

WHITE PAPER

How To Audit The Visual And Verbal Experience Of Your Brand

by **Peyton Green**



Underwater Image Courtesy of PVH/SpeedoUSA

Think about all the moments when people take in your brand with their eyes and ears. Online, in store, in a showroom, or through personal interaction. Visual. Verbal. Now ask yourself, are these moments truly supporting your brand's core values? Is your brand truly reflecting what it is you set out to accomplish? With so many elements at play, the formula must be balanced to achieve the right experience.

The key to a successful brand experience is an internal company awareness of its external image and voice. Consistently auditing your brand's experience will ensure that it continues to create meaning, value, and preference in your customer's mind.

Brand experience defined: The intentional design of moments that physically, visually, and verbally integrate into people's

lives and their lifestyle, expressing the purpose, promise, and pillars of the brand, and triggering an *emotional response*.

So How Do We Keep These Moments True, Fresh, and Authentic?

The Visual.

Photography. We've all heard that "A picture is worth a thousand words." Your brand's visual experience is often a customer's first impression and is vital to getting its message across. Photography can speak volumes, setting the tone and communicating the brand's personality, all without uttering a word. It's a good practice to align your visuals for consistent messaging. Schedule audits on an annual basis to reassess the art direction and styling across

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web, print collateral, social media, and packaging. As your product offerings evolve, so should your visual experience. Before introducing a new line of products or launching a new initiative, step back and make sure your visual aligns with your physical to effect an emotional bond with the brand.

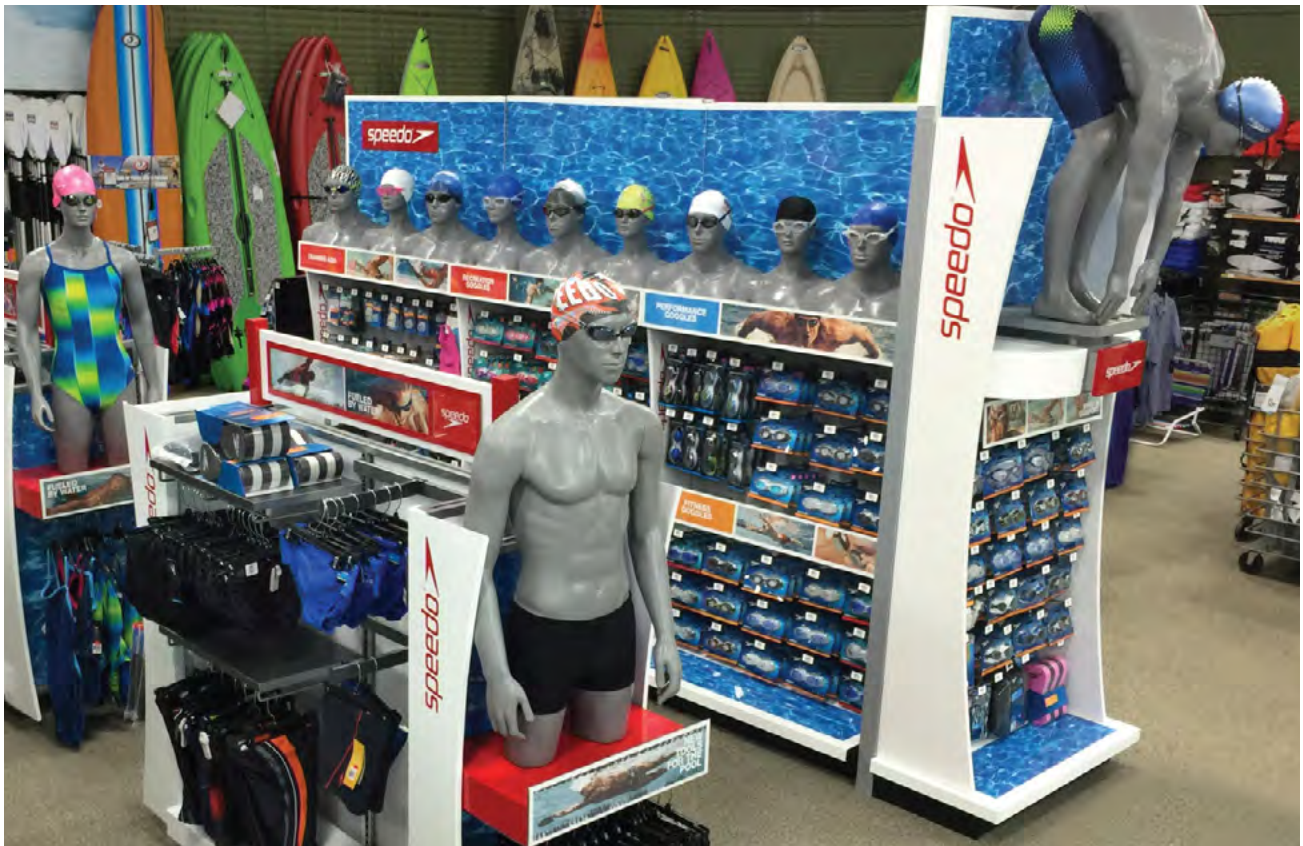
Typography. No matter how good your photography, at some point you have to speak up. Font choice, arrangement of type, and messaging should all reflect on the tone and personality of the brand—confident, playful, serious, tongue-in-cheek, etc. Take a look at all media outlets. Are the fonts consistently applied? That repetition becomes recognizable to consumers, making it easy for them to identify, understand, and relate to the brand. Have you kept the font selections to a minimum? Remember, less is more. Too many fonts, weights, and styles risk overpowering the message. It's not a restaurant menu, it's your brand. A lot can be said with two well-paired font families. Setting a clear hierarchy will keep your customer engaged.

