

WHAT'S YOUR SIGN? - USING BASIC DESIGN PRINCIPLES TO HELP EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS REACH THEIR AUDIENCE

Amy Fennell, CPBT-KA
Natural Encounters, Inc.

Abstract

As a professional community, avian educators and trainers function as ambassadors between the general public and the animals with which we work. The importance of our dialogue and methods of delivery when speaking to an audience—basically, what we say and how we say it—has been the subject of many excellent papers over the years, and cannot be understated. However, the presentation of printed information in an engaging and accessible way is equally important: when we're not around, our interpretive materials do all our speaking for us! Overlooking this key piece of the educational puzzle can lead to educational signage or pamphlets that fail to effectively transmit information to the public, or—worse—are misinterpreted or ignored by their intended audience. The best way to solve this issue is by taking a critical look at public outreach materials and applying simple design guidelines to ensure that the information is presented to the audience in the most accessible way possible. By understanding the basic principles of graphic design and information architecture, we can take an active role in this traditionally passive method of education, and by doing so can reach a larger audience than ever before.

Introduction

It is rare to find a successful organization in any industry that lacks a strong sensitivity to the power of the spoken word. In the animal industry—and specifically, in our field as avian trainers and educators—this is especially true. As a whole, we are a group that frequently discusses and debates novel methods of audience engagement (Martin, 2012). We self-correct the facts we use in presentations through research and revision (Billington, 2012), and we make a concerted effort to be inclusive to audiences of all ages, abilities, and demographics. Without these attributes, we would not be successful teachers. Words have weight and power, and the best speakers use them deftly to weave a narrative that captivates an audience and inspires them to act.

There is no reason that educational signage cannot aspire to the same goal, and yet outreach materials are often considered of lesser importance compared to the value of the spoken word. While very few educational moments can compare to the genuine rapport between a presenter and their audience, it is a sad truth that we cannot be everywhere at once; in our absence, it is our signage that speaks for us and for our animals. If it speaks poorly, or fails to engage an audience at all, then we have failed to meet our educational goals just as surely as if a presenter failed to engage a gathered crowd. Worse, while a poor speaker improves over time with practice, feedback, and revision, poor signage tends to remain static, and may continue to clutter and underutilize valuable space for years to come.

Good signage, like a good presenter, should efficiently transmit information to the majority of the audience, and it should encourage the reader to seek more data. What makes signage 'good'?

The same thing that makes a presenter ‘good’: the quality both of what you say, and how you say it. Put another way, the success of visual educational materials depends—just as any show or presentation does—on content and delivery. Content is relatively straightforward and highly variable depending on your animals and your facility, so we will discuss it only briefly in this paper. Effective delivery, however, requires some basic knowledge of graphic design when the intended medium is visual and static by nature.

Many facilities do not have dedicated graphics departments. Those that do have professional designers under their employ may still benefit from animal care staff with enough basic knowledge of design to let them provide constructive commentary on rough drafts and mock-ups before the documents are finalized. In any case, the basic components of graphic design as they apply to educational outreach materials are simple and easily accessible. The same components also apply to other materials—pamphlets, documents, flyers, PowerPoint presentations, webpage design, etc. For the sake of clarity, these materials will all be considered synonymous with ‘signage’ for the purposes of this paper.

The basic components of graphic design that we will explore are **typography, layout, and color.**

Typography

Typography, in essence, is the art of the printed word; it is a method of presenting written language to the eye in the most appealing and accessible manner. Typography is primarily concerned with the font, size, color, spacing, justification, and layout of text.

Font choice is arguably the most important aspect of typography as it applies to informational signage. If your content is equivalent to a presenter’s dialogue, your font choice is the accent and the intensity with which the dialogue is spoken.

Certain ‘accents’ may suit particular situations, and yet those same accents may be inappropriate or confusing in other settings. In North American news media, for instance, the prevailing accent with which a newscaster speaks tends to be as neutral as possible—regardless of regional tendencies—so as not to distract from the content of the newscast. In children's programming, however, accents may be varied and exaggerated for effect. As with accents, the wrong font can distract or muddle the intended message of educational signage, while the right one can assist in the efficient delivery of information.

Consider the following:

1. i'm coming to get you.

2. I'M COMING TO GET YOU.

While identical in content and punctuation, the particular choice of font makes the first sentence seem light-hearted and friendly-- the words of a mother picking her child up from a friend's house, perhaps—while the font of the second sentence is considerably darker in tone.

