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## ***Effective Interpretive Media Design is CRAP***

### **Description**

Have you been tasked with the daunting duty to design your organization's flyers, brochures, or interpretive panels? Effective interpretive media design is CRAP. Contrast. Repetition. Alignment. Proximity. Explore these basic design principles with NAI's Interpretive Media Section Director, Alexis Sohlden.

## **My Introduction**

Good morning and welcome to Virginia Beach. My name is Alexis Sohlden. I'm here on behalf of Jefferson County Open Space in Colorado. I'm also here as the director for the Interpretive Media section. Thank you to those of you who attended yesterday's section meeting. For those of you who didn't or were unable to and are still interested in the section, please take a business card of mine. There you'll find my direct work information and on the backside you'll find information about the interpretive media section including its Facebook page, blog, and website.

To give you a little background on me, I attended the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. I want to recognize them right off the bat as a lot of the information that I'll be sharing with you today has been adapted from my time at that school. I've also worked at a variety of organizations, agencies, and organizations from non-profit to for-profit to government.

I'd also like to recognize a few great design books that I'll be referencing throughout my presentation. The non-designer's design series by Robin Williams is a great starting point for any designer. Interpretation by Design (Caputo, Lewis, Brochu) is another great book that focuses directly on design within the interpretive realm.

## **Participant Introduction**

I don't plan to stand up here and lecture about effective interpretive design today. I'd like this to be a discussion. We'll start out with a PowerPoint and discuss the design principles along the way. Please ask questions during the presentation or feel free to share similar experiences. I want this to be as useful to everyone as possible.

With that being said, what are some things that people are looking to get out of today's presentation?

## **Design Introduction**

We wear multiple hats as interpreters, naturalists, rangers, coordinators, and managers. Lately, in our field it seems most are dealing with budget and/or staffing cuts. This usually creates a situation where we are tasked with additional hats or tasks. Sometimes we have little to no experience, but need to make it work.

Who does interpretive media or design on a day-to-day basis? Weekly? Monthly? Once a year?

Have you recently been tasked with the responsibility to create your organization's flyers, brochures, interpretive panels, or other media?

Don't fret. We'll walk you through the basics of effective design that can be applied to a variety of interpretive media materials. We want you to walk away from this session with functional and practical design skills that you can apply immediately to your projects as well as designs.

## How and Where to Start

It's easy to get excited about designing an interpretive panel, poster, or other piece of media (or is that just me?) Sometimes we want to jump right away to the design and use a cool graphic element. It's always important as a designer to step back and realize that your message should drive the design. Don't let a great picture or interesting texture design in Photoshop lead you away from your intended interpretive message.

## Good, Effective Design

You want your design to get your readers attention, but not for the wrong reasons. I'm of the camp that good design shouldn't be noticed. I'm sure you've seen a bad design and noticed it immediately. Grammatical errors, spelling, odd layouts, fonts (comic sans/papyrus), etc... jump out at many of us as we're taking information. This is non-effective design as we as readers are noticing the design more than the message.

Good, effective design should attract the readers' attention and then convey the message or meanings intended.

## Media

The world of media is ever-expanding. There are traditional, print types of interpretive media like wayside exhibits, panels, posters, brochures, newsletters, booklets, maps, etc... There is exhibitry that incorporates many types of media including panels, dioramas, interactives, etc... There is also now the digital age that includes social media, websites, e-newsletters, etc... Some interpretive media also focuses on audio tours, sculptures, movies, and more.

Choosing the appropriate type of media is a decision that you will need to make individually or with your respective organization. There are many facets to consider including cost, time, effort, etc... We won't be getting into all the different types of media in this session, but know that you can apply these concepts to most if not all types of media.

## Message

We all want our audience to get our message, but what truly makes effective interpretive media and design? Effective and accessible design includes colors, layout, graphic elements, and much more. We also can't forget about the message and interpretation we're hoping to convey to our audience. What meanings and connections are you attempting to create?

Think about frontline programs that you've planned. You don't grab a bunch of props, and then write your outline or program. You write the program using a theme and then decide how best to engage your audience through different interpretive techniques. Now, think about designing your interpretive media in the same light.

Interpretive media is a channel that you utilize from yourself to the visitor. In frontline programs, you are face-to-face with the visitor. With interpretive media, we typically don't have that luxury. We need to pick an appropriate and effective medium to communicate with our visitors. Media should help create meanings and make connections for the visitor using thematic interpretation.

