5-2013

Visual Branding In Graphic Design

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Visual Branding In Graphic Design

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts of Design
in the Department of Art and Design

May 2013

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ABSTRACT

Brands are all around us - no matter where we go, no matter what we do. As consumers, we are bombarded by images of logos and advertising campaigns every day. However, we rarely think about the process by which brands enter our lives. Before any product is ever produced or sold, it must first be branded. Every idea, from initial sketches to patented logos, supports a branding strategy, or the decisions a production team has made about what will drive a consumer to choose their brand over that of their competitors.

One problem small companies face when trying to get a product branded is that they cannot afford to hire agencies that specialize in branding and instead, turn to average graphic designers. Not all designers, even those who create jaw-dropping art, know what market data to look at and how to incorporate business strategy into a branding campaign. Many do not have the training to conduct research, analyze markets, and develop business strategies. Often times, this results in a designer going into the project blindly and hoping that the design is strong enough visually and the budget is large enough to make it work.

This lack of knowledge lies in the fact that there is no single answer to the question, "What is the best way to create a brand?". Each project requires a unique approach specific to the product. So much of the process depends on what has already been done in that particular field and how the target audience has responded before. Without prior knowledge or experience in the creation of a brand, designers must invest valuable, and often unpaid, time doing market-specific research or simply rely on the principles of design in order to meet the client's expectations. A general knowledge base of the elements, or factors, that contribute to the success of a brand is in high demand, but low supply. The lack of research done on visual branding processes and the factors that must be considered leave designers faced with branding challenges, in the dark. The

purpose of this study is to analyze the time spent, relative importance, and order in which

commonly accepted branding factors are used in the creation of a visual brand to see if any

trends can be recognized.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Brands are all around us - no matter where we go, no matter what we do. As consumers, we are bombarded by images of logos and advertising campaigns every day. However, we rarely think about the process by which brands enter our lives. Before any product is ever produced or sold, it must first be branded. Every idea, from initial sketches to patented logos, supports a branding strategy, or the decisions a production team has made about what will drive a consumer to choose their brand over that of their competitors.

The history of branding is very unclear because it is an idea that can be seen in many different forms throughout time. The branding of animals is the most widely known example. For hundreds of years, farmers have used branding in order to mark their livestock (Clifton 2003, 13). Farmers would burn a unique symbol on their animals so that buyers could identify a particular farmer's product and thereby, hope to establish customer loyalty. These marks burned into livestock are where the name "branding" actually comes from, but the concept has its origins elsewhere. Long before that, kings and other rich and powerful people were known to choose specific colors or create coats of arms that they stamped or painted onto their belongings in order to mark their property (Clifton 2003, 15). Branding in this sense is not about marketing a product to be sold, but about creating a unified identity for a group of people, products or ideas.

Today, branding still involves the simple ideas of farmers and kings, but the concepts are much more developed. Graphic Designers are hired by organizations to create visual suites, which may include logos, business cards, letterhead, storefront signage, product packages, advertisements, and other project-specific items. Each piece is an important part of the image the organization wants to communicate about their product or service to the target consumer audience. One common misconception, however, is that brands are only comprised of the

1

product itself. Recent studies have shown that the intangible identity of a brand, created by a designer, accounts for on average, one-third of the brand's total value (Clifton 2003, 2). For example, only 40% of Coca-Cola's net worth of over $70 billion comes from the product itself, leaving $42 billion dollars for business strategies and visual brand identity (Neumeier 2000, 12).

The importance of creating a recognizable brand is often a determining factor in the success or failure of a company. However, branding is a creative process and that makes it difficult to identify one strategy that works for all projects. Designers are hired to create visually appealing work, but clients also want designs that attract and maintain customers. Not all designers, even those who create jaw-dropping art, know what market data to look at and how to incorporate business strategy into a branding campaign. Many designers do not have the training to conduct research, analyze markets, and develop business strategies. Often times, this results in a designer going into the project blindly and hoping that the design is strong enough visually and the budget is large enough to make it work.