With this in mind, it is worth taking a moment to consider the 'accent' with which your signage is speaking. Is it light-hearted and simplistic when you intend it to be slick and serious? Is it boring and formal when your aim is to engage young children? Matching your font to your content (and in turn to your intended audience) helps to ensure your message comes across clearly. Which font would you choose and why?

1. Red-tailed hawks are adaptable hunters.

2. Red-tailed hawk are adaptable hunters.

3. Red-tailed hawks are adaptable hunters.

4. Red-tailed hawks are adaptable hunters.

Fonts can be exciting, and with a plethora of free fonts easily available online, it is easy to throw five or six different fonts into a single document. Resist the urge—this can overcomplicate your signage and make it difficult for the reader's eye to pick out important information. It is rarely beneficial to your final product to use more than three separate fonts (a title, body, and accent font), and often a single font—with changes in emphasis or size—may be all that is needed. Simple is almost always best. On this topic, basic visual effects such as drop shadow, glow effects, borders, embossing, etc, are tools which can easily overwhelm printed text. Use them sparingly as subtle accents, or consider avoiding them entirely.

Experiment with font choice as you like, and then stick with what works for your facility. A five-minute search for a font may be all it takes to change your signage from generic to eye-catching—and *that* may be enough to engage a child who is too shy to speak to you directly and inspire them to learn more about the natural world.

Layout

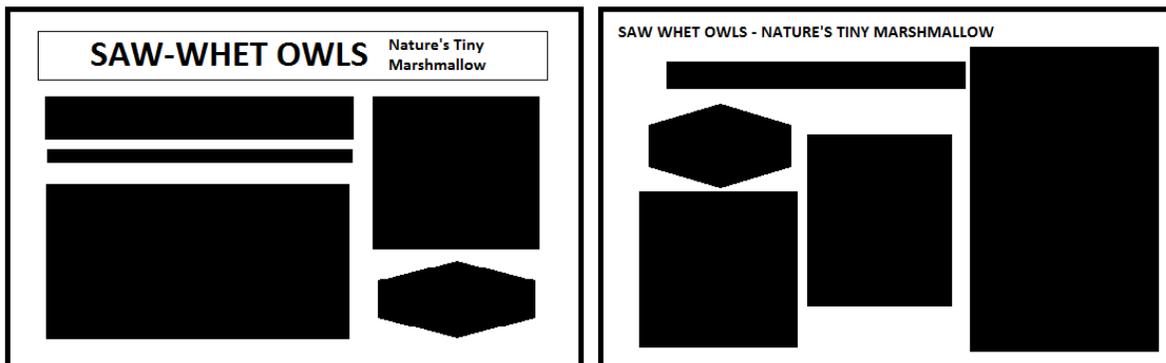
'Layout' is the process of planning the arrangement of your final product in detail. It involves deciding where all your information will live, visually speaking. Beginning the layout of your signage may seem intimidating at first, especially for newer designers, but there are many online resources (such as free basic templates) available to help you get started. While you may not want to choose a generic template for a final product, they are of great help in the basic planning stages and can assist you towards your ultimate goal by breaking your content down into categories (generally, 'text', 'images', and 'accent'), and by helping you block out your information.

A simple grid pattern can ensure that your components are well balanced and have plenty of white space around them. Your ultimate goal to draw the viewer's eye towards clear, uncluttered content that is properly sized to fit the space it lives within. Your information should not compete with itself; there should be a single, dominant theme to your signage.

The amount of text used in your signage may vary from almost none to a significant amount, depending on your goals and intended audience, but the inclusion of relevant images should be considered nearly mandatory for educational signage. Text-only signs are rarely as engaging as ones that make good use of illustration or photography. Humans are visual creatures by nature, and the right photograph or illustration will pull the eye in far more effectively than any text. Images should be large enough to be clearly visible at an appropriate distance (based on intended use), of suitable resolution to print without blurring or artefacts (visible pixilation, etc) from resizing, and—importantly—free and legal for use.

It should be noted that the majority of images posted on the internet are not public domain, and are not free to be used without consent. To ensure you've chosen images that are legal to use, check the copyright and licensing information on the photograph or image. If you cannot find that information, do not use the image. Some photographs may be restricted to non-derivative or non-commercial use, or must be used only with the photographer's name clearly attributed on the work. To be certain that you are using an image legally for your intended purpose, search for images with Creative Commons licences (www.creativecommons.org), pay to use a stock image site, or partner with a local photographer to secure professional images. Clip-art, like text effects, should be avoided or used very sparingly.

