design chi

Three keys to creating compelling visual communications

Erik Jacobsen

of Threestory ≙ Studio

In traditional Chinese culture, *ch'i* (or *qi*) is an internal vital energy — the life force that animates all living things.

Compelling visual communication is alive: it grabs attention, engages the reader, and delivers a message that matters. And sticks.

In my years designing communications, I have found three essential keys that successful projects have in common. I'm not usually a fan of acronyms, but this one works:

clarity, humanity, integrity → design chi

Looking at visual communications through this three-part lens will help you create pieces that come alive.

warning!

This discussion assumes that you have
a message worth communicating.

If you don't, these principles won't help —
refine your story and come back.

If you do, carry on...

⚫ clarity

Like a glass of pure water, clarity in communication is refreshing — and a lot easier to swallow.

Cluttered design is often the result of cluttered thinking. Take time to clear up your thinking first, then make your communication consistent with your thinking.

Clarity starts with understanding your purpose. What is it that you really need to communicate? Identify your core message and give it room to breathe.

Instead of including all the information you can think of, try removing as much as you possibly can, until only the essential remains. Throwing the kitchen sink at your reader is unhelpful when a small, clean glass will suffice.

Clarity is essential. Like water.

What is my essential purpose?

How does each element add to,
or distract from, the core message?

Have I removed all non-essentials?

CLARITY TIPS

don't gild the lily

cut the fat

white space is your friend

humanity

Remember that on the other side of every presentation you make, every article you publish, every communication piece you create, is a human being.

As Albert Einstein said:

Concern for the man himself and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavors… Never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations.

Or in the midst of your web pages or brochures. Ignore the humanity in your audience and your communications become cold and forgettable.

The warmth of humanity helps readers open up to receive the message you have for them.

People respond to people.

Who will see this?

Why should they care?

Have I made a real connection?
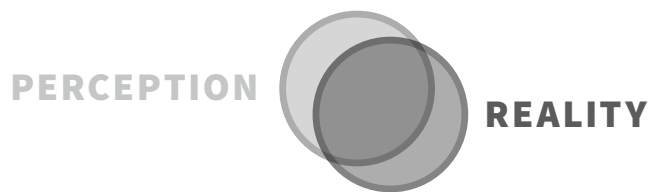
HUMANITY TIPS

put a face on it

be real

tell a story

integrity

Underlying every effective communication is a core of truth. No amount of good design will help if this essential core is missing. Nothing undermines communication more completely than the sense that perception doesn't align with reality.

PERCEPTION   REALITY

So, start with solid data, with good research, with as complete an understanding of your subject as possible. If there are holes, fill them, or be clear about the gaps.

Visual integrity reinforces content integrity. The deliberate and consistent use of design elements — colors, fonts, margins, sizes, line weights, imagery — holds a design together and builds confidence in the content.

If it feels wrong, it probably is.

Is it true?

Does something feel off, wrong, out of place?

Is there logic behind my design decisions?

INTEGRITY TIPS

tell it like it is

pay attention to your gut

be consistent

You may think that two out of three isn't bad. Not so.
All are essential. If you miss a piece, you're in trouble.

~~CLARITY~~ → CONFUSING

If communications have integrity and make a human connection, but lack clarity, they will be confusing. Your message will be lost. Focus on what's essential, then clear away the clutter to bring clarity back.

~~HUMANITY~~ → COLD

Clear communications that are grounded in truth, but fail to appeal to my humanity, are cold and forgettable. Think about why this would matter to your audience, then take the time to make a real connection.
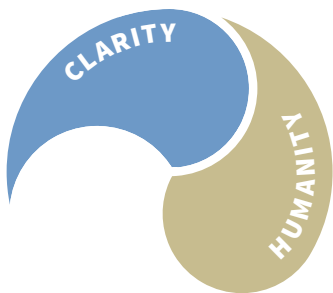
~~INTEGRITY~~ → CRIMINAL

Communications that speak clearly and strike a human chord, but lack integrity, are certainly misleading, probably unethical, and perhaps criminal. This is what gives marketing a bad name. Don't do it.

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Use the worksheet on the following page to examine your communication efforts through the lens of design chi.

With clarity, humanity, and integrity, you have the potential to create truly compelling visual communications.

That's what we do every day at Threestory Studio.
Email us today with your design challenges.

DESIGN CHI
Implementing the three keys to compelling visual communications

clarity

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Erik Jacobsen is the founder and chief creative mind of Threestory Studio, an information design shop in Silicon Valley.

He works with scientists, academics, non-profits and businesses around the world to bring clarity to complex ideas through the design of visual communications.

Erik is also a seeker of truth, father, writer, photographer, soccer coach, teacher and musician — all of which inform his work in information design.

He likes feedback and would love to hear from you:

✉ erik@threestory.com   www.threestory.com   🐦 @threestory