

This is the design element that can make your work sparkle

Rhythm holds your designs together

by Mike Stevens

This article is about *rhythm* as a design element. It's a subtle element of sign design that can be defined to serve several different purposes. Once you become aware of it and begin to use it on a conscious level, there will be an immediate improvement in your layouts. It's one of those "goodies" that helps your work sparkle.

Rhythm is a recurring pattern of elements such as lines, forms, and colors that create a sense of direction or an illusion of movement. By their repetitive use within a given composition, these elements serve to unify and tie things together. In layout, the goal is to create a "unified whole". All of the parts should work well together, establishing a sound composition. The eye should not be distracted by several independent elements, but should be led through the composition.

Rhythm of format

The first rhythm that you confront in sign design is the rhythm of the format. (The second article of this series [*SignCraft*, Nov/Dec 1988] explained that each format has a vertical and a horizontal axis – theoretical lines around which artistic forms are composed or organized.) The format has a dominant and a subordinate rhythm. The dominant rhythm of a format is determined by the longest axis. For example, the dominant rhythm of a 4-by-8 horizontal sign would follow the left-to-right rhythm of the eight-foot horizontal axis.

In natural layout, the dominant

rhythm dictates the shapes that we create with our word groups. If your sign is horizontal, then *most* of your word groups should be also. When viewed as a whole, *the overall sil-*

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houette must be consistent with the horizontal format. If your sign is a *super graphic*, your word groups may be either horizontal or vertical, regardless of the shape of the format. Remember, a *super graphic* overpowers the format and causes it to recede as a design element.

As was implied in the above paragraph, words and word groups have rhythm, as do lines of copy and line spacing. Recurring patterns of color and line value are very strong design elements that play a more obvious role in unifying a layout.

Rhythm of words and word groups

Figure A is an example of the rhythm of a single word. I have used an italic script to make the point

obvious. (All alphabets create a rhythm of their own as they are assembled into words.) To simplify the problems that are encountered in layout, it's to your advantage to keep the individual parts as simple and clean as possible to avoid their calling undue attention to themselves. We want to create word shapes that are adaptable and work well with each other. In the two examples in Figure A, the first one is so full of conflicting rhythms (as noted by the dotted lines) that it doesn't even work with itself. The word is supposed to have a definite horizontal, left-to-right rhythm. But the inconsistent italics create visual discord. It wouldn't relate well to the copy that followed, or lead the eye to the next word. Note the integrity of the second example. Its consistency would make working with it much easier.

The need for balance and clarity of each part within a composition cannot be overemphasized. The art of layout is in assembling the different elements into an effective whole. To do so, we need to create reasonable shapes with our words and word groups. As Figure A demonstrates, the integrity of each word needs to be considered and modified if necessary. It is impossible to lay out effective sign work with irregular and awkwardly shaped words or word groups.

Italic letters create the most obvious rhythms in lettering. Depending on the severity of their slant, they require more space at the end of each line of lettering to allow for their full expression. The rhythm of italic lettering can be so strong that it creates the illusion of occupying more space than it actually does.

Compare the examples in Figure B. Note how the script looks more natural on top of the capital lettering than it does under it. It has breathing space.

Dominant and subordinate rhythms

All lettering has both dominant and subordinate rhythms. The dominant rhythm of italic lettering is left to right, consistent with the horizontal line. The subordinate rhythm is defined by the italic axis. It is this subordinate rhythm that is causing the problem with the second example in Figure B. The letters in the script (especially the capital A and the two ascenders of the Ts) need more breathing space. They are

