

Visual Design with Emotion

Chris Bittner

It's Time

The world of static text and images is going up in flames and those who can't let go of the past and embrace the dynamic changes in information dissemination will get burned. Well, at the very least they will be left longing for that rolled up, hours-old, antiquated fire-log of a paper to hit their front steps.

But more than this, the aging populace who hold tightly to the good-old-days, resisting the revolution of interactive media, will miss out on a vibrant, emotional, living conversation.

And those who design information for the masses need to be falling forward, off the front edge of technology, technique, and transmission of emotional connection.

We are not robots.

We are moved by our perceptions, conscious or not, and our emotions move us from one life choice to the next.



Image 1 Photo by Elijah O'Donnell on Unsplash

Therefore, emotion is key in visual design – there must be a connection between message and audience that causes a reaction beyond simple, peripheral knowledge that some stimulus exists.

The Power of Emotion

Cognitive scientist Don Norman studies the ways in which humans interact with visual design and how good design moves us emotionally on different levels of neuro processing (D. Norman).

Focused on the effects that happiness has on reactions, Norman says that positive or happy feelings produce dopamine in the brain, which is a physical chemical reaction to visual stimulus.

But, more than this, humans react on different levels of subconscious and conscious levels to the world around them. At the visceral level of processing we subconsciously respond to colors, food, shapes, and other basic elements of daily life (D. Norman).

“To me, a good image, to be effective has to be affective,” “. . . you have to be moved in some visceral way. You appreciate the image for its content, its beauty, its composition. It makes you feel something: mad, happy, laugh, cry. It makes you do something. That’s what a good picture is, on all levels, whether it is sports, news, features—whatever it may be.” – Jim Colton (Seth Gitner 11).

The use of color in design has been studied for centuries and the choices made can affect the emotional response an audience has toward a message or product (Cao). Jerry Cao tells us that red can promote power, importance, or youth. Yellow – happiness, enthusiasm. Green – growth, stability. And Blue – calm, safety, openness, and reliability (Cao).



Image 2 Photo by Arwan Sutanto on Unsplash



Image 3 Photo by Alex Block on Unsplash

Color is vital in storytelling through imagery and can set the mood or convey meaning simply through vibrancy or drabness, variety or monotone (Seth Gitner 13). Bright colors can excite an audience, causing arousal and valence (Deng and Poole 714). Likewise, drab colors or the lack of color can bring about feelings of depression, loneliness, and a change in the

approach–avoidance behavior a viewer has toward a visual (Deng and Poole 717).

Regardless of message, designers want their audiences to be drawn into the story and message. There is a balance between using color that conveys happiness, sadness, despair, or tragedy, and holding the attention of a viewer without driving them away. Designers must be deliberate in choosing the correct visual elements for the mood or seriousness of a message.

Images must be appropriate and relevant to the information presented – the impact of reception and recall depend on it (Riaz et al. 1). Audiences enter visual encounters with websites, advertisements, and other mediums with expectations of what they will find regardless of previous experience. They often have goals when engaging and design choices can be perceived as helping or hindering that process, causing a positive or negative emotional reaction (Riaz et al. 115).

At the behavioral level Norman says we react subconsciously to a more intentional participation with design – an interpretation of what we can feel, touch, and control (D. Norman) .

If you’ve ever been to the beach you know the feel of sand, in your toes, pouring through your fingers, and stuck on skin – even after showering thoroughly. The grit of each grain can be imagined when viewing an image of sand – the flow and the form is remembered.



Image 4 Photo by Zoe Holling on Unsplash

Visual design has the power to invoke memories – visceral and behavioral reaction – though they may not always be the target emotions a designer is trying to induce (D. A. Norman 2).

Designers, much like the press, are not as in control of their audiences as some would like to believe. The power of reaction lies with each individual viewer. When an audience feels violated or lied to, they simply flip the switch and move on. There is no need to continue digesting rotten fruit – the vast amount of information we have reveals the agenda of those interested in misleading us (D. A. Norman 2). Travelers would never return to a site that showed an ad with beautiful white sand pouring wispily from a hand to advertise the beach in Santa Monica, CA. The public is smarter than that and a violation of their trust will end a vital connection.