When tying all aspects of layout together, step back and take a look at your overall placement of information:



Check to see if your layout is balanced visually, such as the image on the left, or cluttered and inconsistent like the layout on the right. With practice, balanced placement of signage components becomes easy and natural.

Color Theory

Color is one of the biggest considerations in graphic design, as it has the power to either draw or repel the eye, and to provoke a quick emotional response in viewers (i.e. a bright red sign may evoke feelings of alarm or concern before the viewer is even aware of the information contained within). As with fonts, overuse of color (or use of the wrong color or combination of colors) can overwhelm the information you are trying to present, or can make text difficult to read. Choose a main color, then one or two complimentary or analogous accent colors that can be used to 'pop'

titles or key information. Be wary of oversaturation and clashing color schemes; neon colors may draw the attention initially only to repel the viewer's gaze immediately afterwards.

When searching for a color scheme, take inspiration from your animals, your facility's logo or website, or from nature in general. Consider, also, the surroundings in which the sign is going to be set; if you are designing an educational display for a leafy forest exhibit, choosing green as the background for your sign may make it difficult for visitors to see. Take a moment to review color theory, as it will help you choose your accent colors.

Rather than adding an additional color for contrast, consider adding a subtle texture or watermark to accent areas of your sign.

A Few Additional Considerations:

- As mentioned throughout this paper, there are many free online resources available for novice graphic designers. However, it is also worth mentioning that many online resources have usage laws that make printing or commercial usage illegal, or require a fee to use publicly. Checking that you have the legal right to use any photography, fonts, or illustrations you collect from the internet ensures best practices are being followed.
- If appropriate, make sure your facility's logo is properly displayed, and that project partners or photographers are credited as needed. These added touches do not necessarily impart conservation information to your audience, but they lend professionalism and consistency to your work.
- Blank walls are canvases for education—if your facility has unused or underused space, consider what information that space could hold and how best to use it for that purpose.

Content, and Tying It All Together

A brief word on content: do not forget to consider the reading level of your audience. Use plain language when writing copy. General public documents are most accessible when written at approximately a 9th grade level. Consider:

“Gular fluttering is a key factor in owl thermoregulation.”

“Owls pant like dogs to help them cool down when they get too hot.”

The first may be more accurate, but the second is far more understandable to the layman. Content should be factual and engaging, and as concise as possible given the limitations of space inherent in the medium. It should also be well-proofed by multiple individuals before it goes to print—there *will* be a typo, and it *will* make it into the final product the one time you fail to triple-check your work!

In fact, before your signage goes to print, take a moment to self-check your work beyond a simple proof reading. Now is the time to ask yourself: Is your signage...

...Accessible?

Is it written at an appropriate reading level?

Is the text clearly legible? Is your color-scheme appropriately viewable for color-blind users? Is the text large enough for visually-impaired viewers or new readers?

...Accurate?

Is your data correct and sourced?

Are there spelling errors? Has your sign been proofed by a third party?

Does your information contain relative dates rather than fixed ones? (“She is six years old” vs. “She was born in 2008”)

...Concise?

Have you cut out all of the unnecessary ‘extras’?

Are you making the most efficient use of available space?

Can you say it with fewer words, or a better image?

...Captivating?

Is your sign visually appealing? Do you *want* to look at it? Is it fun?

If any of these considerations seem overwhelming in a world of tight schedules and never-ending projects, remember that a well-executed simple design is always more effective than a complex one poorly made. Your goal is not to have the prettiest signage, or the most colorful, or the most eye-catching-- it is to transmit the most information to the widest audience in the shortest amount of time. If a standard 8”x10” black and white 48pt. times new roman sign is the right tool for the job, then celebrate it as a project easily done, and feel confident in moving on to the next task in a busy day!

Having the opportunity to speak with an audience of any size about our animals is a heady privilege. As an industry, we are a catalyst that sparks conservation change, and our shows and presentations form a direct link between our audiences and the natural world. By delving into the world of basic design principles, we can make sure that our printed educational materials stand out, draw the eye, and engage the mind every bit as effectively as our face-to-face interactions with the public—and *that* makes a simple interpretive sign worth far more than a thousand words.

References

Martin, S., 2012. Connecting With Our Audience, IAATE Annual Conference, <http://www.naturalencounters.com/pressRoom.html>.

Billington, M., 2012. Exploring the Incredible World of Raptor Vision, IAATE Annual Conference.