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How to make sure your graphics shine and earn their place without being distracting?

In the first part of this two-part series on design, Cammy Bean introduced the concept of “clicky-click bling-bling.” Download part one here.

Now that we’ve recognized the signs of content with flash and no substance, we’re ready to create good design that will engage users.

Good design doesn’t mean over accessorizing. Part two explores how to add graphics that enhance, not distract from the learning experience; incorporate interactive elements that are useful; and find that “inner bling.”
6 tips for good graphical design So how to make sure your graphics shine and earn their place without being distracting?

Here are six things you can do:

1. Think about the purpose

When designing your e-learning, think about the purpose of the graphics, as well as the purpose of your whole screen.

For example, is the aim of your visuals to grab attention? Or perhaps you want to use the visuals to tip a common idea on its head by using a recognizable image and altering it in some way or using it out of context.

Perhaps you want to use the visuals to tell a story, with text or without.

Tell a story with visuals. Taken from Kineo's Climate Change project.

Ask yourself:

“Where’s the first place the learner’s eye should fall on screen?”

What’s the priority of the content? Should the learner explore the visuals in a certain order, or freely? All of these should help your graphics brief and ensure your graphics support your objectives.
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2. Keep it relevant

Screen estate is precious and you should use it wisely. Using visuals (or text for that matter) that are irrelevant or surplus to meeting an objective can actually do more harm than good when it comes to learning.

All that information will be fighting for a place in the learner’s memory and the brain has to try to make sense of it all. Be nice to brain cells - keep it relevant and to the point and there’s more chance of it being remembered.

3. Work with the text: It’s a visual asset, too

People often think of text and graphics as two separate entities, yet text is also a visual asset. Aim to design your screens so the text and graphics communicate the messages together. We don’t mean that they need to replicate each other’s messages – that would be overload – but rather than having a block of text on one side, and the image on the other, join them up visually to help learners make the connections without having to look back and forth across the screen.

Think magazines – don’t be scared to break your text into chunks and put the relevant parts with images or areas of an image, using headlines to bring out the key points. Equally, if you’re using interactive graphics, have the text appear as near to the clickable area as possible.

4. Remember ‘Pictures say a thousand words’

If you had to read the emergency evacuation procedures on a plane, do you think you would? Probably not, but the information graphics used get the points across much more effectively and to an international audience – one to bear in mind if you’ve got translation issues.

Sometimes, visuals are the best way to explain an idea or concept, particularly complicated ones, and they can communicate it much more efficiently than text. For example, how else would you effectively show the workings of a volcano, the inside of a car engine, correct working posture, or the location of UK Government offices around the world? Visuals are also great for statistical and diagrammatical information, but don’t feel you have to use a ‘standard’ bar or pie chart. The Guardian makes great use of scale to show relevant percentages or figures with different sized circles.
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5. Be unreal

Depending on the overall style of your course, thinking beyond the bounds of visual realism can help communicate ideas. To aide learning, can you simplify the complicated by using line drawings to show the inside of a machine or structure of a building? Why not consider using scale (even if it’s unrealistic) to emphasize key points and draw the eye to the most important parts of a screen? Unrealistic and exaggerated images can burn into the memory better than any wallpaper could.

Can you use visual metaphors to communicate a complex or sensitive point, or to grab attention?

6. Create memory aids

Finally, help learners to recognize, categorize and recall information by using visual memory aides. These could be color schemes, icons, or key images used in a consistent way – perhaps to top and tail a chunk of learning.

Use these six tips to help you make sure there is substance beneath that bling and that the visual design adds to the learner experience through visuals that enhance the instruction, rather than seductive details that distract.
Creating effective interactivity...

So what about the clicky part? Interactive, when done right, can certainly add to the experience. When done wrong, it distracts or otherwise adds no value. So how can you make sure the interactive components of your elearning adds that value?

As with graphics, the same tips above can apply including being sure to think about its purpose and make it relevant.

In this example, we use interactivity to paint the picture. Here the learner drags the slider bar to see explore the effects of bad diet and lack of exercise on the body over a lifetime. Interactivity plus graphics = powerful impact!

Exploratory graphics taken from Kineo’s Great Ormond Street Charity Project. Teenage learners can see the affects of not exercising on different aspects of the body over time.
Creating effective interactivity...

In a program we created for Nikon on understanding how cameras work, we created an effective interactive piece to explain how the aperture on a camera works.

Through simply dragging the aperture settings through the numbers on the dial, you can see how the aperture opening changes and how the foreground and background images shift in focus. Nikon said this was the clearest example of aperture they’d ever seen. Yes, it had a little clicking to it – but it was relevant clicking that enhanced the instruction and helped the learner make real connections.
Creating effective interactivity

This example from a course on tides creating for the Royal Yachting Association requires the learner to interact with the graphic – for what is, in real life, a graphical task. This exercise provides the opportunity for some simulated practice that they can take with them into real-world tide tables and practice.
Great elearning designs have “inner bling” – they shine from the inside. They help the learner walk away from the program, remembering what mattered and not just the shiny wrapper.

Here are four top design tips to help you ensure you’ve got inner bling working for you first:

1. **Start with the end in mind**

   As you initiate your design process, ask
   
   “Does the program focus on what you want the learner to be able to DO?”

   Focus on what the learner needs to be able to do at the end of the day.

   Clark Quinn admonishes,
   
   “If you’re not starting with what they need to be able to *do*, just *don’t*.”

   Cathy Moore’s action mapping approach provides a quick, visual way to design projects to help you
   
   “change what people do, not just what they know.”

   [Read more about action mapping in our elearning top tips.](#)

   Use an approach like action mapping to keep your message lean, concise and focused on the outcome. Design activities that mirror what learners will need to do in the real world—this creates for stickier more contextual learning that is easier for learners to recall once they’re on the job.
Make your designs shine from the inside

2. Challenge the learner

Clark and Mayer urge us to

“Make a difference between emotional interest and cognitive interest.”

Remember,

“Attempts to force excitement do not guarantee that students will work hard to understand the presentation. In contrast, cognitive interest occurs when a learner is able to mentally construct a model that makes sense. As a result of attaining understanding, the learner feels a sense of enjoyment.”

When learners feel challenged and then work through the challenge, they feel satisfied—that’s the best indicator of how well a course has done its job.

Write meaningful questions. If you are going to do a casual game, make sure the questions are challenging and realistic. Provide context and include it with an overall program of instruction, as opposed to a stand-alone game.
Make your designs shine from the inside

3. Make mistakes

We learn our lessons well after we’ve messed it up the first few times. In your designs, if you can home in on the mistakes, misperceptions and performance gaps that cause 80% of the issues for your target audience, you’ve got the fodder for creating elearning that adds real value.

The most common way to fold mistakes into your elearning is in case studies and scenarios

Learn more about folding mistakes into your designs.

4. Use stories

Stories are easy to remember, instructive, and provide a shorthand to experience (if you can’t learn from your own mistakes, at least you can learn from someone else’s!)

More on working stories into your design here:

More on working stories into your design here.

Above all, provide bling with substance. Make sure your elearning shines with its own “inner bling”. Only then should you try and make it shiny on the outside.

Join us on LinkedIn in the eLearning Professionals Group to continue the conversation on Clicky-Clicky Bling-Bling. We’d love to hear how you make sure your programs shine from the inside.
References...


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