This lack of knowledge lies in the fact that there is no single answer to the question, "What is the best way to create a brand?". Different strategies have to be used in almost every situation because it depends so much on what has already been done in that particular field and how the target audience has responded before. The only thing a designer can do to avoid having to create with no prior knowledge of the field and on visual aesthetics only is to spend their own unpaid time researching the very narrow market of the job at hand for each and every client that brings them a branding project. A general knowledge base of the elements, or factors, that contribute to the success of a brand is in high demand, but low supply. The appropriate application of design factors and the lack of research on visual branding, make it difficult for designers to create successful branding campaigns. The purpose of this study is to analyze the time spent, relative

importance, and order in which commonly accepted branding factors are used in the creation of a visual brand to see if any trends can be recognized.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Question

How do ten commonly accepted design factors contribute to the visual branding process of practicing graphic designers?

The job of any graphic designer is to effectively communicate, through visuals, what the client wants the target audience to know. The designer must then use his/her own experience, education, training, and skills to create a visual. Although every designer approaches a problem differently, three design principles are used by all designers; concept, composition, and components (Krause 2004, 10). Designers also consider the use of color, typography, symbolism, and production, even if it is subconsciously (Wheeler 2011, 22). Factors like color and typography are very important in to the creative process, but when a designer is hired to create a brand, the process changes.

Branding can influence value, customer loyalty, return margins, employee retainer and much more. With the average consumer being exposed to 3,500 branding messages every day, one might think branding would be a popular topic of scholarly literature, but in actuality, discussing branding techniques in scholarly form is a very recent development (Post 2005). While much of the literature discusses how decisions are made about things like font families, coloration, or even the creative process, very little has been published to help a designer integrate marketing and design into an organized course of action for a branding campaign.

The most complete source of branding information comes from the few organizations known as branding firms. IDEO is one of the biggest names in this industry because of their superior client list including GE, Bayer, Hyundai, and Sealy (www.ideo.com) and they have published more than 85 books on the topic of branding. This premier firm is made up of a large team of designers, engineers, marketing specialists, industrial designers, manufacturing processors, content specialists, and the list goes on. Here, the task of branding is sub-divided into individual components, which are assigned to specialists. The designer then compiles all the pieces and creates a comprehensive and unified brand. Unfortunately, most graphic designers do not have the luxury of a team of highly qualified experts, like those at IDEO, and so they must do all of the work outside of the traditional knowledge base of graphic design themselves. So although books like Sustainability by Design by Valerie Casey may be useful, they provide little assistance to a first-time branding designer about the process as a whole. Another problem for inexperienced designers is that most of the literature that does exist on branding focuses on specifics such as the business or marketing characteristics of a brand. Organizations often determine budget constraints, the identification of a target audience, product quality, and even ethical decisions that can limit the input that a designer might have.

Although there is a lack of literature on the creation of brands from a designer's perspective, general graphic design literature and marketing research documentation do provide an overlap of information for design professionals. Factors such as composition, color, typography, marks, naming, and concept development should be considered as fundamental to the successful development of a brand.

Composition

Composition is one of the broadest topics that can be included in the literature overlap. Formal composition can be analyzed for a brand element using the same methods that paintings, drawings and sculptures have been critiqued for centuries. Using the elements and principles of design (line, color, shape, unity, balance, scale, contrast and perspective), anything visual can be analyzed in terms of the feelings or messages it sends and its success as a captivating image. As Andrew Hall states in his book Illustration, all illustrations involve "the artistic composition of visual elements together on the two-dimensional picture plane and includes traditions in depicting space, form, tone and light, composition and color". Key to the composition of any design or work of fine art is the correct use format, direction, dominance, and placement of all elements (Hall 2011, 48). Any design professional should already inherently use these compositional skills, so they are often not considered a determining factor when creating a piece. However, without the proper understanding of elements such as balance, unity, and scale, neither artist nor designer can present their work and defend why it is compositionally successful.

Color

Color is all around us and without even knowing it, we process colors as emotions or experiences. When anyone opens their eyes, their mind goes through a sequence of visual perceptions. Although the shape of an object is the first thing processed, color is recognized before the brain even registers the content (Wheeler 2011, 128). When applied to branding, this is why when we see that aqua blue, you immediately know it is Tiffany's or the bold red and white, all you can do is think of Coca-Cola. Color is one of the best ways to make a brand memorable and unique (Wheeler 2011, 128). Having a signature color also helps the brand stretch across more mediums, from packaging to social media (Wheeler 2011, 130). As a

designer, one of the challenges of color is to understand color theory enough to know the emotions tied to each color, and each color scheme. Complementary variations, where the selected colors are opposite of each other on the color wheel, can be very appealing because of the contrast. However, if the hues of these colors are too close in value, the image seems to vibrate and is rather unpleasant (Krause 2004, 217). Color should also be considered from an economic standpoint. The production cost of a full-color image is considerably more than a two-color image. If cost is an issue with the client, a design with only two spot colors might be more appealing to them, simply because of the cost (Krause 2004, 212). Even if money is not a limiting factor, branding pieces, like logos, need to be effective when reproduced in only black and white (Airey 2010, 184).