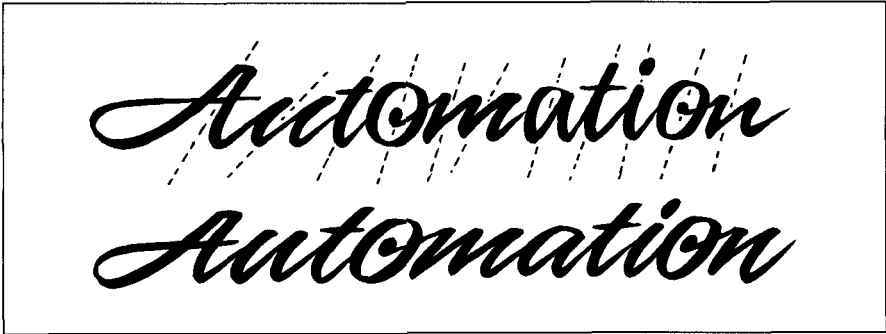


Figure A

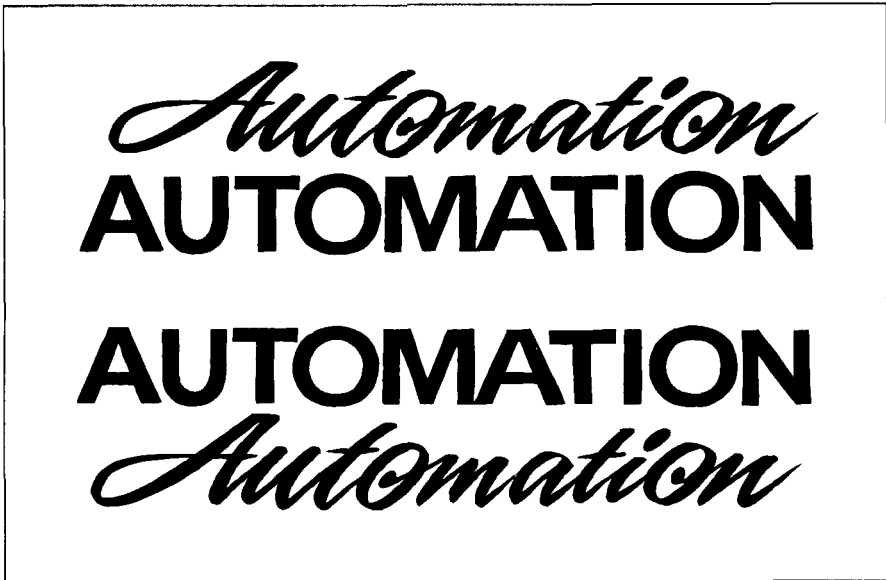


Figure B

conflicting visually with the bottom line of the capital letters.

The rule of thumb is to place upper-case and lower-case lettering on top of a line of all capital lettering, not under it. The theoretical straight line at the bottom of lower-case lettering relates well to the theoretical straight line at the top of capitals. The irregular shapes that run through the tops of lower-case lettering conflict with the straight line at the bottom of the capitals. The exception to the rule is when one of the two lines of copy is much stronger in its color and value, thereby dominating the other and eliminating visual discord.

Figures C and D make an interesting point. The dominant rhythms of both formats are vertical, yet most of the graphics are horizontal. The boots are the only obvious vertical elements. Both of these sketches work fairly well because the combined graphics form a vertical silhouette that is consistent with the rhythm of the format. Each line of copy is consistent with the subordinate rhythm. It is interesting to note that we are constantly creating rhythms in our layouts, whether we are conscious of it or not. (The exception

