
VISUAL VOCABULARY IN BRANDING

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Abstract:

Visual vocabulary or visual language is a set of symbols used to describe a system or a process; it refers to all graphical representations that supplement a brand image, a logo, and build a brand identity that is bound to remain invariable even when the sign undergoes fundamental changes. The article is a presentation of the concept of visual vocabulary/language and of its relevance to branding and marketing. We argue that these symbols are culturally dependent and a key element in brand design.

Keywords: *brands, visual vocabulary, visual language, marketing*

Visual vocabulary has been defined as “a set of symbols used to describe something (usually a system, structure, or process)” (Garrett 2002). This is a general definition which, as it is usually the case with generalizations, fails to capture the more specific components of the concept. Visual vocabulary is a concept which equally applies to architecture, design (with its various branches, including web design, for example), branding and even language learning. It is true that it operates with symbols, but these symbols do not only illustrate systems, structures and processes; in language learning, for example, visual vocabulary is used to help learners – especially young learners, but also adults – acquire vocabulary in a foreign language. Symbols help learners develop the core language competencies (listening, reading, speaking and writing), which “entail the process of receiving (input), attending to (interaction), and assigning meaning (output) to verbal (aural or written) and / or visual stimuli. They also include competencies in communicating in the target language, which includes an understanding of the cultural and situational context of such communication” (Mayer 2005, 467).

Therefore, visual vocabulary is not only a set of symbols illustrating concepts, but these are also culturally dependant and provide the one who are able to use it with a wide perspective upon the context within which communication occurs. What is then the relationship between branding and language acquisition?

Brand design and language learning have various elements in common, but the most apparent are those of a cultural and social nature. First, both share in an interest in the cultural context: both branding and language learning occur in a specific cultural context; both brands and the language learning address a specific group of people. A successful brand (and, of course, a successful language learning strategy) triggers a reaction of the target group. Strategies related to brands and foreign languages depend on what could be defined as “active learning”: the acquisition of symbols which results in desirable reactions (buying a product / production of language or communication in the foreign language).

In brief, visual vocabulary is meant to trigger desirable reactions from both customers and language learners; the strategy is almost similar, yet the result is strictly dependent on target groups and the definition of “desirable” in each case.

Several authors have argued that visual vocabulary is nothing else but a transfer of a concept into an image, namely “the visual translation of a brand into a flexible set of images, symbols, colors, typography, overall style, and ownable messages” (Knapp 1999, xxiii). This is to a certain extent a truncated paraphrase of an older theory which has been considered one of the most revolutionary in modern linguistics, i.e. the theory of the sign developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. He argued that if what the sign signifies may be considered invariable, the sign itself varies through time, because it is time-dependant: “The sign is subject to change because it continues through time” (Saussure et al. 1986, 75).

In other words, the concept, i.e. what the brand actually sells, may be a fixed object, while its visual representation is subject to change, because it exists in time and within a particular social and cultural context. Brand images and visual vocabulary are thus intrinsically connected not only because they are both representations of a particular signified, but also because the relationship between them is natural and easily accepted by target groups, who are accustomed to such communication (acquisition of information through visual representations is perceived by the human brain as a natural reaction to stimuli).

In practice, things are less complicated. Visual vocabulary refers to all graphical representations that supplement a brand image, a logo, and build a brand identity that is bound to remain invariable even when the sign undergoes fundamental changes. This does not necessarily mean that a logo should only appear as a neat graphical representation of anything; without the support of the culturally bound visual vocabulary, such a representation would not represent anything.

For example, visual vocabulary may include fonts (different styles, size, spacing, colors), shapes, pictures, even paper type or resolution in case of a brand image designed for the web. All these elements should represent a concept, i.e. the brand identity and be governed by specific rules. The quality of these visual elements is extremely important, but one should mind the fact that, in communication, quantity matters as well. Thus, the number of visual elements is as well important, not only for the sake of diversity but also in order to provide the brand with a certain independence and freedom to change. Abstract representations are always a good choice. The logo

should be changed only when re-branding is necessary, but the visual vocabulary should be as flexible as possible. “The bonus function of a visual vocabulary is that when you're doing a special promotion, launching a new product or extending your services or product line, you can vary elements of the visual vocabulary or even develop a new set of visual vocabulary elements, to make the materials for your new promotion stand out. While consistency throughout a campaign is important, the elements of your visual vocabulary aren't as set in stone as your logo. This is especially effective when you work just with the colors and drawn elements and leave the text and tagline treatments the same” (Ferree 2005).

