

~~Having~~ Using type in Web ads: Making every opportunity count

~~Alex W. White~~

~~© Copyright 2007, all rights reserved by the author~~

This article was written for digital-web.com and published on that site in 2007.

“Advertising on the Web is so different than print. It has to contend with tininess, limited bandwidth, banner ad shapes, being shoved into side-bars... no one even wants to see our ads!”

First off, let’s define the term “advertising.” It is from the Latin *advertere*, “to turn toward,” thus “to bring to someone’s attention,” or “to notice.” So all advertising, whether Web, print, or broadcast, must share this one attribute: *it must be noticeable.*

So why is so much advertising, including Web advertising, so skippable? Partly, I think, because advertisers make the mistake of thinking of their audience as “viewers” rather than “targets.” The distinction is real: a viewer is “one who views,” which implies active participation; a target is one to whom an ad is aimed, whether that person is attending to our ad or not, which implies active aiming by the ad maker.

Web sites are more akin to print editorial pages than print advertising pages in their complexity and sequentiality. Web ads, however, can be compared to TV commercials: Web ads are brief 5-second spots compared to the 30-second spots that appear, for example, on the network news. There are severe limitations on story length and complexity, so being clear and persuasive (or at least intriguing) are critical. Web ads simply have to reveal their value and their message immediately – or sooner.

The principle that all branding efforts must be visibly, identifiably related holds true even for the smallest Web ad. Companies have design palettes that define typefaces, colors, positioning, and sometimes proportions and content in every instance of their branding efforts. Compliance may be an ongoing problem, but start a design by making it agree as much as possible with the client’s existing materials. Then introduce amendments necessary for your specific design application.

The two aspects of Web ad design that make it more effective

One is content that matters to the target. Nothing is more important than a message that is fundamentally a mirror in which the target will recognize himself.

The other is the presentation’s simplicity. It’s visual difference. Crafting a design so it is distinct from its surroundings and therefore noticeable.

The three elements of design

Regardless of medium, designers have precisely three elements to work with: image, type, and space. There are no other elements. But these three have so much more potential than is typically used. Manipulating each purposefully will produce much better results.

Design Element No.1: Image

The common language

Look through an advertising annual and you will see that, compared to type and space, imagery gets the vast majority of attention. Images abound: full color, full bleed, mini movies on the Web. We targets are saturated with images. We tar-

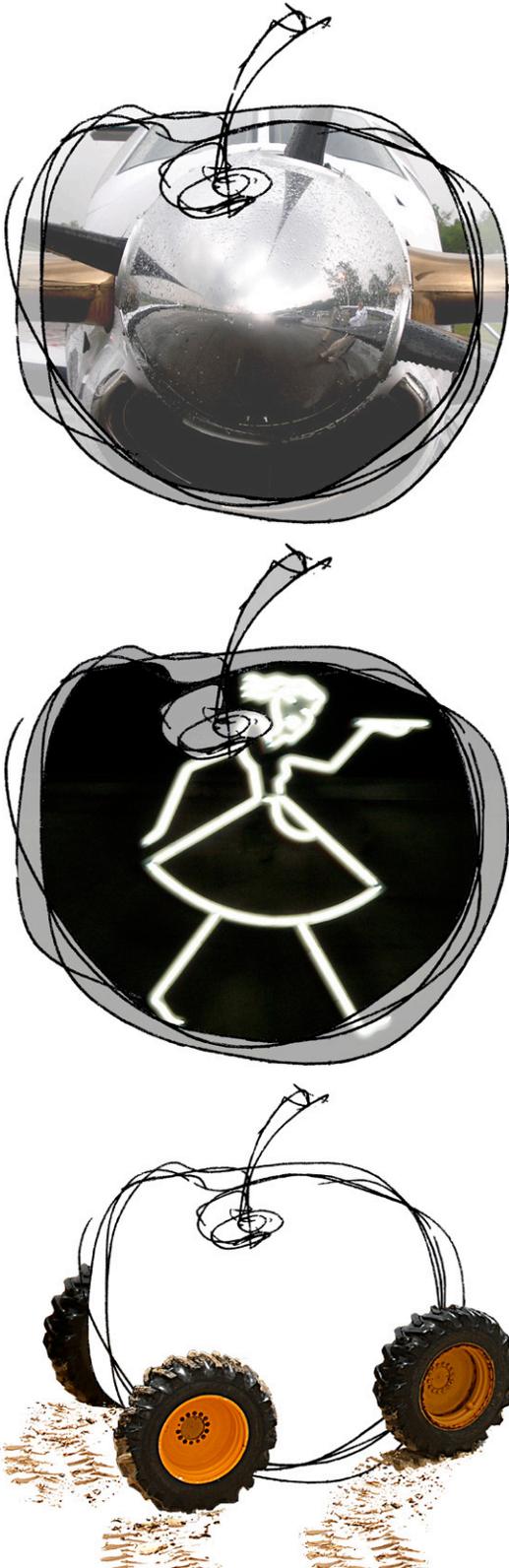


Figure 1



gets are jaded to their persuasive power.

