

# Effective layouts begin with an understanding of format

by Mike Stevens

In the last article, we talked about learning to read a sign graphically as opposed to culturally. It was noted that positive and negative space are of equal value as design elements. They both have shape and, depending on how they are used or prioritized, one will accentuate the other. In this article, we will expand upon reading a sign graphically by pointing out that the shape of the sign or the area that you are designing within is also a design element. This area is called the *format*. Its size and shape suggest the solution to your composition.

Examples of sign formats are: windows, walls, assorted paper, cardboard, wood, metal, and plastic fabricated or stock pieces. Windows, trucks, and walls sometimes represent the total format, but are often sub-

divided, creating independent "sub-formats" by the use of design panels. Subformats must be harmonious with the dominant format and are subject to the same rules of design.

Immediate improvement is made when a sign artist begins to realize that the format is a design element, and not just a surface where one gets to do his or her thing. The effectiveness and quality of a sign is determined by the combination of its parts, and how they relate as a whole. Format is a key element.

## Type of layouts

There are two basic approaches to layout. The first is to lay out and letter something that is visually pleasing, leaving adequate margins so that the composition looks harmonious and

consistent with the shape of the format. This is known as a *natural layout*. The second approach is what I refer to as a *super graphic*. This means to design something that is so visually strong that it overpowers the format, causing it to recede as a design element. Anything in between these two choices creates visual discord. (See the first chapter in my book, *Mastering Layout*, for a formula that will assist you in creating and understanding natural layout.)

There are two variations in design that you can use with a natural layout, or a super graphic. You may use either a formal or an informal composition. Figure B is a natural layout with a formal composition. The lettering and blocks of copy are centered on the theoretical vertical axis, which is in the mathematical center of the format. Figure C is a natural layout with an informal composition. The lettering and blocks of copy are balanced casually on either side of the vertical axis. Figure D is a super graphic, with a formal composition. Figure A is a perfect example of conflict between copy and format. We'll see why in a moment.

## The optical center

All formats have a theoretical vertical and horizontal axis. Plural for the word axis is axes. Axes are theoretical lines that artistic forms are composed or organized around. In natural layout, the vertical axis is located in the mathematical center of the format. The horizontal axis is located approximately 46 percent of the way down from the top of the format. If it were placed in the mathematical center, it would give the



Figure A



Figure B



Figure C

illusion of being below center. The intersection of these lines is the optical center of the format. This is the heart of your composition. Decide what the most important copy is and use it to create a dominant mass that can be centered in this area.

When using a super graphic, you may move the axes around at will, according to your sense of balance. Remember, however, that the heart of your composition will always be at the intersection of these two theoretical lines. Create the strongest mass of positive space in that area.

All letters, words, and word groups (copy blocks) have shape. The shapes either relate well to each other or they don't. One of our primary goals as layout artists is to create harmonious shapes that work well together, forming symmetrical word shapes and word groups. For headings and titles, though, we may use alphabets with sharply contrasting forms to stimulate interest and to lead the eye through the composition. These are known as *display* alphabets. They have been designed to create a mood or an image. Their legibility is often compromised for the sake of design. The second category of type styles is known as *text* alphabets. They are designed primarily for their legibility and adaptability. They form pleasing word shapes, and make it easier to create symmetrical copy blocks.

When words are assembled into copy blocks, their letter spacing and word spacing should be tight enough to create one overall silhouette. Silhouettes are the outlines of single or multiple blocks of copy. Ideally, silhouettes should work well together and reflect the shape of the format.

Turn to page 41

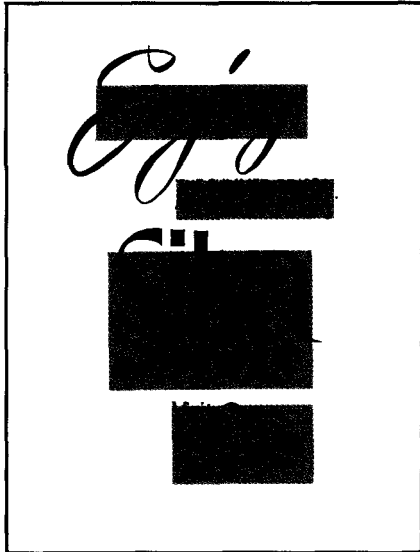
*Enjoy the Summer*  
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VISIT OUR STORE  
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Figure D

For example, if your format is taller than it is wide, the combined shapes should form a vertical silhouette, and



Copy organized in blocks

vice versa. If your format is horizontal in shape, then the overall silhouette should be the same.

### Analyzing the examples

Study Figures A through D for a few minutes and analyze each one. Read them graphically as opposed to culturally. Remember that reading graphically is the ability to see and evaluate the elements of design that make a sign effective or ineffective — rather than just reading the words.

Figure A ignores the format as a design element. It is a perfect example of what not to do. In comparing it to the other figures, it demonstrates the importance of organizing and creating silhouettes with the copy. Note that it appears to have more words than the other examples, and that each word seems to be competing with the other for your attention. The name *Silva* just barely comes forward in the composition.

Follow along with me as I read Figure A graphically. Note that the silhouette of the first line of copy is a long horizontal shape that actually relates more to the top edge of the format than it does to the rest of the composition. It doesn't lead the eye into the layout. It stops at the top left and right sides of the format. The following lines of copy look like

mumbo jumbo until the eye is stopped once again by the horizontal lines and the shape of the words *visit our store today*. Notice how these horizontal shapes are in direct contradiction to the vertical format. Instead of assisting in leading the eye into the layout, they lead it from the left border to the right border. Our layout artist appears to have lucked-out by making the name *Silva* just big enough to attract the eye and keep it going. The next three lines of copy are still in direct contradiction to the vertical format. We see the horizontal shape of each line, rather than prioritized silhouettes of copy. In short, the layout is chaotic.

The copy in Figures B through D has been interpreted three different ways. Each one is valid depending on how and where the signs are to be displayed and the style of the company.

Figure B is a natural layout with a formal composition. The first thing that you read is *Silva Pools . . . Today!* You don't notice the shape of the format until it is called to your attention. Whereas in Figure A, the words and the format hit you all at once. Note in Figure B that there are three distinct copy blocks that form an overall silhouette that is in keeping with the vertical format. At no time is the eye led out of the composition. The copy has been interpreted and prioritized in an interesting manner.

Figure C is a natural layout with an informal composition. Notice that even though it is an informal composition, the copy blocks are well organized and create distinct masses. Compare Figures A, B, and C. In Figure A, I see eight separate elements or bits of copy. In Figure B, I see three distinct copy blocks that form one overall silhouette, and in Figure C, I see four separate elements that form a whole.

Figure D is a super graphic with a subformat at the top of the sign (the reversed panel). Note that it has a horizontal shape and that the lettering within it is consistent with the rhythm of the panel. This horizontal panel works unusually well in relation to the vertical format because it has been unified by the lines that suggest a transition of color.

Interpreting and editing copy is essential to your success as a layout artist. Compare the first sentence in

Figures A and B. Note in Figure B that the first sentence has been simplified graphically. It makes a singular graphic statement, which makes it easier to work with than the graphically confused sentence in Figure A. Concentrate on organizing and forming definite shapes with your words and groups of words.

The art of layout is much easier when you begin to realize that the solution is in the problem. You are given a certain number of words that must fit into a given space. By understanding the rules and elements of design, you can begin to think your way through a design problem, as opposed to guessing or waiting for a creative flash. First organize your composition logically, then turn on your creativity and bring it to life.

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