Color. While photography and type are important, studies have proven that color increases brand recognition by up

to 80%.^[1] We digest color before anything else. It can make us happy, sad, calm, anxious, hungry, and so much more. So it is vital to get it right. Your color palette should align across your brand, from the accents in photography to visual graphics and communication to packaging. If your palette is tight and limited, are you reproducing the color accurately every time? Think about Tiffany's and how effectively they market the brand with just one strong color. They do this by making sure that color is exactly right no matter the medium or execution. This builds trust in the brand, which results in loyalty and recognition.

So What Happens When It All Comes Together?

One brand that does a great job with the visual experience is MINI. Everything from the photography to the messaging supports the overall eccentric, playful, yet "don't-mess-with-me" brand personality. Color is ever changing, but it sticks to a bright, rich palette, echoing individuality. Product photography is poised, but playfully aggressive, supporting the bulldog stance that's so evident in the cars themselves. Proof that consistency in message doesn't have to mean the same thing over and over.



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BOLTGROUP teamed up with the Phillips-Van Heusen marketing team a short while ago to create and expand a year-round destination retail experience for their new Speed Fit shop. Aquatic fitness is more popular than ever, but how do you demonstrate that in-store visually? We looked at the physical forms, the colors, and the materials to see how they could all come together to create a truly show-stopping retail experience that said performance, fitness, and recreation all at the same time. Through fluid, rolling fixture designs, active displays, and shimmering blue graphics, a consumer encounters the brand and can't wait to get in the water!

The Verbal.

With the visual solidly defined, we now ask if the brand voice sounds like it fits? A brand's tone of voice is one of the cornerstones to brand building. People want to feel engaged with a personality, not just a big brand. Think about how you address your customer base in social media, on the web, in store, or in collateral. What are you really saying? Consistency in your voice strengthens credibility. Take a look at all aspects of your communications and make sure your customers are hearing the true values of your brand. Is your brand authoritative, powerful, friendly, approachable, etc?

Social. In today's current market, having an active voice on social media is crucial, but you have to do it right. You want to be certain that the brand is being represented properly in everything you post, publish, or say online. Your response to current events on Twitter, the way you promote a product launch or a sale on Instagram, or even the way you word a Facebook post needs to follow the personality of the brand. Are you playful, thoughtful, serious, or an expert in your field? Sticking close to your personality will keep your audience engaged and establish trust. With multiple social media outlets it's easy to stray off course. Establish someone in your organization to step back and review the big picture on a regular basis.

Retail. Another key place your voice is heard is in retail. It's how you greet customers, make a sale, or provide product information. If your brand has a retail presence, make sure the sales team meets on a regular basis to confirm that they're voicing the brand consistently. How many times have you lost interest in a store visit because of a bad employee interaction? Apple is a good example of getting retail right. With a brand personality that's approachable, yet confident, their employees do a stellar job of portraying this tone in stores. They happily greet customers with confidence, and their expertise in their field is evident from the moment you walk into the store.

Collateral. Although print is less of a player these days, your collateral materials are still an important place to audit your brand—from business cards to brochures to internal documents. In each case your messaging should align with the greater purpose of the brand. Regroup annually to confirm that taglines and messaging are still on brand. If you customers didn't see your logo, would they still get a sense of what your brand is all about?

What Are Some Benefits of a Brand's Voice Being Heard?

Look at Southwest Airlines. The brand's LUV campaign is friendly, approachable, and rooted in their commitment to customer service. Everything from their advertising to their onboard safety presentations reflects this. If you've ever flown Southwest, you quickly learn that most every employee has a sense of humor. They're lighthearted and friendly when addressing customers. The collateral is approachable and customer centered. It makes you smile and creates customer loyalty by standing out among a fleet of impersonal airline brands. Southwest even has a social campaign #liveat35 where artists perform impromptu concerts at 35,000 feet to the delight of their passengers! Who wouldn't like a little live music on a cramped flight across the country?





Sometimes an alternative personality is needed. A few years ago BOLTGROUP developed the Kobalt tool brand. Here's a brand that needed to stand up against seasoned veterans like Craftsman and Stanley, but had to separate itself from that competition. The positioning was focused on three groups—professional mechanic, professional non-mechanic, and DIYer. The brand needed a voice that was confident, even a bit brash, but still approachable enough to be believed on the shelf in a leading home improvement store. (A pro quality tool, available at retail.) A keen focus on precision, durability, reliability, and a commitment to excellence kept the brand's verbal experience aligned with its visual experience. As a result, a 2015 Y&R study found Kobalt to be one of the 10 most desired brands among dads in the U.S.

So remember, no matter how large or small your company, start setting regular audits on the visual and verbal experience of your brand. Put it all out on the table in one place. It's a commitment to your brand and to your customer, one from which everyone will benefit. The results will build your brand into an unforgettable experience that will remain relevant in people's lives and lifestyle for years to come. ■

1. Source: Loyola University Maryland study.



MEET PEYTON

Toting a BFA in Graphic Design from James Madison University, Peyton Green joined BOLTGROUP in November 2010, bringing over 10 years of print and identity design experience. He provides successful, creative solutions across several forms of media—from retail space design to packaging design—and innovates experiences through thoughtful brand execution and strategy.