Typography

Type design is not something that most of the population even notices, much less understands. As a designer, choosing an effective typeface is a huge part of a project's success or failure. Type designers, and even amateurs, have flooded the Internet with new type options. Faced with an ever increasing number of newly created fonts to choose from, designers must understand how type works before they can make an informed decision, especially for branding projects (Wheeler 2011, 132). Considerations include, but are not limited to: serif, sans-serif, size, weight, curves, rhythm, descenders, ascenders, capitalization, leading, line length, kerning, tracking, numerals, symbols, legibility, readability, alignment, and emphasis (Wheeler 2011, Krause 2004). If the type is being used in a logo, it will often be in combination with a graphic image. When mixing type with images or illustrations, they should either be complementary or contrasting, but should always have a clear sense of visual hierarchy and overall balance (Krause 2004, 266). In a brand, the type must be inherently legible and readable because it will be used

for a logo, as well as other applications. It should be recognizable, or distinct enough to be

associated with the brand, even without the logo or mark (Wheeler 2011, 132). The fonts created

for Disney, Yahoo, and Ferrari clearly illustrate this point, even when the colors and fonts are

mixed up, it is still easy to tell which look goes with each company. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1

Marks

Much like color, shapes register so quickly that we don't realize we are even thinking about

them, and yet shape is the first thing identified in the sequence of visual cognition (Wheeler

2011, 52). According to Krause, shapes can be divided into five categories: basic geometric

shapes like squares or triangles, complex geometric shapes which often carry a specific

connotation such as a cross and Christianity, structured free-form shapes made up of abstract

lines, random free-form shapes which often feel organic, and literal free-form shapes like

snowflakes or letterform graphics (Krause 2004, 130). Especially with complex geometric

shapes, historical significance and cultural association of shapes is very important. For example,

a fylfot was once known as a solar cross, often carved into rock. Today, that symbol is

recognized as a swastika and is associated with racism, mass murder, and communism.

Incorporating a horseshoe into a design might be a less obvious example of cultural association.

Most people associate this symbol with good luck, but for the superstitious, if it is turned upside down, all of the good drains out and it becomes a symbol of bad fortune (Lawrence 1898, XV).

Marks can be even further broken down into an icons or symbols. The basic idea behind an icon is to replicate the look of the actual object in a direct way. With symbols, the mark still specifically suggests a single object or idea, but it has no visual relationship to what it represents and therefore may be only understood in a cultural context. Hall cites two good examples of symbols, both as a concept and as a mark. The color green, for instance, has been associated with envy, but has no concrete visual connection to the emotion. Likewise, the shape of a letter, when used as a mark, has a specific sound associated with it, although the root of this relationship is purely learned (Hall 2011, 64).

Different styles of shapes and symbols are best when used for different purposes. For example, the Nike swoosh is very effective because it reduces well to put on watches, zipper pulls, and tags, but it also implies force and motion. In contrast, an abstract or symbolic mark may not be the best option for an Internet-based client like Google because in the digital world, color and size are not as limited (See Figure 2).

