

WHITE PAPER

How to Build a Visual Brand Language For Your Products

by **Kurt Rampton**



Characterized by their classic, streamlined form and wrapping silver logo band, the KitchenAid appliances demonstrate an effective and consistent visual brand language.

Image Courtesy of KitchenAid / Whirlpool

Ask yourself these questions:

- 1. Do the look and feel of your products communicate what's best about your brand?**
- 2. Do your products look like they all share the same brand?**
- 3. Would I recognize the brand of your products if I took the logos off?**

If you answered yes to all three, then your products have a "Visual Brand Language." If you didn't, well...pay attention.

A Visual Brand Language, or VBL, is a framework for product design used to create a cohesive product family. With an effective and consistent VBL, the look and feel of your products will communicate what's great about your brand in the most direct way possible. Your customers will recognize your products. Your design team will also be able to innovate more efficiently, because they'll be armed with a set of Signature Design Elements and Principles—tools to design the next product for your brand (more on that below).

The foundation of any VBL is the brand. An effective visual language uses form, material, color, texture, product behavior, and even light and sound. When applied consistently across a branded product line, the effect is a unified family of products that continually delivers on your brand promise. Are your products practical, rugged, robust? Refined, elegant, and sophisticated? More important, do they look and feel that way?

Nine Straightforward Steps for Creating a VBL for Your Brand

Before you can express your brand in the design of your products, you have to get your brand's house in order. First, articulate why the brand exists and the customers it serves. Map out a position that doesn't imitate your competitors, but instead stands out distinctively among them.

1. Understand Your Brand (and the Other Guy's)

A strong and consistent VBL is only as good as the brand it represents, so work with your marketing team to revisit the core components of your brand. There are several critical elements that define a strong brand. Here are a few of the most important for developing your VBL, paraphrased from **Our Definition of Brand and Why** by Jamey Boiter:

- a. **Brand Pillars:** 3-4 compelling truths about the brand, attributes that communicate your brand's core beliefs, culture, and values.
- b. **Brand Personality:** If your brand had a voice, what would it sound like? What would it be like to hang out with your brand, maybe have a beer?
- c. **Brand Positioning:** How you strategically differentiate your brand's image from your competitors for a particular target audience.
- d. **Brand Identity:** Your name, logo / mark and associated system.

If you've already done the work to build a strong brand, then you are on the right track. If you want to read more about the fundamentals of a good brand, check out Jamey's [blog](#).

Pay attention to your competitors' brand positions, then take note of what makes your voice unique and distinctive within your category. It's great to study the competitors' products and literature, but even more important to hear it from the users themselves. Use "Voice of Customer" research to listen to customers describe the qualities of your brand, and the brands with which you compete.

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2. Get to Know Your End User or Customer

Do you know who uses your products? Really know them? Gather the research you have on your end users and plan additional research to fill in the gaps if needed. With quantitative research, you can describe your users in terms of age, gender, geography, cultural background, and income. With research like user sessions and user shadowing, you can get to know them while they are shopping for and using your product. For more ideas to learn about your end users, check out Monty's blog "[10 Paths to Empathy with Your End User](#)".

When we are designing a VBL for our clients at BOLTGROUP, we often develop this end-user research into 3-4 "personas," or representative characters that embody the various user types. Each persona is fleshed out with a list of aspirations, lifestyle, favorite activities, and brands. Personas are one of several tools we use to acquaint our creative team with the end users of the products. By putting our designers inside the heads of the users, they are ready to develop a visual language users will love.

3. Identify the Key Attributes You Want Your Products to Communicate

Now you know who you are (your brand) and who you are talking to (your end users). So what do you want to say? This is your chance to build an emotional connection with your end users. Starting from the Brand Pillars and other brand attributes from Step 1, craft a list of attributes that describe what is great about your products and what they mean to your end users. Add to the list words or phrases that capture the tone, style, and attitude of the products, inspired by the Brand Personality. It will be the design team's job to carve these VBL Attributes into a three-dimensional, multi-sensory visual language.

4. Create Your Signature Design Elements and Design Principles

Armed with a well-defined brand, a laser focus on your end user, and a bold statement ready to declare to the marketplace, it's time for your creative team to develop the Signature Design Elements. These are the forms, shapes, features, and treatments that can be applied across your product line to maintain a consistent visual language. (Think of the clear bubble window on the sole of Nike Air shoes.) Starting with form, consider the overall silhouette and "stance" of your products. Then design the common details, material transitions, vents, and whatever elements are common to your product category.

Depending on the type of products you make, you may want to design the following elements of your Visual Brand Language:

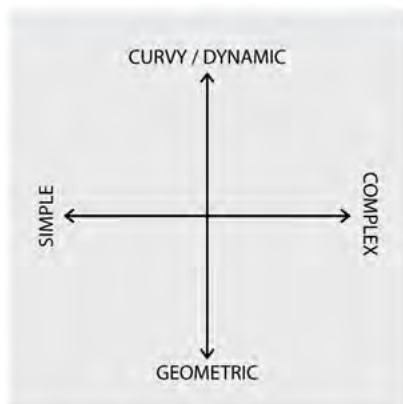
- Industrial design of overall form and/or silhouette
- User interface points (handles, buttons, controls, touchpoints)
- Graphical User Interface (UI) design elements
- Logo and brand treatments
- Color palette
- Sound, light, texture, material
- Material transitions, reveals, fasteners
- The sound and feel of moving or removable parts

The Signature Design Elements are the visible, audible, or tangible aspects of your design language. It is also important to consider the less tangible qualities that will define your user's product experience. These are your Design Principles: intangible qualities that result in a positive user experience and make your products unique (think safe, innovative, easy to use). The Design Principles should also consider the life cycle of your products, from cradle to grave.