Since audiences to our sites are typically diverse, this means all interpretation should be universally accessible.

This includes physical and intellectual access. Physical access ensures that all visitors will physically be able to get to the message. Are there stairs? Is the panel placed at an appropriate height? Does your design allow everyone to hear, touch, see, and/or do what is necessary to receive the message? Messages should also be provided in a variety of ways to ensure intellectual access to everyone.

## **Schramm's Fraction of Selection**

Wilbur Schramm explored why we read what we read. To explain his work, he created the Fraction of Selection.  $\text{Expectation of reward} / \text{degree of effort required} = \text{frequency of activity}$ . As a designer, it is part of your job to create a high fraction of selection. This means that the reader will feel that for a small amount of effort or work, they will receive a great reward. A low fraction of selection means the reader thinks that a great deal of effort needs to be invested and they expect to get little in return. Avoid creating a "book-on-a-stick".

## **The Design**

Designing interpretive media should take into account the interests of your visitors, the unique features of your resources, site, events, etc... that you're attempting to interpret, as well as an application or technique to present your information.

## **CRAP/PARC**

Effective design is truly about CRAP. Contrast. Repetition. Alignment. Proximity. Some people also refer to these principles as PARC (Proximity. Alignment. Repetition. Contrast.). However, works best for you to remember them, these four basic tenets will guide your designs to help save you time and effort. Throughout this session, we'll discuss how purpose and content should drive your design (not the other way around).

# Proximity

## Related vs. Unrelated Items

- Related items should be organized together. If you're giving your audience information about the date and time of the program, it would make most sense to keep these elements together on your poster.
- Unrelated items should not be grouped together. These elements should be spaced or distributed in a way that indicates they are separate from one another.
- Physical closeness implies relationship

## Blank, Empty, or White Space

- Resist the urge to put the time in one callout bubble in the upper-right-hand corner while putting the date in another callout bubble in the lower-left-hand corner.
- It's okay to have blank, empty, or white space. Depending on who you're talking to, they'll have different names for the same idea in design. These spaces allow your eye to rest. This goes back to our Fraction of Selection concept earlier. Glancing at a poster, which would you be more likely to read? White space is most effective when clustered boldly in one area of the design.

## KISS - Keep your design simple and clear.

- "Keep it simple, stupid" is a design principle noted by the U.S. Navy in 1960. The KISS principle states that most systems work best if they are kept simple rather than made complicated; therefore simplicity should be a key goal in design and unnecessary complexity should be avoided.

## Test your design

- Do you know where to start?
- What is the visual flow?
- How many times did your eyes stop?
- Do you know where to end?

## Goals

- Design becomes more organized
  - Intellectually
  - Visually
- More likely to be read and remembered
- Understand where to begin
- Know when you are done
- White space allows your eyes to rest

## What to avoid

- Placing unrelated items near each other
  - Closeness implies relationship
- Placing related items away from each other
  - Date and time should naturally go together

## Alignment

Alignment and layout go hand-in-hand. Every item should have a purpose. Every item should be placed purposefully. Every item should have a connection with something else in the design

Be mindful of placement of text and graphic elements in your design. Think about aligning them to the left, to the right, or to the center. Having multiple alignments on one page or piece can be jarring to the reader if not done in a mindful way. Consider your message and overall design when picking an alignment. Think about wedding invitations. Most include center alignment. Alignment helps create a tone for a piece.

Text alignments may be something you're familiar with from Microsoft word. There are a couple of options including flush left, flush right, centered, and justified. Graphic elements can also be aligned including center, right, left, top, middle, and bottom. Distribution of elements can also be had either vertically or horizontally.

Every design element that you decide to include in your interpretive media item should have some connection to something else in that particular design or the series of designs. When designing an interpretive media piece, think about what lines the eye will take. Create a focal point where you want to direct your reader's attention to first. Then lead them to where you want them to read next. In the United States, we typically read left to right, so design your piece with this in mind. Graphic elements or objects should be also moving into the page, rather than away.

The direction should direct readers from most important information to least important. Keep in mind the 3-30-3 rule. While all visitors are different, but typically can be grouped 3 styles of readers. Some visitors will only want the snapshot – the 3 second story. Others will invest more time and take around 30 second to read or engage in your media. Finally, others will become engaged and remain for up to 3 minutes. These are the visitors that read the small print.