Figure 2
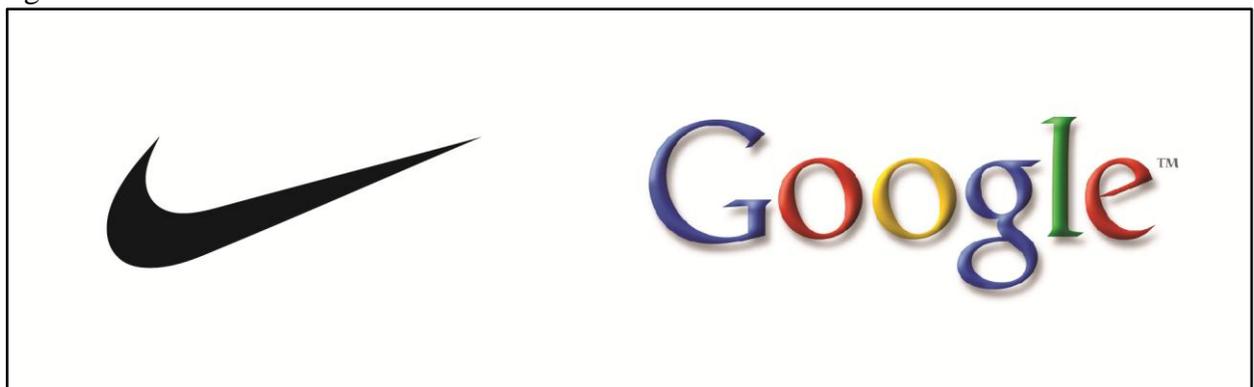
Naming

Although designers do not always have control over the naming of a product or organization, it is a key part of branding. If given the opportunity to make a suggestion, all designers should know the general guidelines to naming. Danny Altman, founder and creative director of A Hundred Monkeys, a celebrated branding studio, said, "Naming is 20% creativity and 80% political" (Wheeler 2011, 122). Inspiration can be found from meanings, values, culture, personal experiences, metaphors, sounds, science, languages, and everything else we come in contact with during the course of our whole lives. The trademark laws, market statistics, target market needs, and brand goals need to be researched and hundreds of options should be presented to a testing committee. Then, names should be reviewed and tested for negative translations, analyzed for cultural connections, and tested on sample audiences to ensure they convey the intended message. They need to be put into contexts like voicemails, headlines, and commercials and visually tested in business cards, billboards, and social media (Wheeler 2011, 123). A good name needs to be easy to say, write, remember, and protect, connect to the product or organization in some way, be distinctive and brief, and timeless (Neumeier 2003, 82).

Concept Development

Visuals may be the end result of any branding campaign, but a successful brand always starts at the exact same place both graphic design and marketing do, at concept development. Concepts are evolving organisms and continually grow as the project progresses. Having a strong concept at the beginning helps to unify the client and the designer. Concepts should be a product of research and are better when developed with open communication between designers and clients. Krause makes note of the difficulty some designers have in separating their personal goals from the desires of the client, which are ultimately more important (Krause 2004, 327). One common

way of ensuring that both parties are on the same page is to write a design brief answering questions like (Stone 2011, 28):

- What is the purpose of this project?

- Why does it need to be done? What is the problem or opportunity?

- Who is it for and why should they care?

- How and when will it be used?

- What needs to be done, by whom, and in what timeline?

- What are the lasting effects of this project? How might it be remembered?

For a branding project, a brief should also include all key products or services, the planned competitive advantage, key competitors, and a value proposition (Wheeler 2011, 121). Once the brief is written, it is up to the designers to take all of the information gathered and translate it into visual elements. This means preparing hundreds of rough sketches that represent a range of possible concepts for the client's approval. This feedback is vital before moving forward with a design.

Even with all the existing literature on the factors that overlap with the advertising or graphic design fields, a crucial part of the branding question is ignored. Understanding the factors and processes of design does not necessarily insure the development of a successful brand. For instance, an in-depth look into naming will not benefit the process after the mark has already been created. By the same token, spending more time selecting colors than developing a strong concept might render the chosen colors meaningless to a client. Although the factors that influence branding have been identified, there is no literature to support the implementation of

these elements. Design professionals should be consulted with regard to the chronological order of the factors, their relative importance, and the time that should be allotted to each factor.

METHODOLOGY

Variables

The purpose of this study was to measure how ten commonly accepted design factors contribute to the visual branding process of practicing designers. To understand how they affect the process, information about the time spent on each factor, the relative importance associated with each factor, and the order in which the factors should be evaluated was collected for each factor listed. The factors were chosen based on both the existing literature pertaining to visual branding and the commonly accepted factors of general graphic design discussed in the literature review. The factors of the visual branding process that have been analyzed are:

- Research (copyright availability, cultural and historic significance, market research, medium analysis)

- Vehicle compatibility

- Color

- Typography

- Shape

- Tagline or slogan

- Creation of touch-points

- Client input

- Sound (Verbal recognition, visual representation)

- Mark, logotype, symbol, icon, or avatar

(Wheeler 2011, Airey 2010, Krause 2004)

With each survey that went out, there was space to include any additional factors designers might think important. No new fields were named, thus giving validity to these chosen factors.