According to Erin Ferree a “visual vocabulary is a way to reinforce and add to the messaging that is contained in your logo” it has nine advantages “over use of a logo and text alone:”

- Visual vocabulary becomes a system, a language addressing potential clients and business partners and creating a specific context for that particular business;
- Visual vocabulary is easy to understand and it appeals to visual memory which helps potential clients remember important facts about the business, without having to remember textual information;
- Visual vocabulary appeals to emotion not only to memory for some people are likely to react better to graphical representations (colors and photographs) rather than to text or music;
- Visual vocabulary makes a company look more professional, people-oriented;
- Visual vocabulary makes corporate materials more professional, convincing and articulate.
- Visual vocabulary makes promotion materials more memorable;
- Visual vocabulary reinforces the company's logo;
- Visual vocabulary is a permanent source of newer and better marketing materials (Ferree 2007).

Erin Ferree refers to visual vocabulary as a valuable aid to a brand image or logo, but if we turn to the World Wide Web, we understand that visual language is a key element in modern branding and marketing: “Understood in a broad sense, visual languages have become a key component of human-computer interaction and seem certain to gain even more importance in the future. The explosive growth of visual communication on the World Wide Web is another indicator of the increasing use of visual languages” (Marriott and Meyer 1998, 1).

The visual language of brands usually refers to concepts that appeal to a certain target group living in a certain social context. David Ansett's report on “The Visual Language of Brand” is the result of a thorough analysis of thousands of brand expressions. For example, within the framework of global crisis, many companies sell their products as small pieces of affordable luxury. People refrain from buying cars or houses but do not refuse themselves a nice and trendy perfume. The visual language around such products represents both the concepts of luxury and that of affordable.

The affordable luxury is just a sub-trend, but David Ansett identified several major, followed by their sub-trends, haunting the world of branding these days:

Trend	Explanation
GLOBAL 'BLANDING' (MAJOR TREND)	Describes the trading-in of unique and usually meaningful symbolism for a shared and meaningless visual language
THE AUTO BADGE HERITAGE	Refining brand mark to make it a shiny, three dimensional representation of their badge
SPHERE OF INFLUENCE	It includes the many brands from a wide range of categories and geographical markets who have evolved, refined or re-designed their brand identity to include a sphere element.
EVERY MAN AND HIS DOG'S BREAKFAST	A key requirement of an effective brand identity is to provide the business with unique and own-able visual properties.
SHARING SHARDS	First spotted in the IT space, this style of visual language has moved across the finance industry and business consulting to place branding for the City of Melbourne in Australia.
THE NEW FACE OF WHICH SPORT?	As sporting clubs around the world clamor for the latest update to their brand's visual language, many are turning to three dimensional versions of their existing symbols and mascots.
THE FLYING GRID	Key-lines have been used to create a three dimensional form in brand marks for decades. Recent times have seen this form of rendering gain new momentum with the addition of blended color to accentuate the effect.
SAME-SAME BUT DIFFERENT	Einstein's theory of relativity applied to branding.
THE RIBBON OF LIFE	Ribbons have long been a symbol of life and celebration. The current trend of Global Blanding has seen the use of the ribbon element on brand identity increase noticeably.
AUTHENTICITY (MAJOR TREND)	Brands with tradition and craft at their heart have long communicated to the market with visual language rich in authentic and traditional cues.
THE SIGNATURE	A sub-set of the wider trend of authenticity the trend towards the use of a signature in brand visual language has regained popularity.
GREENWASHING	'Greenwashing' and 'Farmwashing' are two new terms coined to describe the recent trend of brands creating a sense of environmental or farm-fresh credibility to products with no rightful claim to those credentials.
FAKING IT	When it comes to authenticity, brands who are faking it stand a good chance of creating negative brand associations. In an attempt to look friendly, human and accessible, many brands have jumped onto the trend of faking it with hand-written fonts. These are computer

	generated typefaces intended to look like human generated hand writing.
MADE WITH LOVE	The 'Made with Love' trend has been adopted by brands wishing to associate themselves with qualities of care and trust, community spirit, authentic artisan, and hand-made goodness through the use of handmade or hand drawn elements, often combined with photography or other visual cues of human comfort.

(Ansett 2010)

Conclusions

- Visual vocabulary or visual language is a set of symbols used to describe a system or a process
- Visual language is culturally dependent and a key element in brand design
- The visual representation of an object is subject to change, because it exists in time and within a particular social and cultural context
- Visual language is a key element in modern branding and marketing

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