Still, if you have to have a picture of, say, an apple, make it as new as possible by giving it a treatment that directly relates to your message. Avoid random treatments that are merely “different” for difference’s sake. That works against your message because it says, “Look at this long enough to know you have been manipulated into looking.” Your target will be over and out at that instant.

Here are three treatments – *not logos*, which require simplification and symbolism – that correspond with these ideas: apple + power; apple + staffing; and apple + substruction (*Figure 1*). If any of the solutions make you smile, they are unexpected and therefore *possibly* memorable. This can fairly be called “value added design.”

Design Element No.2: Type
The communicative element

We have become an increasingly visual society in the years since the advent of television in the 1950s. If other Web advertisers are emphasizing imagery, you can either choose to follow the prevailing attitude, or you can buck that trend – possibly becoming more visible – and tell your story using only type and space, space and type. No imagery at all. The key is to impose the space on the type to make itself visible in the foreground.

Integrating type and space is not the same thing as just typesetting a headline. That puts space in the background, as usual, and is vanilla and supremely under designed, even if you pick a nice typeface. Too much credit goes to the type designer, not to you as the ad’s designer.

There are two significant considerations when choosing a typeface for an ad. One is what typeface(s) does the client use for its overall branding efforts? Unless you have a really powerful reason otherwise, you should use that typeface to further their branding. The other powerful consideration is what typeface is going to propel my message with greatest impact? That is a balance between simplicity of letterform, like a bold sans serif, for example, and character that distinguishes your ad from all others. Choose typefaces that are highly legible, yet have enough subtle quirkiness to be distinctive. A third – and far less significant – consideration is what typeface do you as the ad’s designer happen to like? Your favorite typeface may happen to coincide with a client’s real needs, but that doesn’t happen as often as we designers think it should. So attend to the first two considerations and leave your current fave face on the desktop.

Here are a few examples of integrating type and space (*Figure 2*). What they all have in common is that space pushes letterforms around. Space, in fact, dominates the type. This is still relatively unusual and therefore visible to advertising’s targets.

Design Element No.3: Space
The neglected element

Space invariably exists behind image and type. It is just pixels or substrate, there because it has to be. No one pays attention to it, except for covering it with image or making it a color. But it always remains in back of the other two elements. Make a message visible by doing the unexpected: bring the background to the foreground. Look for ways to have this clarify and propel your ad’s message. This is not equivalent to a Photoshop treatment that decorates an object: few messages fail to be served by this approach.

Here are a few examples of space dominating a design (*Figure 3*). This is a counter intuitive approach that causes abstraction. Remember, *advertising* comes from the Latin for “to bring to someone’s attention.” Our first responsibility is to make Web ads visible to our targets.



Figure 2



Unity, legibility, and character

All design strives for visual unity among image, type, and space. That means, for instance, that space doesn't always *have* to be in the background. And that type and image can become a *single* element. The best design simplifies multiple elements into a single *impression*. Do this by finding and exploiting commonalities between image, type, and space so they are perceived as being a single entity. A few ways of doing this are by putting texture from the image into the type; by putting space into the image; and by shaping the type into the image. Because Web ads have severe limitations, not least of which is their intrusive nature, they are more susceptible to busyness than other kinds of ads.



So on the one hand, *legibility* is maximized by simplification, and on the other hand *visibility* is maximized by abstraction and character. If a Web ad design is skewed too far toward legibility, it will be bland and unexceptional. If a Web ad design is skewed too far toward character, it will be hard to read, perceived as a confusing, skippable muchness.

The ideal is to balance Web advertising's simplicity with character. There is no formula for this. It is what makes design an art. Finding such balance requires sensitivity and practice.

Adapting print ads to the Web

There are several kinds of Web ads. Variations on these continue being invented and rolled out:

Banner ads: horizontals

Sidebar ads (aka "skyscraper" ads) verticals and scrollable; two to three higher clickthrough rate than banners

Pop-up and pop-under ads (annoying to close, but far higher click through; higher cost for advertiser)

Floating ads (even more intrusive than pop-ups, they have sound and motion and produce still higher click-through numbers)

Unicast ads (a television-like commercial with the advantage of clickability to the sponsor's site)

And there are of course multiples of these on many sites. So your Web ad competes with the page's content and the other ads. This competition for attention is very like print and broadcast advertising.



Further information

There are many resources available for advertising design. A few are:

My own: alexanderwwhite.com

The Design Observer: designobserver.com

Creativity's Ad Critic: adcritic.com

Management Professor's site: garrreynolds.com

Web 2.0 advertising: <http://www.calacanis.com/2006/11/15/the-real-story-of-web-2-0-advertising-2-0>

The Type Directors Club: tdc.org

Association Typographique Internationale: atypi.org

International Council of Graphic Design Associations: icograda.org

Ad Age Top 100 Campaigns: <http://adage.com/century/campaigns.html>

Creative HotList to see what's new: creativehotlist.com

Figure 3

Alex W. White is the author of *Advertising Design and Typography*, released by Allworth Press. He consults with businesses to increase the potency of their advertising and branding efforts and can be reached at alex@alexanderwwhite.com