Sample Selection

Approximately 150 practicing design professionals were sent surveys by email. Participants were selected through random Internet searches of firms who claim to do branding work or through their association with the local AIGA chapter. Due to the lack of individual designers contact information listed online, the emails were typically sent to art directors with the hope that they would distribute the survey to their designers. By contacting art directors in several types of industries in a variety of geographic locations, the sample included a range of different ages, educational backgrounds, professional training, gender, and income levels. Graphic designers working in advertising firms, design studios, and as full-time free-lance consultants to large corporations were invited to participate.

Instrumentation

The survey was distributed electronically in order to reach a wider and more diverse pool of participants. Each participant was asked to rank in ascending order, the time they spend on each factor, the level of importance they associate with each factor with, and the order in which they personally focus on each factor in the design process. The responses from all of the participants were totaled for each step and question individually, and then averaged to give a consensus of ranked importance, time invested, and order in the design process. Designers were asked to rank the factors on a scale from one to ten, in which one was most important and ten was insignificant using each number only once. With the creative nature of the questions in mind, the likelihood of a consensus being reached for each and every section was very low. A wide range of variables

were unaccounted for in the use of short survey, but it was decided that this was necessary in order to reach the maximum number of participants. For this reason, the goal of the survey was to spot any trends that were very apparent within the responses collected, rather than identify the most common and best way to create a visual brand. If no trends had presented themselves within the collected responses, then the pool of participants would have been expanded until a consensus could be reached in at least one category.

Example of Survey Table

	Importance	Time Spent on Each Factor	Order in which evaluated
Color			
Shape			
Typography			
Research			

The survey began with a few demographic questions including age, gender, education, geographic location, income, current place of employment, number of designers in that establishment, and a list highlighting their experience with different parts of the industry. The participant was asked to check all projects listed that they had worked on in a professional setting. This list included: logo design, magazine layout, advertisement, visual branding, animation, 3d vectoring, package design, web design, newspaper layout, book layout, book illustration, and textile design.

These demographic questions provided the groundwork to qualify a participant to be included in this research. Not only did they need to be a practicing designer, but they also needed to have experience in branding since the questions were specific to that field. Although this

requirement dropped the number of responses that could be counted and analyzed in the survey, it made the results more accurate. Knowing that only a small percentage of the surveys sent out would be completed and returned, a goal of ten responses from participants with branding experience was set.

RESULTS

Responses

The survey was sent out to over 150 designers over the course of two months. Although there were 16 full responses sent back, six surveys were disregarded, as the participant did not have experience in branding. The remaining ten responses were then analyzed to look for trends specific to the process of creating a visual brand. As expected, there was a lack of uniformity in the answers across the board due to the creative nature of the process. As one designer sent back in the email with their responses, "These answers can change dramatically with each individual project, so I am not sure how much help my answers will be in the context of your research". This response demonstrates that the underlying problem with the teaching of branding cannot be answered due to the inability to standardize the creative process. Despite this finding, there were some trends identified that help to answer the question of how the ten commonly accepted design factors presented contribute to the visual branding process of practicing graphic designers.

Analysis

In interpreting the responses from ten branding professionals, I calculated the mean and mode of each specific category, including, but not limited to: importance of client input, time spent on or thinking about color, or the chronological order that typography is evaluated. While doing this, I noticed that there was rarely one prevailing answer and each category had a very

wide range of values. For instance, when the ten designers were asked to rank shape in chronological order the results were so diverse that there were four modes; 8,6,5, and 4. This means that no more than two of the designers agreed upon its place in the timeline of brand development. In some categories such as the relative importance of the creation of touch-points (mail-outs, brochures, packaging, etc) there was even a 3-point difference between the mean and the mode.

Despite the inconsistency of the data, there were three trends that emerged within each of the categories of research, sound, and typography. Each of these factors had fairly constant answers, both within each individual field and across all three fields (relative importance, time spent, and chronological order). There also were a few trends that began to develop when the mode and mean chart was used to rate the overall significance of each factor to the branding process.

The answers pertaining to research were the most steady among all participants. It was said to be the single most important, third most time consuming, and the first factor considered when creating a brand. This may be due to the fact that research is typically taught to be the start of any design project and that emphasis carries over to the field of branding, which makes it an easier factor to quantify. These results also show that research is an integral part of every branding process, regardless of the nature of the project.

The verbal recognition and representation, or sound, was a factor that showed surprising results in the uniformity of responses. It was ranked very low in all three categories, unlike research, but the average deviation of ranking was quite small. This could indicate that either sound is not a major determining factor or it is a common ending point in the branding process. My personal experience with branding leads me to believe it is more likely that it is just too minor or insignificant when compared with the other factors analyzed. It was included in the top

ten factors because it was present in most of the "how to brand" manuals and textbooks I used in the literature review process and early stages of the research. This shows just how crude and imperfect the few learning and teaching resources on branding are.

