation to buck this trend is Shell (but, then, it did get there first).

Sometimes a company will use an unusual colour combination that will automatically make viewers think of that company. This applies to the blue and yellow of Ikea, or the purple and orange of Federal Express.

Unusual colours

Once you break away from primary colours, you start to stray into dangerous territory. For years, Barclays Bank used a strong blue-turquoise for its logo, which was instantly recognisable. However, it came to be seen as old-fashioned and backward-looking, and is now toned down with a more sombre, darker blue. Colours date as rapidly as any fashion: brown and orange, so popular in the 1960s, relate so strongly to that decade that only those seeking a retro appearance would now choose to employ this combination.

Contemporary websites often tend towards bright, garish colours that are easily manageable in RGB, but can't be reproduced in the restrictive colour space of printed CMYK publications: bright turquoise, dayglo orange, shocking pink, acid green. If a logo has to appear in print as well as on screen, choosing colours in this range commits the company to expensive printing options or compromise.

On a website, it's easy to adapt and change these colours as fashions and trends dictate. When committing to a corporate identity or a single logo, though, it's more difficult to change a colour when it falls out of favour. It's often best to stick to regular, easily reproduced hues and combinations than risk creating a logo that may look stunning today but will quickly date.