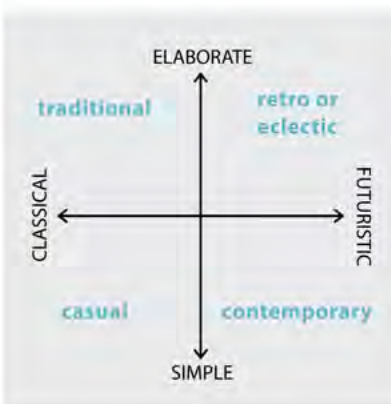
Nike Air Max with air window in the sole



SAMPLE VBL MATRICES



CONSUMER PRODUCTS



HOME APPLIANCES



SPORTS WEARABLES
(WITH BRAND AND COMPETITORS PLOTTED)

5. Create a VBL Matrix

In your Brand Positioning from Step 1, you should have already mapped out the position of your brand relative to the other brands in your category. You may even have a Brand Positioning Matrix. If so, you have a head start on creating your Visual Brand Language Matrix, used to map the design of your products relative to the competition. A VBL Matrix is a tool to guide creative teams developing a Visual Brand Language. The right matrix for your product depends on your category, but they generally include at least two axes, each representing a spectrum of visual design characteristics. You can then plot your competitors' products on the matrix, and identify a target look for your product. Make sure your VBL Matrix aligns with your Brand Positioning Matrix to ensure fidelity to your brand.

In the image above we have a few examples for different product categories. In the third example, "Sports Wearables," the competitor brands are plotted on a matrix based on where they stand on the spectrum between "Recreational" to "Expert" (x-axis), as well as on the spectrum of "Sporty / Ergonomic" to "Urban / Fashion" (y-axis).

Plotting the competition allows you to identify gaps in the aesthetic marketplace, and opportunities to make your products stand out and look unique.

6. Develop a Flagship Product Or Product Line to Embody Your VBL

As your VBL starts to take shape, begin to incorporate the new design elements into an industrial design for your flagship product or product line. This will put your visual language to the test, giving insight to how the Signature Design Elements work in real-world applications. It also gives your designers something concrete to work on and develop. If your products are typically offered at multiple price points (e.g. "Good, Better, Best"), go ahead and develop each version of the flagship product in order to fully explore how your VBL adapts to each price point. As the product design and VBL elements develop side by side, this new product (or products) will become the poster child for your new design language.

7. Craft a Design Standards Document

Ultimately your VBL should be captured in a Design Standards Document—a multi-media presentation describing your new VBL—complete with VBL Attributes, Signature Design Elements, and Design Principles. The document should include guidelines, examples, and inspiration. This is the tool you will use to immerse your marketing, design, manufacturing, and sales teams in the visual language, personality, and feel of your products. The Design Standards Document is a companion to your Brand Standards Document. Armed with well-crafted Brand and Design Standards Documents, your design teams will create inspired products that communicate your brand's message more effectively and efficiently.



BMW 3 Series, 1995 and 2014

8. Immerse Your Creative Teams in the New VBL

A Visual Brand Language is a language, and your design team needs to be fluent. When it's time to introduce the team to the new VBL, practice using the new vocabulary with a brainstorm session or design charrette. Provide bound copies of the Design Standards (with quick reference tabs) to every team member. Surround your design team with photos, renderings, video, and appearance models of products that embody the new VBL as they are developed. And become an advocate for your new VBL inside your business, aligning the vision of the entire product line into a unified, unique visual presence.

Building a Visual Brand Language isn't easy. However, with a solid and consistent VBL, the look and feel of your products will instantly communicate what's distinctive and great about your brand. Your customers will recognize your products and you will recognize the impact of that in your sales performance.

9. Nurture Your VBL to Grow and Evolve

The design of a 2015 BMW 3 Series has evolved significantly since 1995. The original clean-lined, somewhat boxy cars have become more streamlined, with sculpted curves and ridges. But it doesn't take a design historian to recognize common design elements, like the sporty stance and the two iconic, rounded kidney shaped grilles. This consistency helps customers instantly recognize a BMW, whether it's brand new or 20 years old.

It is important to view the VBL as a living, breathing document, just like your brand. It should be updated regularly as new design elements are developed and the category evolves. Your VBL is your brand's visual heritage. When it comes time to refresh your VBL in future years, it will be important to build on the foundation and equity that you have developed by incorporating and evolving the most enduring signature elements into new designs. ■



MEET KURT

Kurt Rampton has been with BOLTGROUP since 2010 as a senior designer on the Product Innovation team. He was born to design and flourishes in a career that combines art and fashion with physics and geometry. He's a recipient of the IDSA Student Merit Award during his tenure at Georgia Tech.