Typography was the third factor that showed relatively similar answers across the board. Since type is a key element of visual communication, it was easier to quantify due to its familiarity and use in almost every design project. In the analysis of the means and modes, typography was identified as the sixth most important factor, fifth most time consuming, and sixth factor evaluated chronologically. These results demonstrate that type has a distinct range in reference to branding. It was so "middle of the road" in all three categories that it appeared to be more the "meat and potatoes" of creating a visual brand, rather than the more conceptual factors of research or client input. The consistency of the results indicated that type plays an integral role in the design process of all projects.

Finally, I analyzed the trends between the questions. The data indicated that the means and the modes of all of the factors ranked in each question had a similar margin of error. This finding shows that the questions were clearly understood because the difference between the average and ranking were about the same. The following chart (Figure 3) shows the mean (top number), mode (middle number), and the rank (bottom number) of each factor in each category.

Figure 3

FACTORS:	Importance of each factor (1-10)	Time Spent Working on or Thinking About Each Factor (1-10)	Chronological Order in which each factor is evaluated (1-10)
Research - Copy write availability, cultural and historic significance, market research, medium analysis	3.0 3 1	3.8 5 3	2.6 1 1
Selection of Vehicle – compatibility and pricing	4.6 3 4	6.2 8, 4 8	5.1 2 4
Color	7.1 8 10	6.5 10, 7, 5 9	6.3 10, 6 8
Typography	5.7 10, 7, 2 6	5.5 3 5	5.6 2 6
Shape	6.7 9, 7 9	6.2 6 7	5.7 8, 6, 5, 4 7
Tagline or Slogan	5.9 10, 7, 3 7	6.1 7 6	5.3 10, 7, 3 5
Creation of Touch-points – PR campaigns, mail outs, brochures, packaging, events	4.4 1 3	3.4 1 2	7.3 10 10
Client Input	3.9 3, 2, 1 2	4.8 9, 5, 3, 1 4	4.0 1 2
Sound - Verbal recognition and visual representation	5.9 7 8	7.0 10 10	6.6 9 9
Deciding on Mark, logotype, symbol, icon, or avatar	5.2 5 5	3.3 2 1	4.5 5, 3, 2 3

Conclusion

This experiment provided valuable insight into the roles the ten listed design factors play in the process of visual branding as a whole. Although trends were not manifested in each factor or question, the results did give insight into individual factors like research, sound, and typography. By ranking the design factors, practicing designers made it possible to determine the relative importance of each factor in developing a brand, as well as the relationships the factors have with one another.

As expected, this research did not completely answer the question at hand leaving a need for further research. In order to better understand how the design factors contribute to the process of visual branding more completely, the survey should be distributed to a much larger audience, thus potentially increasing the number of qualified participants and leveling out the data. Since the rate of return of the emailed surveys was so low, another method of delivery might also be needed to increase the responses. Perhaps even scheduling visits to larger design firms and delivering the survey in person would be helpful in gathering more responses. Also, the survey should include more specific instructions that the factors should be ranked according to each other and the numbers for each individual question should only be used once, as several responses had to be disregarded in this study due to repeats of numbers.

More work in the area of determining the most pertinent design factors and the questions that current branding specialists felt were the most important might also help to fully answer the original question. If the survey had simply asked brand specialists to list the ten most important design factors, would their list reflect the factors chosen for this study based on the literature?

Obtaining results would be more difficult if the participants were asked to both create their own list of factors and to rank them for all three categories. This would lead to a decrease in responses and a dramatic increase in variables making the results difficult to analyze.

With each project presenting different problems and challenges, there may not be a single best way to create a visual brand. Given the enormous amounts of data that would have to be collected to analyze each of the factors, the newness of the branding field and how quickly it has developed, and the creative nature of the process, it might be entirely out of a researcher's control. With time, as the field continues to grow, the literature on the subject will follow. With a larger quantity of participants and a longer-term study, it might be possible for future research to provide a more solid base for teaching visual branding. Further understanding of the commonly accepted design factors and how they contribute to the overall process will enable branding to be part of every designer's resume. In turn, more companies could benefit from good branding strategies, which would ultimately impact the everyday lives of consumers.

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