

Electrifying Corporate Design

Corporate Design in e-Communication: the third s.a.x. Conference, 14th of September, 2001

This years s.a.x. conference tackled the implications of electronic documents for corporate design. With a range of speakers from political, academic, and commercial backgrounds, the goal of the conference was to provide a forum both to raise awareness of the issues involved, and to indicate a direction for conceptual, design and technical approaches that can ensure consistency across traditional and new media. From the opening session, on the importance of staying abreast of technological possibilities to regional economic development, to the closing address on the use and abuse of language, the day provided a wealth of practical and philosophical stimulation in a relaxed and refined atmosphere.

For the third year running, s.a.x. Software GmbH, the Karlsruhe based multi-national who provide technological support for the implementation of Corporate Design, have chosen a dignified and secluded resort to mark a distinctive break from day-to-day concerns, and provide a comfortable backdrop for the examination of fundamental matters. With an explicit prohibition on product presentations, and guests and speakers selected from s.a.x.'s advisors, collaborators and customers (representing the specifiers, providers and judges of Corporate Design) the framework was set for a day of critical inspection of trends and possibilities.

Corporate Design Must Be

In the opening session, Dr. Horst Mehrländer, undersecretary at the Ministry of Trade and Commerce in Baden-Württemberg, identified the opportunity to expand corporate design from traditional to new media, such as e-mail and internet, as an important contribution in projecting the personality of an organisation and ensuring a consistent corporate image. This is a contribution that the state of Baden-Württemberg is delighted to be supporting through various programs. Like any design activity, design for electronic communication has to be viewed as an investment rather than a cost, and Dr. Mehrländer pointed out that a carefully constructed corporate image acts as a powerful differentiator. This point was amply reinforced by the presentation by Peter Rosenfeld, managing director of URW++, specialists in electronic



typography. Mr. Rosenfeld surveyed the typefaces used by leading companies listed on German and other stock markets. Among his results he could demonstrate the immediate recognizability of some companies purely from the typeface they use. In fact, almost a quarter of the companies he looked at had gone to the trouble of developing a unique corporate font to express the company's values.

Anticipating the Unknown

Two factors underscore the shift from written to printed, and from printed to printable correspondence: Judicial decisions are starting to regard electronic documents as legally binding; and the coming generation are already more comfortable with displays and keyboards than pen and paper and place great relevance on electronic communication such as e-mail and SMS. It is easy to extrapolate this trend to purely electronic documents. Hans Hoffmann, of s.a.x. Software discussed some of the issues arising from this change in his keynote address.

To implement corporate design consistently, and present data on a variety of screens (from computers to PDAs and mobile phones) as well as on paper, designers have to define the corporate image in ways that are independent of the medium. From this perspective, design becomes an integral part of the document creation process, rather than a final link in the chain, assuring the correct appearance of a completed content. There are a host of challenges for technology too, from uniform colour reproduction across media, to ensuring the availability of the correct typeface, or from the management of tamper-proof or interactive documents, to fail-safe electronic signatures and authorization. All of this has to be made possible using applications that do not estrange users, or present a dead end to the emergence of still newer ways of document creation, use and distribution. As Mr. Hoffmann could show, by being based on the de facto standard applications of Microsoft Office, MasterLayout, from s.a.x. Software, provides just such a solid foundation, whether for personal documents, or documents produced by other software.

More light was cast on the importance of maintaining a coherent customer experience across different types of media by the contributions from two design houses. Jörg Walters, a project manager at Hesse Design, tackled the necessity of corporate image in capturing and keeping the attention of customers in

the fast moving world of electronic communications. Though the priority on the web has to be quick access to usable information, an attractive appearance is also vital. Indeed, Mr. Walters provided figures showing that, on average, successful branding applied consistently across different media, accounts for 56% of the impression of the values of an organisation. This rises to 80% in the case of service providers.

Charly Frech, Chief Innovation Officer at MetaDesign, re-emphasised the need for a user-centred approach to corporate design for electronic communication. While the corporate image needs to be coherent (and MetaDesign offers consultation not just for media, but also for architecture and equipment) he stressed that this user-centrism also means providing guideline tolerances that can accommodate cultural differences. He advocates a toolset that provides easy access to the elements, fonts and templates that everybody needs, whether they are clerical staff or agency designers, to produce documents that reinforce the corporate identity.

Concrete Considerations

To place such approaches in context, Professor Dr. Peter Preißler, of Preißler Partner Management Consultancy, presented a session on the controller as cost-cutter and investment regulator. Against the trend to increase profitability by cutting fixed costs (which usually means redundancies), he encourages finding ways of increasing the return on the resources used by a company. While explaining approaches for identifying weaknesses and making effective investments, he identified toolsets for the efficient management of corporate design, such as s.a.x. MasterLayout, as one way of achieving such improvements in profitability.

Also in the context of greater returns from resources, Michael Buck of Hewlett-Packard, one of the co-sponsors of the conference, showed how the increasing relevance of e-communication is being expressed in HP's product palette. By building virtual machines, capable of running Java-like applications, into their peripheral devices, HP shifts the emphasis in the printer, from printing, to data-processing. Proactive interaction with, and creation of, electronic documents using e-mail or the web, increases the efficiency of the printer as a part of the organization.

The last official talker of the day, Anke Dittmar, leader of sales promotions at German paper-supplier Schneidersöhne, closed the conference by re-positioning paper in a world of electronic-documentation. Rather than just being a background for printed text, she made the case for paper as an emotive element, with tactile, aural and visual qualities that need to be properly considered, both as part of the overall message and as a part of a complete corporate design.

Parting Piece

With the presentations finished, the conference was closed with a champagne reception and Professor Kurt Weidemann reading from his book "Worte ...auf die Waage gelegt ...auf die Schippe genommen" (Words ...taking seriously ...making fun). After a day of thought provoking information and discussion, Professor Weidemann's observations, ranging from the humorous to the ominous, served to remind everyone present that we still need to be aware of the words we use, whatever the medium, and however it is presented.