### Goals

- Design becomes more organized and unified
- Design is given a tone
  - Serious
  - Fun
  - Formal

### What to avoid

- Multiple alignments on one page
  - Confusing, somewhat jarring
- Centered alignment
  - Unless it's a conscious decision

## Repetition

You're probably already doing this. It's just time to take it make it stronger and more conscious.

Think of repetition as consistency. Elements should be unified across a design and therefore repeated. Think about a ten-page paper you turned in during school. The margins were all probably about an inch or 1.25 inches on each page. The font you used was probably the same size throughout. If you used headers, hopefully they were a different size or style.

If your design is part of a series, repetition will also include having the same design elements on each. This includes fonts, layouts, colors, and presentation of materials. The inclusion of your logo is also a great way to tie together a series of signs.

Unity or repetition of design is a great place to invest your time and effort. Many successful organizations or agencies have taken time to develop a standards manual including graphics. Think of the National Park Service and their unigrid designs. I'm sure you can almost picture their black bars, fonts, and logo. Another great example of this is the New York Subway. Both of these great examples are attributable to Massimo Vignelli. If you take the time upfront to create these documents, it will save you a lot of time in the long-run. You won't have to keep making design decisions and your visitors will begin to develop an identity for your organization.

### Goals

- Increase visual appeal
- Increase visual organization
- Increase consistency
- Gives organization credibility
  - Thoughtful and conscious design

### What to avoid

- Avoid using an element so much that it becomes overwhelming or annoying to the reader.
  - This is going to detract from your message and purpose.

## **Contrast**

Contrast (noun) - differ strikingly. If two elements are different, make them really different. If they're just slightly different, it looks like a mistake and creates conflict in the readers' eye. "Don't be a wimp" do it with strength. Contrast can be a great way to create a simple, yet dramatic design. Contrast can also increase or enhance accessibility.

Contrast makes text easier to read.

### **Size**

Contrast also comes into play with graphic elements and their proportion. Which of these designs draws your eye more? Don't be afraid to design with strength in mind. You need to grab the visitor's attention first. Think of that POW or grabber within your frontline program. Once you have their attention, you'll be able to deliver the message.

### **Color**

Think about using a family of colors that are complementary to one another, but are different enough from one another that creates enough of a contrast. Color can convey a mood, help with contrast, or tie into your brand/identity. Think about signs that are red vs. signs that are blue vs. signs that are green. What do those colors evoke?

Fonts should also be considered. Choose fonts that relate to your message. Don't use multiple types of fonts unless they serve a purpose. A good design principle is to have two fonts. One should be used as the header or decorative font. This will be used to call attention to your piece. The other should be used as the body or main font. This font should be clear and easy to read. One good rule of thumb is to pick a san-serif and combine it with a serif.

Think about a website you've viewed recently. Was the body text serif or san-serif? Think about a book, magazine, or newspaper you've read recently. Was the body text serif or san-serif? Typically, digital platforms will rely on san-serif fonts as they are easier for the reader to view on a screen. However, print documents still rely heavily on serif fonts.

### **Goals**

- Create visual interest
- Organize your piece
- Enhance readability

### **What to avoid**

- Being a wimp
- Contrast needs to be strong and done purposefully
- Adding too much contrast

## Other Tips and Tricks

- Use odd-numbers rather than even-numbers when considering graphic elements
  - Split into thirds rather than halves
- Use the graphic element to help tell your story.
  - Graphic elements should do more than duplicate what can already be seen. You should also avoid adding a graphic element that is not related to the story or message you are trying to convey.
- Make your design professional
  - This increases your credibility and likelihood that someone will be receptive to your message. Does comic sans necessarily denote professional?
- Use high-quality graphic elements - 72 DPI for digital and 300 DPI for print.
  - Understand the difference between vector and raster files as well as how to manipulate both.
  - Please, please, please avoid Microsoft clipart or wordart. This is going back to our earlier principle that good design shouldn't be noticed. Both clipart and wordart have become very noticeable and are associated with early versions of Microsoft programs.
- Don't stretch, strain, or contort graphic or text elements.
  - Become familiar with your design program and how to resize elements proportionally.
- Avoid all caps. Your design delivers your message including tone. All caps is often associated with shouting. It also makes it more difficult for readers to read.
- Consider line length
  - Consider if it is better to break your text into columns or multiple panels. It shouldn't run the whole width of a panel (36 inches/3 feet). For a reader this makes it very difficult for them to follow and understand your message.