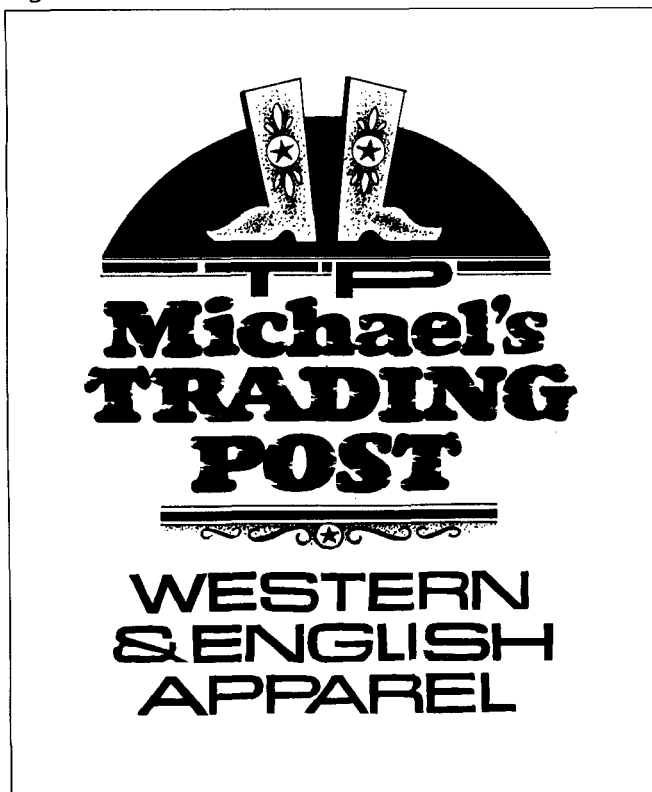


Figure C

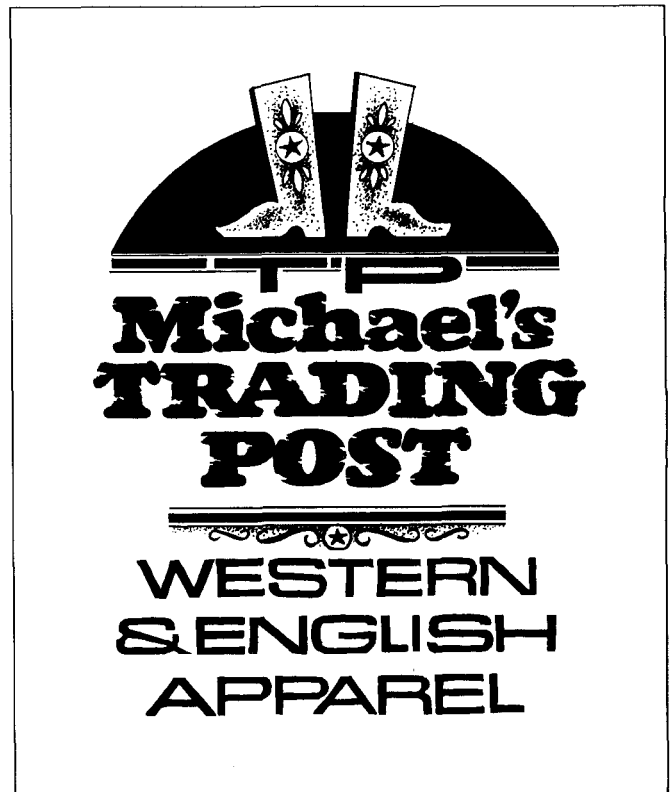


Figure D

would be those who do not organize their compositions at all.)

One of the main differences between Figures C and D is the monotonous pattern (rhythm) of line spacing at the bottom of Figure C. Notice the line spacing starting under the word *Post*. It is similar, visually, right through to the word *Apparel*. The bars and the little design element with the star break it up a little, but it doesn't work as well as the line spacing in that same area of Figure D. Figure C is an example of accidentally creating a rhythm of negative spaces that compromise the impact and legibility of the sign. This is a subtle, but very important, point. Monotonous line spacing will kill an otherwise dynamic layout.

The goal in this layout was to create two distinct copy blocks: one that incorporated the name and logo of the store and the other that described their products. Figure D was successful; Figure C failed. They both form one overall silhouette that is consistent with the format, but Figure D takes the prize for its clarity.

Notice the different design elements that were used to unify Figures C and D. The first was the repetitive horizontal lines that we mentioned before. Secondly, I used recurring line value. The massive half circle at the top of the sign relates to the bold lettering in *Michael's Trading Post*. The line value of the words *Western & English Apparel* relates to the line value of the bars. And finally, the corny decorations on the boots are incorporated into the bar under the word *Post*. (Desperate!)

A few more examples

The layout for Figures E and F was inspired by a student in one of my classes. Her version was better. She didn't use the brushes in the top panel, her sketch was refined, and she illustrated a variety of implements that an artist might use. Before I comment further on these sketches, take a few minutes and analyze them. Which is the better layout and why? My preference is Figure E, although it has a major flaw in the rhythm of the name *Richardtson*. It is difficult to read because the letter spacing and the

line spacing above and below the name are almost equal. Each letter relates as much to the bars as to each other, thereby compromising the left-to-right rhythm. I added the dots between the letters as an afterthought, hoping to reinforce the rhythm, but they are not strong enough. Had I made the dots bigger, they probably would have read better than the name itself.