The power of nurturing relationships through integrity is real and must be respected.

Keep it Real

Behavioral level reactions are called “expectation-induced”, according to Norman (D. A. Norman 4), and there is awareness of the way things should be according to a viewer’s culture. These expectations lead audiences to sites that produce the content and products they are looking for, where their reflective level of emotional response can feel conscious emotions brought about by their choices (D. A. Norman 4).

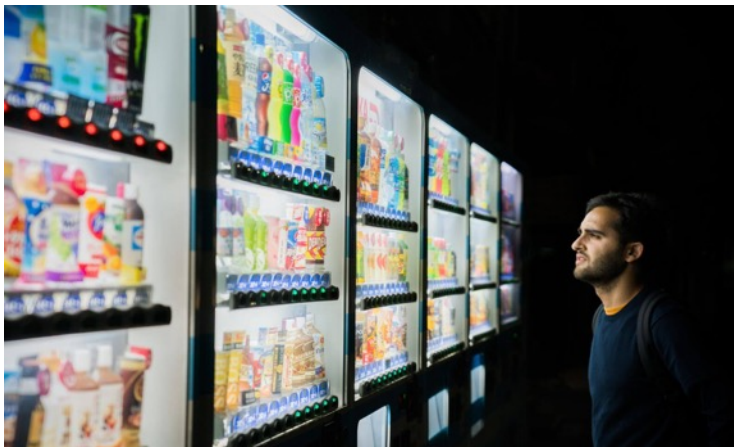


Image 5 Photo by Victoriano Izquierdo on Unsplash

Consumers try to think through purchases, attempting to make cognitive choices, but the heart often wins the battle between thinking and feeling. Good imagery, “makes you feel something,” says Jim Colton, “it makes you do something” (Seth Gitner 11).

“We have the potential,” says Aral Balkan, “to make things that empower, amuse, and delight. It makes the technology invisible, and the experience indistinguishable from magic” (TEDTalentSearch).

It is easy to over-design, to embellish simple needs, and to create complex, complicated experiences when simplicity and pleasant artistry could be married into wonderful communication.

Today’s adults have very short attention spans, bombarded by information from every angle, we can hold our gaze for a mere 3-8 seconds before losing interest in uninspired design (LeWeb).

Visual design needs to be authentic – reaching out honestly to a targeted persona with information that is relevant, even in its creativity. It needs to inspire, not just through magic, but also through flawed and rugged imperfection. (*Worth 1,000 Words: The 4 Principles of Visual Storytelling*).

However, showing human weakness in the humanity of design does not mean intentionally creating frailty or fabricated conflict in the stories we tell. There is much skepticism toward photojournalism due the uncovering of staged photos and digitally manipulated imagery.

“Setting up photos – where they are completely staged – is very widespread. I’ve seen it done by very well-known photographers.” – Stanley Greene, Founding member of Noor Images (Staging, Manipulation and Truth in Photography - The New York Times)



Image 6 Before

Creative design allows latitude for a lot of manipulation and creative license, but in journalism this is simply not acceptable. What is real should be realistically portrayed and unaltered to maintain integrity of the story. The February, 1982 edition of National Geographic is a well-

known instance of photo manipulation as seen here.

The cover reveals the pushing together of the pyramids to fit the vertical layout but this simple alteration caused great headaches when the public became aware of the deception (Susan Goldberg).

Trust is vital in a relationship, and the vulnerability an audience allows is an emotional investment, which when violated can never be fully restored.

