toward global color

No longer merely a decorative accent, color conveys an important design message all its own.

by Jill Pilaroscia

People have a basic need for variety and change. Even the effect of color on psychological well-being is not static. In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell postulates that ideas, behavior, messages, and products coalesce into an energetic mass that forms a trend. He likens this process to outbreaks of infectious disease.

Color Marketing Group (CMG), a not-for-profit international association of 1,500 color designers, promotes the exchange of information about the use of color in marketing goods and services. CMG interprets and forecasts color directions for all industries. The organization’s recent forecast, which extends into 2007, predicts cleaner, clearer, and brighter colors. In other words, colors with a direct message. According to CMG, the influence of Latin cultures will bring warm and hot salsa hues—reds, oranges, yellows—to our designs. Greens, associated with the environment, and blues and turquoise, the backbone of spa imagery, are still vital in these hectic, high-speed times. Most colors of the palette are represented in CMG’s recommendations. So what will get our attention?

Which specific colors are trendy is less important than how people are combining color and are communicating with color. Human beings can only process a limited amount of sensory information at any given moment. In order for an object to be visually noticed, it must be clearly visible and excite the retina. Color plays a key role in attracting our attention. Fresh color combinations intrigue the eye: a Paul Smith scarf that combines pink with rust and brown stripes; the recent Barneys New York catalog emphasizing golds, melons, maroons, taupe, and apricot; and do the many accessories in Williams-Sonoma’s product line.
But the more interesting question may be, how are these trends going to be put to practical use in other ways? Color can become a universal language between cultures. It used to be that the verbal or written word alone would suffice in many businesses, since relationships were often based on trust and personal connection. With globalization, this has changed. Color can help bridge distance and cultural differences.

For example, an international fish wholesaler in San Francisco used to sell sushi-grade tuna globally without having its clients preview the product. Then new entrepreneurs entered the marketplace and the increased competition (and some of their practices) made it difficult to sell high-quality fish using adjectives alone.

A color tool, the 'Tuna Color Guide,' was developed for the wholesaler: it represents the qualities and grades of fish using 21 shades of red. Now when these high-stakes deals are made, buyer and wholesaler are both viewing the same hand-held fish chart and reading off the coded numbers. The ability of color to clarify communication in this specific marketplace can be applied elsewhere.

Pantone, a world-renowned provider of color systems and the leader in technology for accurate communication for color, has developed licensing agreements with Invista, Allsteel, and the Durkan and Karastan carpet companies. These manufacturers identify their products with color references from the Pantone for Architecture and Interiors System, allowing a product or interior designer to customize or match fabrics, yarns, or entire products. They can refer to specific visual tools instead of relying on verbal descriptions, as they did in the past. Costly mistakes can be avoided.

Real estate developers have begun to rely more on color to differentiate properties to enhance sales or leasing. The industry focuses on color because the return is quantifiable—a small investment can yield a quick return. Properties with new colors can create relationships between neighborhoods, buildings, and retail establishments, and as a result they sell and lease more quickly than big beige boxes. The trend toward using color to give similar buildings individual identities is spreading to all kinds of development markets across the country. As branding evolves, many companies are applying color to attract the attention of target audiences. They do this not only with traditional collateral, direct mail, and advertising, but also with buildings, interior design, vehicles, and product placement.

Recently, DHL replaced its silver and maroon scheme with bright yellow and vibrant red to differentiate itself from competing UPS signature brown trucks and uniforms and Fed Ex's familiar combination of orange, purple, and white. The new color scheme may not be calming, but it is memorable.

Some companies are doing more than using color in their branding efforts; they use it in their name and then some! When RedEnvelope relocated its corporate offices in San Francisco, the gift retailer asked Huntsman Architectural Group and Colour Studio to be sure its brand color was present, but then pushed the envelope (of course!) further by bringing in Feng Shui consultant Space Sacred. When it is not practical to adjust a structure physically to align with Feng Shui principles, careful use of color can create harmony. Feng Shui associates each of the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) with a specific color. For example, RedEnvelope's brand color, red, is associated with fire. This is appropriate because red is primal, dynamic, and expansive. Not surprisingly, the company chose red for its public spaces. Sixteen other colors, associated with the other elements, create balance in the workplace.

Companies engaged in a wide variety of business practices are jumping on the color bandwagon. Color is not longer just a decorating accent. It can be a powerful tool to shape experience. Color is taking its rightful place in our dynamic global design practices.

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