Tech*Topics*

Get the Most Out of Your Color

Copresco publishes *TechTopics* in black and white for good reason. We believe that color would add little value to its overall communications effectiveness.

However, color can play an important role in technical documentation. That's why we added color to our digital printing services.

Senior graphic designer David Koski presents the following guidelines for the proper use of color. Here are his observations.

The Value of Color

It may seem crazy to suggest that one needs to justify the existence of color, but it is important to do so, especially when you're paying for it. Choosing whether to introduce or keep color in a document is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. Since it is so easily incorporated into documents, color can be insidious and invasive. Documents are of some significance and cost, so dare to doubt the need for color.

It's natural for people to want color in documents, so it is surprising that vendors of color copiers and printers have had to go to such great length to convince prospective buyers that they need color. We've all seen the marketing rhetoric that asserts: "studies show that color increases comprehension and improves recall." These promotions usually allude to research but often fail to cite the actual studies.

These claims are repeated, of course, by providers of printing and copying services. While I'm willing to believe that there are valid statistics that show how color can enhance comprehension and recall, studies could also be constructed that would prove the same claims for good use of contrast, typography, photography, illustration and so on; none of which require color. Indeed, when used inappropriately, color can destroy readability, legibility and reader interpretation.

Clearly, vendors of color copiers and printers have a vested interest in promoting the use of color in documents. Therefore we should be skeptical and cautious when examining their claims.

My aim is not to desaturate the colorful world of documents. Rather, I'd like to see color used more appropriately and thoughtfully, not in the arbitrary manner so often seen. With that in mind, let's look at a few questions to ask relating to the use of color in documents.

> **The following questions and answers will help you make decisions about color.**

Is color necessary?

The other night on television I watched a bit of the film *Casablanca*. Beautiful, with every scene perfectly lit like moving portrait photography; not a stitch of color to be seen. Art devoid of color yet full of meaning and emotion is plentiful in the world. Witness the works of M.C. Escher or the engravings of Gustave Doré. Was the Parthenon any grander painted, as some assert it was, in bright colors?

Is there too much color?

Often, less is more. The less frequently color is used, the more impact it has when included. When I see a book with a signature of color plates placed in the middle like an oasis, I pay more attention.

Is color affordable?

Except in the natural world, color always has a price. Toner costs, extra passes through the press, increased download times—it's just built in. There are cases where color seems free. For example, if you're printing three colors on a two-color press, why not throw in a fourth? In this case adding another color might make good sense, but there may still be additional costs involved.

Is superfluous color trying to compensate for pointless blather or lack of content?

If what you have to say is compelling or useful, the reader won't care much about how it's dressed up. Use color to draw attention, not compensate for a lack of meaningful information.

Does color help to segregate editorial and advertising content?

I have always been annoyed by magazines in which it is difficult to tell what is advertising and what is editorial. Advertising may be as garish as it will, but let the story be unsullied and pure.

Can color help document organization?

Color coding can be very effective for distinguishing product lines, regions, subject areas and so on.

Etcetera

Does color carry a mood or message?

Colors carry associations for most people and that fact should be considered as we make decisions about its use. Different colors inspire different meanings for people and for cultures in the course of experience. We should be aware of possible symbolism in color schemes, both unwanted and wanted, and consider that new associations can be built as time goes on. In Western culture, for example, bright primary colors are associated with young children and toys. Nearly opposite is the association of dark, muted colors with maturity and sophistication. Such associations can work for or against a particular message.

Is color driven by distant, detached processes?

If a secretary plants a piece of clip art in a word processing document and that later becomes a prototype for a series of documents, color may be perpetuated as a standard with nothing to justify its use but happenstance. If those documents eventually become destined for a printing press, their RGB origins can cause conversion difficulties. By contrast, a graphics professional will start from scratch and consciously choose colors that are appropriate for both the purpose of the document and the efficiency of its production.

Is color ugly?

It is very possible for color to be ugly. In fact, people are usually frank about colors they don't like, so showing a color piece around will tell you if it's safe. Consensus is important because taste varies widely and it's possible for an individual to be somewhat color-blind without being aware of it.

Does the use of color affect legibility?

Studies show that various color combinations affect legibility. Curious, I made a series of small signs using the colors black, yellow, green, blue, red and orange. I wanted to see if I could duplicate the research findings. With my signs, the highest ranked combination, black on yellow, appeared the most legible. However, from there on it was hit and miss. This suggests that the effective use of color can be hard to pin down.

Does color require a particular approach?

When designing a document with color, one must consider which method costs the least in material, labor and effort, while yielding the desired result. Can you get by with black on white? Black on color? Color on color? How about two colors on white? Process color? Process plus the corporate color? Hexachrome or other high-fidelity methods? Should we use a composite printer? A printing press? HTML? Do we need color management? Is it even possible? I think we've scratched the surface.

Color Unifies and Divides

Color unifies, divides and directs the eye. Color makes food more appetizing. Yet so do aroma, texture and taste. More often than not there are other elements, even other visual elements, that can provide the same impact as color. But as anyone can tell who's tried to extract a lime Popsicle from the freezer on his first try, or who's managed to pass the ball on the fly through the opposition to someone on the same team, color sometimes is the best.

General Information

Our staff will gladly answer your questions about software applications, digital files preparation, paper stocks, binding and our high-speed digital printing services.

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Our Thanks

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