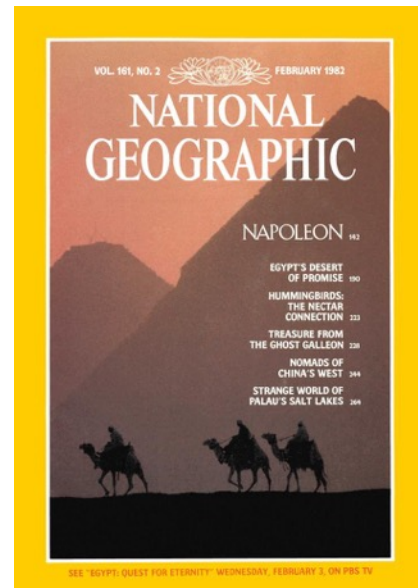


Image 7 After

Keep it Unpredictable

In the world of creative visual design, where we leave the serious nature of journalism behind, the goal is to not only provide information that is usable, reliable, and simply functional, but also pleasurable (Freddusya).

According to William Morris you, “shouldn’t have anything in your house that isn’t beautiful, joyful,” (Freddusya) But, creative beauty is not always the stimulus a designer hopes it will be.



Image 8 Photo by Rob Potter on Unsplash

People like variety, humor, and surprise in design as well, says Al Seckel. We enjoy it when, “our expectations are violated in some pleasant way.” (Seckel)

Simple visual tricks can stop a viewer from meandering through a site, as they stare in wonder at the visual twist that can’t be explained.

Designers may try and create contradictory emotions in their audiences through contrasting visual language and the content it represents. Using the two together can create a memorable emotional reaction while communicating an important narrative (Klanten).

This magic is fascinating, and we can’t help but stare in wonderment, trying to figure out the trick. But what makes this possible, we ask ourselves. Even in a world of Photoshop and digital editing we want to first believe the trick is real and then hunt for the strings or hidden doors.

Though we are well aware of the visual clues of emotion – a sad, downturned mouth with head lowered in despair, or curled lips and happily squinting eyes (Klanten) we are perplexed and

amused by a floating woman, suspended in the woods by some unseen force (Image 6). There must be more to the story and we are drawn to find the answers.

The OXO Good grips uplift kettle, Norman explains, is the result of evolving utilitarian design that has become beautiful in the process of becoming a better product (D. A. Norman 8). The surprise that violates our expectations is that this tea kettle is so unique in appearance but more so when lifted automatically opens to pour hot liquid. In the process of protecting hands from steam and fingers from the burns of hot levers the design has put the fun in functional.

Though the emotional response this kettle evokes may not have been the goal of the designer, it is higher functioning than traditional tea kettles and the form is more desirable because it accomplishes the user's goal while building pride and the image of eccentricity (Riaz et al. 115).



Image 9 OXO Uplift Kettle
<https://www.oxo.com/products/oxo/coffee-tea>

“If you have fun, your customers will have fun,” says Ekaterina Walters. “Don’t just create marketing campaigns,” she says, “build tribes! Inspire movements!” (LeWeb)

Bring it Home

What does a good time look like? What is special about one image and worth sharing more than another (Ferraro et al. 1)? Storytelling is one of the oldest human activities (Wiessner). But it is, at its core – human. We look for meaning and belonging in the images before us, and that perceived bond is created through relatable interaction and emotion on all levels (Cohen).

Though gestalt psychology might explain how we see a greater whole that is formed from many parts (Wagemans et al.), our humanity takes each compound experience and mends a life from chaos. Our lives are formed of many moments and we come by our own personas and projected images as we take in all that we see and experience. We are our own gestalt – our own greater picture made from the parts of our lives.

Increasingly, we are growing in the soil of data and demanding visual layers that filter and solve the information we wade through each day (McCandless). Designers must get the basics right – the emotional relationship and the delight (TEDTalentSearch).

Design must emote. It must find the ways to access users' brains, but through trust and empathy, and give them a greater return than what they invest (Freddusya).

“Attractive things make people feel good,” says Norman, “which in turn makes them think more creatively.” So, designers must nurture the relationships built through hard work and honest interaction. Creative visual communication makes it easier for people to meet their goals, find solutions, and enjoy their lives (D. Norman).



Image 10 Photo by Gerd Altmann on Pixabay

“Pleasant things work better.” – Norman

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