

# Put negative space to work in your layouts

by Mike Stevens

The first step in learning to become a good layout artist is learning to *see*. By that I mean learning to see and evaluate the actual physical relationships between the elements of design. I call it reading a sign *graphically* as opposed to the way that we were taught in school — which was *culturally*. Of the six major elements in sign design, we have been programmed to see only the most obvious one, *positive* space (the letters, words, symbols, and pictures). The remaining five elements of design are just as important. The only difference is that, with the exception of color, they are rarely seen or understood on a conscious level. Here are the other five elements:

1. Format, which is the shape and area of the sign face, or the space to design within.
2. Negative space, the blank spaces in and around letter forms, extending out to the edge of the format.
3. Line value, the relative thickness of line in letter strokes — the height of the letter compared to the width of the brush stroke.
4. Color, including tints, tones, shades, warm colors, and cool colors.
5. Rhythm, the recurring patterns in line, form, or color.

This article will be limited to *seeing* (reading a sign graphically) and understanding negative space as a design element. We will discuss the other elements in future articles.

The negative and positive spaces are of equal importance as design elements. You can't have one without the other. They both have shape and,

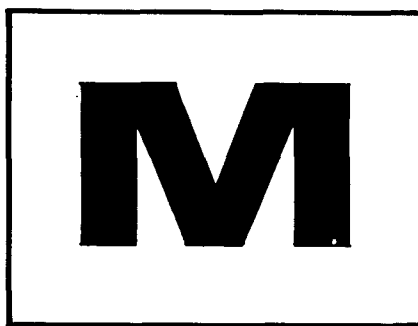


Figure A

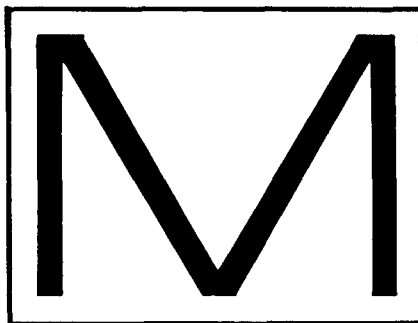


Figure B

depending on how they are arranged in order of importance, or prioritized, one will illuminate the other.

Generally, the role of negative space is to enhance the legibility of our lettering or art work. However, if the relative proportions of the two are misjudged, the negative and positive spaces may compromise each other. In extreme cases, the negative space can become the dominant element and actually be more legible, that is, obvious or readable, than the letters and words.

As lettering artists, our first intro-

duction to negative space is in letter spacing. We learn to space letters visually as opposed to mechanically. Mechanical spacing produces irregular and awkward patterns of negative space between letters that are readily apparent to novice lettering artists and laymen alike. This is where the conscious awareness of negative space begins and ends for many people. With a little help, though, a whole new world of awareness can be opened to designers once someone points out the presence and the effect of negative space in a given composition. It becomes obvious that poor layout is very similar to bad letter spacing. Both contain irregular and awkward patterns of positive and negative spaces.

Just as we strive to maintain the design integrity of a word with good letter construction and proper spacing, we should attempt to do so with our compositions. Learning to see and understand negative space as a design element is the first step in learning to read a sign graphically as opposed to culturally, and a major step forward in successful layout.

Study Figures A and B. This is a simple example of negative space and its power to enhance the legibility of lettering, or to compromise it. Note in Figure B that the negative space is actually stronger than the letter itself. Instead of seeing the letter "M" first, the eye is confused by the triangular shapes of the negative spaces. Imagining that the function of this example was to communicate the letter "M", we can see that its designer achieved exactly the opposite effect. The background is the most legible element, and it must be dismissed before the brain can comprehend the "M". Also notice in this example that the right and left strokes of the "M" relate as much, if not more, to the edge of the format than they do to the diagonal strokes to which they are physically attached. (I have a 50-cent word for this phenomenon that will be discussed in later articles.)

In comparing Figures A and B, it is obvious that Figure A is superior. Why? The simple answer is that the letter "M" has been allotted more margin, and the letter strokes (line value) have been dramatized. Accurate observations, but not the stuff that you can build on. To become a top-notch designer you need to have at your command a theoretical basis to build upon and to work with — a bank of knowledge and theory that will eliminate as many potential problems



Figure C



Figure D

as possible. In the case of Figures A and B, there is a theoretical point to be made that should eliminate any future problems as demonstrated here. The rule is: if a design element (such as the letter "M" in this case) has more space *around* it than it contains within it, the letter will dominate and come forward. If the letter has more space *within* it than around it, then the negative space will be the dominant element. If the areas of negative space are visually equal within and around a positive space, then, more likely than not, the two elements will compete with each other, compromising the legibility of the letter.

