Taking Up Space

Are your documents "design-challenged"?

Imagine producing a fabulous stage show, then presenting it with the performers facing away from the audience—or, worse, with the lights out. The audience will still hear the lines, the lyrics, the music: but a great deal of potential enjoyment will be lost.

That's what happens when a document is produced with attention to the language, but not to the look.

You work hard on the *words* when you write and/or edit a technical manual, a crucial client proposal, or your marketing brochure/résumé. But unless you take equal care with the document's design—that is, its layout and typography—all your efforts may well go to waste.

Whatever your goal (usually, in business writing, either to inform or persuade) design can help you or hinder you.

How does design contribute to a document's success? By helping you get your message across. Design does this in two subtle but powerful ways.

Design can help you get your reader's attention

Before a reader can get your intended message, she or he must pick your document out of the paper avalanche we're all exposed to every day: that pile of incoming mail, that ever-growing mountain of professional reading, that vast array of volumes on the shelves of the local bookstore.

Unless you have a captive audience—a reader who *must* read what you've produced—your first hurdle is to get your potential reader's attention. In this sense, every document has a persuasive element: we must persuade people, in an increasingly less print-oriented culture, that whatever we've written/edited looks interesting (and easy) to read. Design can help us do that, or it can defeat us at the start. If the thing looks uninviting or intimidating, we may well turn off our potential audience before they absorb any of our painstakingly crafted prose. (And

even if they have to read it, they'll read something else—probably a more reader-friendly document—first.) Ugly documents often get passed over, tossed out, or buried at the bottom of the in-basket.

Design can help you get your message across

Effective design helps readers *grasp* your intended message more quickly and easily, and can even increase the chance that they'll *remember* your message. Subheadings, icons, lists, and text boxes are among the design devices that provide signals telling readers what's important, where to start, where to go next, and what actions you want them to take.

You can put design to work for you

Fortunately, you don't need a degree from an art school or in-depth knowledge of a complicated desktop-publishing program to apply basic design principles to the documents you produce.

These columns explore such design issues as the use of white space and grids, typography do's and don'ts, and visual consistency. We'll demystify the jargon and lay out (pun intended) the elements of design success in clear, easy-to-absorb chunks. We'll refer you to resources for further study. And in case you're still feeling a little lost, we'll explain how to get the most from working with graphic-design professionals.

Together, we'll work toward ensuring that good design supports the words you've worked so hard to create.