



Collateral Damage

By Gretchen Johnson

gretchen@wordplaymarcom.com

Imagine going to a surgeon who is wearing two different colored socks. Or, you enter a retail store and find the shelves dirty and poorly stocked. Do you wonder about the quality of work you will receive? How you dress your company can have the same positive or negative affect on your prospects, too.

Business cards, stationery, brochures, sales sheets and other printed company materials — often referred to as “collateral” — are the most common method by which an organization delivers its brand message. Though not printed, your web site and other electronic materials also fall into this category.

When used consistently, business collateral is an opportunity to positively reflect the products or services you offer. But when used inconsistently, or when these materials contain errors, they undermine the efforts of the organization to deliver on its brand promise. Just as your surgeon’s miss-matched socks might make you nervous, a company’s inconsistent written and visual communications subtly suggest poor quality, too

Of course the best way to maintain consistency of your corporate messaging is to establish it from the start. Small companies sometimes balk at the cost of developing a professional logo, creating a brochure and having professional stationery printed. But there is no faster way to say, “We’re mean business” than through printed materials. They’re tangible and – when they they’re consistent and professionally done – they can make a great first impression. But even when companies do invest in developing a professional image from the outset, most brands evolve over time as the company grows. Many companies that are more than a few years old, for example, have a hodgepodge of stationery with various fonts, colors and paper stocks. Some may even have multiple versions of their logo.

The online creative services consultancy Creative Business defines a communications audit as, “The process of reviewing a client’s current materials in order to define criteria on which to base future efforts.” And they estimate that a thorough examination of these materials can cost thousands of dollars. But that’s not always practical for small or even mid-sized companies on tight budgets – not to mention non-profits. So what can you do in-house? Plenty. By simply reviewing your materials and establishing a plan for consolidating and reissuing mismatched materials, you can strengthen your corporate image and give your visual brand the consistency it requires.

We don’t expect your internal staff to provide the same level of creative assessment that an experienced marketing, branding and design team can when it comes to factors such as brand personality or messaging. And a physical review won’t include assessing the consistency of staff interactions with prospects or your team’s approach to service. But when it comes to your company’s printed and electronic presence, consistency alone goes a long way toward establishing a unified brand.

Don't be overwhelmed by the process. An incremental approach is just fine. Wasn't it Confucius who said "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step?" The key is beginning the journey and starting your review process today.

For a copy of our simple 5-Step Quick Guide to Collateral Review, write to gretchen@wordplaymarcom.com

©WordPlay Marketing Communications 2007