

Colourful Connections

Exploring the impact of colour and
its role in business communications



Introduction

Some intriguing theories surround the impact of colour on human behaviour. In the business world it has never been easier or more cost-effective to add colour to communications. So, at a time when businesses are fighting for consumer attention, how is colour best used - and can it make the difference?

“Customers can have it in any color – so long as it’s black.” So said Henry Ford, the founding father of mass production, about his Model T automobile back in the early twentieth century. Had he tried the same stance a century or so later, a rather less illustrious future may have befallen the Ford motor company.

Why? Because today’s customer wants choice – and decisions on colour are often an essential element of that choice. Cars, computers, phones, watches – colour is a major consideration. But does the colour chosen say anything about the person? Are we influenced by colours and, if so, is there a way for businesses to harness that influence?

Scientific verification of the effects of colour is limited. But so-called ‘colour-theory’ is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1706, Isaac Newton produced a colour wheel which organised colours into their natural progression. A century later, German writer and physicist Goethe began studying the psychological effect of colour. He divided all the colours into two groups – a plus side and a minus side. Colours on the plus side – from red, through orange, to yellow – were said to produce excitement and cheerfulness. Those on the minus side – from green, through violet, to blue – were associated with weakness and unsettled feelings.

For those who live in a Western culture there is a loose, common ‘vocabulary’ for most colours. In other words, over time, certain colours have become associated with specific attitudes and emotions:

Black is often used as a symbol of death or evil but it is also popular as an indicator of power and sophistication.

White is representative of purity or innocence but it can also imply coldness and sterility.

Red is a warm colour that evokes strong emotions like love and warmth or, conversely, anger.

Blue is nominated as a favourite colour by many people and is the colour most preferred by men. Blue calls to mind feelings of calm and serenity but can also signify sadness - ‘the blues’.

Green is the colour of nature, symbolising calm, tranquillity and stability. Green also represents jealousy.

Yellow is the most visible colour. It is often described as cheery and warm, but also signifies cowardice.

Purple is the symbol of royalty and wealth, and can also stand for wisdom and spirituality. Since purple rarely occurs in nature it can often appear artificial or exotic.

Brown is another nature colour that evokes feelings of strength and warmth. Brown can also create feelings of isolation or sadness.

Orange is considered an energetic colour and calls to mind feelings of enthusiasm, excitement and warmth.

Pink is commonly regarded as the 'female' colour. It is typically associated with romance and love.

It is clear that many of the feelings evoked are contradictory and that colour theory cannot be an exact science. Indeed, colours represent diverse meanings in different cultures. For instance, whilst white is the colour of purity and innocence in western cultures, the same colour represents mourning in eastern countries such as Japan, China and Korea.

But whilst there are no strict rules to follow, patterns of colour usage do emerge.

Brand decisions

When it comes to the business world, the most visible use of colour is often a company's brand design. Here, some interesting facts come to light. A recent study¹ looked at the world's 100 most valuable brands and concluded that over a quarter (26%) use blue as a dominant colour in their logo. These major players include IBM (nicknamed 'Big Blue'), HP, American Express and Gillette. Additionally, although some may not regard black as a true colour, basic black is just as popular as blue amongst the top brands.

At the other end of the scale, Starbucks is the only top 100 global brand that uses green as its most dominant colour.

Colour in communications

Of course, brand success comes down to a lot more than the colour of a logo. In fact, brand success has a great deal to do with the quality of communications. In a recent Pitney Bowes survey², business decision makers across the UK, France, Germany and US nominated poor communications as a primary reason for switching supplier.

This is why businesses of every size are now looking seriously at communications management – with colour as a key ingredient.

The evidence supporting colour usage is compelling. For example, psychologists have found that colour helps us to process and store images more effectively than black and white.³ Colour effectively hangs an extra 'tag' of data on images that makes them easier to remember.

This is essential information for businesses looking to draw attention to critical areas of text. Consumers are familiar with concepts such as 'red bill' payment demands – but colour can be used far more broadly, highlighting special offers, legal obligations, contact details and much more.

The important point is that colour is now affordable to businesses of every size. The cost of digital colour print today is a mere fraction of what it was in 1995 when colour copiers and printers were introduced. In the last ten years, digital colour costs to users have reduced by 75%.⁴

As the cost to print in colour has come down, the quality has increased – not only at the mass volume level but also across desktop office-based technology. And colour is no longer restricted to the document within the envelope. The latest technology enables full colour text and graphics to be added to the envelope itself, creating an instant advantage in the drive for consumer attention.

A study by Leflein Associates⁵ amongst U.S. consumers revealed that 69% would be more likely to open a mailpiece with colour text and graphics before opening a plain white envelope.

1 Common Sense Advisory – 'Global Marketer's Guide to Color Selection', 2010

2 Pitney Bowes – 'Preventing customer churn', 2010

3 May issue of the 'Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition', published by the American Psychological Association (APA), 2002

4 InfoTrends, 2010

5 Leflein Associates, 2010

Not science, just sense

Whilst colour-theory makes for interesting discussion it is not an exact science.

For businesses, there is no need to over-analyse. How colour is used, and which colour combinations are selected, will come down to the preference of each individual organisation.

The key points to remember are - colour is available, it is cost-effective and it is proven to attract attention, boost response and drive business growth. Of course, no amount of colour can disguise poor quality data. The most powerful communications will match the impact of colour with precise targeting and personalisation of the message.

“Why do two colours, put one next to the other, sing? Can one really explain this? No.” Even Pablo Picasso was at a loss to explain the impact of colour in his work. Luckily, for modern businesses, such explanations are obsolete. All that matters is whether colour makes communications more effective or not.

Here, results speak for themselves. Colour can help to inform, engage and persuade recipients, serving to transform everyday communications into modern messaging masterpieces that really do sing.

Tips on using colour in communications

- Ensure the text is easy to read. Colour backgrounds or text may look striking, but that carefully crafted copy is wasted if it can't be read.
- Don't go overboard. Too many colours can look confusing and unprofessional.
- Why limit colour to the document inside? The latest technology can print full colour on the envelope for a dynamic first impression.
- Use colour to emphasise key text. Make important messages leap out and stick.
- Keep it consistent. Use a palette of colours across all channels (web, email, print) that are recognisably 'yours'.
- Colour photos or illustrations can be particularly effective and enable accompanying text to be kept simple and readable.



Pitney Bowes Limited
Elizabeth Way, Harlow
Essex CM19 5BD
T: 08444 992 992
F: 08702 415 249

www.pitneybowes.co.uk



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