

Subtle Designs That Have Dramatic Results

You've seen it before: A far-too-deep drop shadow, wild gradient undulations and a 20-pixel border - dead giveaways that an amateur designer was to blame for the visual monstrosity before you. Over-designing is one of the most difficult urges to fight for newbie designers who do not yet have the experience to know that subtlety is elegant. It attracts. It sells. It works.



If you're new to the graphic design game, consider all your tweaks carefully before sending your designs in for client review. In many cases, you can add power to your piece by turning the volume down a notch or two.

Text kerning

A unique font is only as important as the story it tells. Many amateurs resort to stretching fonts, using over-the-top fonts, and other techniques that end up making their designs look cheap. Instead of graphically tweaking the text, instead try to adjust the kerning first. Take a look:

THE CANTERBURY TALES

THE CANTERBURY TALES

See the difference kerning makes?

Gradients

Gradients are often abused by amateurs - typically in the form of over- or under-saturation or too much of a color swing. Without going into the specifics of a gradient tutorial, keep in mind that the best gradients are noticeable yet subtle.

Shapes and lines

Shapes and lines can add splash to your designs, but only when used sparingly. If you want to make a wispy line around your logo, be faint and - again - subtle. If you want to add a triangle to highlight your headings, don't also apply the same triangle to your subheadings. A dash here and there is fine, but don't go overboard or your message will get lost in the confusion.

Drop shadows



In both print and electronic form, drop shadows lend elegance and help your designs pop off the page or screen. This isn't to say your designs should be floating 120 feet off the page - just slightly hovering. Many newbies add more drop shadow, making their designs look more elevated or even detached from the drop shadows altogether - this is not good design technique. A slight, subtle, soft drop shadow works best in most cases.

Borders

Borders, not to mention interior shading and outer glows, are great tools for helping your designs stand out. But when overused, they can make your design appear gaudy and amateurish. Limit your use of these techniques, and when you do use them, use them sparingly. A web box does not need a 30-pixel wide border - chances are that a three-pixel wide border will look more refined and more professional.

Knowing how to craft influential designs through subtle techniques is what differentiates the pros from the amateurs. That being said, always be aware that revolutionary designers break the rules every day, and design trends evolve every day. Even an out of this world idea can become the next design fad. Don't be afraid to break the rules, but know that these techniques work best for most designs today.

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