Figures A and B demonstrate that bigger is not necessarily better when it comes to graphics. They make a perfect example for the occasional

client who comes in and says, "Make the lettering as big as possible, the sign needs to be read from a great distance." The solution to the client's problem is not in making the lettering as big as possible, but rather in editing some of the copy, allowing more space, or increasing the size of the sign so that it will accommodate the wording.

In comparing Figures C and D, it's obvious which is the superior product. If asked why Figure D is better than Figure C, most students of layout would probably give a generalized answer relating more to issues of eye appeal rather than to the specific flaws in design.

Before comparing the two sketches, let's briefly establish an objective standard and a frame of reference to

guide us through the critique. Signs of this nature should fit the image of the business, have visual impact, and a specific focal point. The goal is to attract the eye and force it to read the most important information first — then lead it through the composition rapidly, allowing it to stop or focus on secondary copy in the order of its relative importance.

Figure C, unfortunately, doesn't meet any of the standards that were established in the preceding paragraph. It doesn't have a specific focal point, nor does it have a graphic image that we can identify with. The only positive thing that can be said about the sign is that our friend got the spelling right. It is very difficult to read and may be considered illegible at first glance. Reading it graphically makes it easy to understand specifically "why", and leads us toward the solution that will improve legibility.

Keeping in mind that both the positive and negative spaces are of equal importance, and that both have shape and can be read graphically, what is the most legible part of Figure C? The three black spaces in the reversed panel at the bottom of the sign! Note their clarity. They are more legible than any other element on the sign. Why do the three blank spaces at the bottom of the sign dominate the composition? Because they are framed and articulated by the lettering (positive space) and the well-defined edge of the format. The words *Housewares*, *Garden Tools*, and *Paints* relate graphically to the edges of the reverse panel. This usage emphasizes the greater mass and shape of the negative space. In effect, it has confused the shape of the bottom part of the sign, which is readily noticeable when compared to Figure D.

In order to read the top part of Figure C, one must abandon the science of reading a sign culturally and revert to reading the sign culturally, because there is no specific focal point. The impact of this portion of the sign has been totally compromised by the equality of positive and negative spaces. If I were asked to identify the most legible part of this area of the composition, I see *graphically* that the two negative spaces flanking the word *Huntington* are the most legible, though they are not as obvious as the

black negative spaces at the bottom of the layout. The remainder of the composition is "up for grabs". There is too much equality of positive and negative space to assign a graphic priority, or to see a definite focal point. Notice that the letter, word, and line spacing are visually the same as in the margins and within the interior of each letter. Using Figures A and B as a key, we can plainly see that in order to improve this composition we need to take a healthy amount of the negative space from within the words *Plumbing* and *Hardware*, and reassign it to the margins. This alphabet does not lend itself to tight letter spacing because of its irregular and awkward letter forms; however, an attempt should be made to do so.

Figure D is the better sign. It has a specific focal point and personality. It makes a graphic statement. Notice in the top portion of the composition how the letter forms were manipulated and prioritized to form one over-all copy block. There is definitely more

space in the margins than within this copy block.

Figure D is also a good example of how we can use negative space to compromise the legibility of certain words, create special effects, or to allow for better line spacing. Look at the word *Incorporated*. It was necessary to drastically reduce in size and to open up the letter spacing, so that the negative space would separate the top copy block from the reversed panel at the bottom. Note that the negative space is the dominant element here, and that the word *Incorporated* serves more as a decorative design element than as an important part of the copy. As a result, it flatters the ultra-bold lettering above it.

There is a major weakness in the reversed panel at the bottom of the sign in Figure D that needs to be corrected. Note that the two black spaces on the right and left sides of the panel are easier to look at than the lettering. The solution to the problem is to lighten up on the letter strokes and in-

crease the letter spacing, which would allow the eye to flow through the words easily.

Understanding negative space as a design element and learning to read signs graphically is essential to your success as a sign artist. In routine sign work, negative space shouldn't be seen on a conscious level, unless it creates a shape that reinforces the message. Reading a sign graphically is the act of *seeing*. It is the ability to see and evaluate what actually exists graphically — the true physical relationships of the elements of design and their net effect.

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