

Mike's third article in this series tells how contrasting line value can strengthen your designs

Have you ever had the experience of standing back and looking at a sign that you have just finished, anticipating a masterpiece, only to have it wilt before your eyes? Of course you have. We all have. Sometimes, it feels like we've been short-changed by our Maker when he was handing out talent.

It is a rare occasion, indeed, when an artist is totally satisfied with his or her work. There is always something that can be improved. But what? That's the catch. What is wrong with the layout? The secret to your growth lies in your ability to see and talk about the problem. Otherwise, you are just guessing and not building a base of knowledge to work with in the future. Design is intellectual. It is a rational process that leads to "acquired talent". It isn't free – your Maker didn't short-change you. He blessed you with natural talents and potential, but not the skills of an accomplished designer. The wonderful gift that He did give you was the means to acquire the knowledge and the power to do the problem solving.

One of the most common problems that sign designers have is monotony of line value. In an attempt to give their signs more character, they change alphabets, colors, and the height of their lettering, but few go on to refine their work from there. A sensitivity to line value will improve your work immediately. Line value is the relative thickness of line in letter strokes, ornamentation, illustration, or cartooning. As you begin to select alternative line values instead of changing alphabets or colors unnecessarily, your layouts will have more pizzazz and the speed of your lettering will improve.

Once you begin to work with it on a conscious level, it will add new spice to your work. I didn't become aware of it as a design element until I had been lettering for ten years. As a student of show card writing, Don Sturdivant was my first hero. I used to stay up nights copying and studying his work. It had a unique flair about it. I began to realize that his drama of proportional relationships was central to the eye appeal of his show cards and theater ads.

I didn't understand it as a matter of line value until I saw the fabulous theater ads of Duke Wellington. He was a true master of line value and spatial relationships. What made it

so clear to me was the way that he unified his compositions by integrating his illustrations with the lettering. He used recurring patterns of line value to unify his layouts.

The first time I saw his work, my mind flashed back to a course that I had taken in cartooning, which stressed the importance of using contrasting line value to create a sense of space and depth in line drawing. After seeing Wellington's work, I began to put two and two together, and developed the philosophy that I now teach in my workshops. Signs are much more interesting when they have a sense of depth and space. Use contrasting line value to create a feeling of foreground, middle ground, and background.

Direct the reader's eye

For clarity, think in terms of three distinct line values – Light, Medium, and Bold. Note the optical illusion in Figure A that suggests a gradation in color as well as a sense of space. As the line value expands, the words

appear to come forward. The three different line values create a feeling of foreground, middle ground, and background. Contrasting line value is one of the techniques that leads the eye through a composition. It gives you the ability to direct the eye to the most important information first.

My version of light and medium line values is similar to that of most other designers. However, my sense of bold is what many others would interpret as super bold, or extra bold. I exaggerate the bold for the sake of clarity.

As a reference, you may use the following percentages in determining the relative width of a brush stroke. A light line is 10 percent of its height, meaning that the width of a light stroke for a 10-inch letter would be one inch. A medium stroke is 20 percent of its height, or two inches for a 10-inch letter. A bold stroke would be 40 percent of its height – four inches for a 10-inch letter. Figure A was rendered using this formula. These percentages do not hold

Master line value to give depth to your layouts

by Mike Stevens



Figure A

true with condensed or extended alphabets.

Once someone points out the need and advantages of using light, medium, and bold alphabets, it's easy to understand. However, it is another thing altogether to be able to execute them correctly on your first try. Take a few minutes out now to draw a light, medium, and bold *R*, all at the same height, without using the formula that was mentioned earlier.

If you're anything like me, or many of the students that I have taught, your relative proportions did not come out as well as you thought they would the first time around. It takes more than just getting the words right. My personal experience was that my intellectual goals and awareness in design preceded my physical skills by six months or more. I knew what I intended to do, but my hand and eyes could do no more than my practice or routine had trained them to do. Practice! Learn to letter a light, medium, and bold face letter

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Layout is much easier to master when you are working with definite shapes and clear contrast. In the last article, we discussed and illustrated the need to create definite shapes

with our words and word groups. We also need to know how to control their density by the use of contrasting line value and color. Think like an illustrator and try to create a feeling of foreground, middle ground, and background with your word groups.

Two examples

Figure B is an example of the power of contrasting line values. For a black and white sketch, it has great eye appeal. It has a definite sense of foreground, middle ground, and background. The simulated chrome look and the deep shadow emphasize the word *Sign*, giving the impression that it is in the foreground. The word *Painting*, the italic lettering at the top, and the panel at the bottom of the sketch have the feeling of middle ground. The lettering within the panel appears to be in the background. To help see the effect, stare at the white space running through the middle of the word *Sign*, and use your peripheral vision to view the rest of the sketch.

Figure C is much simpler. Focus your eyes on the *W* in the word *OWNER* and use your peripheral vision again to scan the rest of the sketch. It is a clean-looking sketch, but I didn't get the results that I wanted. *By Owner, 3 Bdrm/2 Bath* works well as the foreground and *By Appointment Only* appears to be in the background. The problem with the sketch is that I don't have a clear middle ground. The words *For Sale* and the telephone number are competing with each other for our attention. If you cover up the words *For Sale* and just look at the remainder of the sketch, it becomes clearer — you get a definite foreground, middle ground, and background effect. To improve this sketch, I would reduce the height of the words *For Sale* and increase the height and line value of the telephone number.

Using contrast

Creating eye appeal is one of our main objectives in sign design. Achieving it sometimes requires that we compromise the legibility of some of the less important copy. If everything were equally legible on a sign,



Figure B



Figure C

we wouldn't have a main focal point, and the sign would become self-defeating. We need to create contrast so that the eye will have a clear choice as to what is the most important copy, and also to give our layout flair and personality – that elusive quality that some artists seem to be better at than others.

Contrast – clear distinct contrast – is the key to creating flair and personality in your work. It is achieved by playing big things against little things, light colors against dark colors, warm colors against cool colors, sharp angular letters against straight letters, and yes, more – exaggerated round letters and shapes against condensed forms, tight letter spacing against double-spaced letters...time out! That should be enough to get the point across.

Most of this is common knowledge among professionals, but the ability to achieve is not. The problem is much like the earlier exercise I gave you in drawing a light, medium, and bold face *R*. We know the words, and can appreciate the need and function for the idea, but the ability to do it escapes many.

Sign artists who have had experience in show card writing are often more successful in sign design. Water-base show card paints are a much faster medium than lettering enamels, which enables them to work quicker and develop a flair that is difficult to match in enamels. They also develop a special sense of drama and contrast as a result of their experience in interpreting and organizing a lot of heavy copy. They learned to move things around to their advantage.

Take note of the signs that you like. You'll undoubtedly find several basic features common to all. My guess would be that the three most common attributes would be appealing colors, a well-organized layout, and clear contrast between its elements.

If you're not satisfied with the personality of the work that you are now doing, examine your use of contrasting line values. Are you taking advantage of the opportunity to create a sense of foreground, middle ground, and background in your

compositions? In order to improve and break old habits, take things to the extreme. You may over-do it at times, but that is a small price to pay for your personal growth. You will quickly adjust as you begin to work with clear, contrasting elements.

Mike Stevens is the author of two books, Mastering Layout, The Art of

Eye Appeal and Ninety-Nine Show Cards: A Photo Album, plus several video and audio tapes for the sign artist which are available through SignCraft. Mike also offers workshops on layout and design for sign artists. You can contact him by writing Mike Stevens, c/o SignCraft Magazine, P.O. Box 06031, Fort Myers, FL 33906.