Figure F has the same problem, only it is compounded by another flaw. The negative space between *Richardtson's* bottom bar and the next line of copy, *Art Shop*, is equal to that of the panel containing *Richardtson's*. Notice how much more legible the bottom bar is in Figure F than it is in Figure E. The clarity of that bar further compromises the legibility of the store's

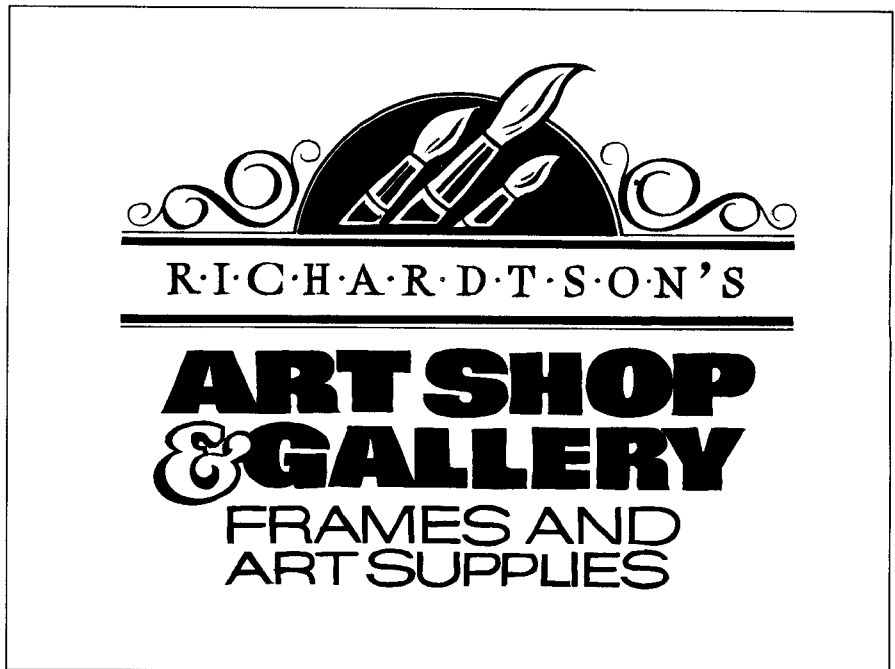


Figure E

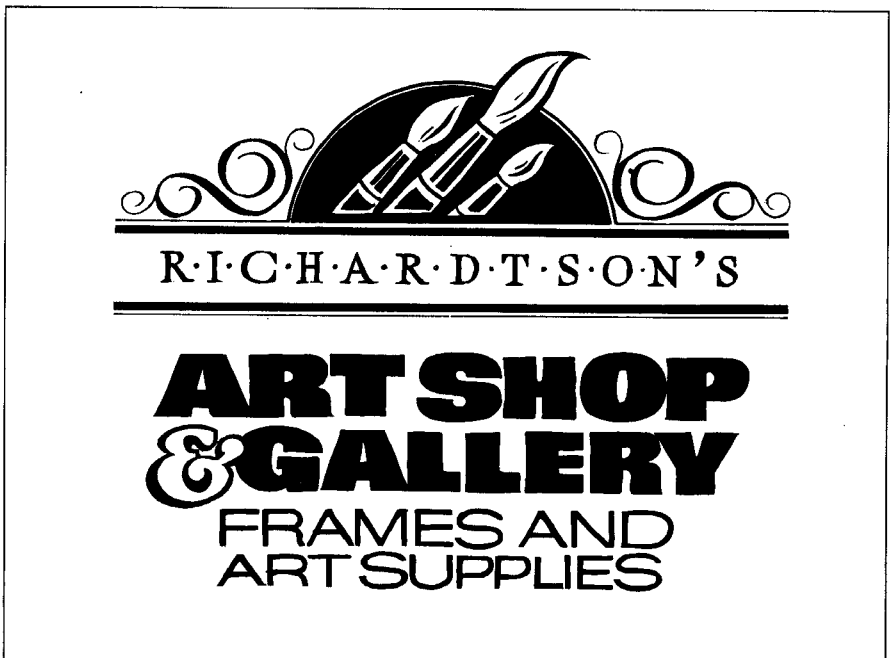


Figure F

name. Notice, also, how the open space almost cuts the composition in half.

One more interesting thing about these two layouts is the use of "captured negative space" as a means of unifying the compositions. Note the relationship between the negative space within the interior of the ampersand, the interiors of the curlicues, and the brushes. A happy accident – it wasn't a part of my original planning.

Start using rhythm as a design element on a conscious level. It's a part of the magic of eye appeal.

Mike Stevens is the author of Mastering Layout, 99 Showcards, The Tape About Layout (an audio tape), and a video on brush lettering. 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, Ft. Myers, FL 33906.