

The thing about brand guidelines

 By [Chemory Gunko](#)

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With our highly competitive marketing landscape, and the ease with which anyone with a PC can create marketing collateral, it has become more important than ever before that your company has a strong brand identity.

More and more though, I see companies rushing into a brand guidelines exercise without carefully considering everything they need to consider. So what should you be looking out for when you create your brand identity?

Play it out before you cast it in stone

I've always been a firm believer in the idea that you play artwork out on at least 1 or 2 projects before casting anything in stone, and yet I've seen multiple examples in the past few months where a guideline has obviously been put together before this has been done.

What this results in is comments like: **that looks messy**. Well yes, because your play out had exactly four words on an A4 page - and it's very easy to make four words on an A4 page look neat. It's much more difficult to make something look neat with reams and reams of copywriting.

The glaring problem is that you have no idea of the amount of content any client has until you start playing it out. Likewise, you don't know about available imagery either.

Now, from an outsider's point of view, I can see how you wouldn't think this would make a significant difference, but from hard-earned experience I can tell you it does.

Every industry has different key areas they have to focus on. Likewise, many industries have especially content-heavy collateral they have to create - from user guides to instructions, or even a range of over 2,000 plumbing fixtures and products, it is the client's products and services that have to take centre stage.

Unless you've worked with the content, and taken the time to get to know the client's products and services are, you won't know what the key elements are, you won't know what the focus areas are going to be and you certainly will not know what shape and form the majority of your collateral is going to take.

And if you don't have that knowledge or information on hand, then how will you create a brand guideline that effectively covers those key collateral pieces?

Digital and print are not the same

Here's the scariest thing: many (if not most) agencies still fall firmly on one or other side of the digital/print divide. This means that you cannot safely assume that what your agency is putting together for you will work on all media.

You'll most commonly find errors in colour specifications and usage

Most print designers specify pantone colours for print - and if you've ever tried to save a pantone colour to an RGB file, you'll know that the colour doesn't show up, because there is no RGB equivalent for a pantone-specific colour.

Likewise, most print designers omit hex codes (the colour classification system for digital) from the brand guidelines they compile... largely because they don't even think to include them.

Even if you are in luck, and find a brand guideline that does include all the web and digital specifications, very often you get an irate customer screaming that the colour doesn't look right, because screen resolution and quality play the most significant role in determining how a colour appears when it's open on your machine.

To test this, open the same website or image on every machine in your individual office and then walk from one to the other and see how completely different it looks on all the machines.

This differentiation happens for so many reasons - the light intensity setting the user uses, how they have their RGB breakdown configured, their contrast settings and more.

The differences themselves can be hugely dramatic - what should be black can come out green or grey for example; what appears blood red to one person can be pink to the next. Throw in the fact that 7 to 8% of all men are colour-blind to some degree, and you are opening a veritable hornet's nest of problems.

Sadly, the most commonly used colours, yellow and red, are also the most difficult to work with and the most likely to go wrong on a screen display.

Second only to font disasters, of course

When it comes to brand guidelines, is there any more important decision than the font you choose?

The font speaks volumes about who you are and how you present yourself, and of all your collateral elements, it is the one that users will most often engage with - or is it?

Not all the fonts that you can choose from are supported digitally - in fact, a very small percentage are actually supported digitally.

Yes, you can use Google Fonts for your website, if the reader's browser supports it, but I've seen even up to date browsers that just do not register the Google Font, if you're even lucky enough to find your font choice among the small list of available fonts. Worse than that, it can be prohibitively expensive to license a font for use as a web font, incurring high repeating annual license fees.

And even if you go through all the hassle and cost of having a font licensed for web use, you'd still not be able to utilise that font on e-mail sends. Which leaves you a choice of one of the original web-standard fonts: Arial, Tahoma, Verdana, Trebuchet or Times New Roman.

Use something other than one of these in an emailer, and if it's not stored on the recipient's machine, they'll only see Times New Roman.

Not everyone is created equal

This is a very key point to remember, because the people who have created your brand guidelines are not necessarily always the people who will be working with them - and not all artists and designers are created equal.

The sad truth is, in order to cut costs, many agencies are doing exactly what your business and so many others do - they hire the least expensive people. This means junior designers, who don't yet have the experience and knowledge to be able to pay fine attention to detail.

In fact, in most agencies' creative departments, you'll find one or two, usually senior, designers who are brilliant at detail work - the rest of them are just typical designers with a great unique art & design style, and very little sense of spelling and detail.

This means that that complicated CI you've had put together (and usually paid a fortune for) may actually be too complicated for the average designer working with it to be able to follow.

Your brand guidelines simply have to be easy enough for the average designer to understand and carry through, in a way that enables them to add their own style and flair to the creation - because their artistic ability is what you're paying for after all.

You have to reinvent the wheel

Brand Guidelines are exactly that - guidelines. They're not cast in stone, and there has to be room for movement to allow you to adjust to different media, sizes and needs.

Even more importantly, if everything you produce looks exactly the same people will think it's the same information over and over again - and in the world of digital, that means readers will ignore it.

ABOUT CHEMORY GUNKO

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