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The Future of Design: Multisensory Experiences

Love at first sight. Turn a blind eye. Out of sight, out of mind. What do all of these phrases have in common? One of our five senses: sight. For years, sight and visual communication have largely dominated the field of graphic design. Yet, this is not the only way to communicate messages and connect with our audiences. For instance, communicating to people with disabilities requires designers to rethink the way in which traditional principles of design—such as color, typography, semiotics, and so on—are being used. Utilizing multiple senses to create an immersive design experience allows us to enhance our message at multiple sensory levels and further engagement, understanding, and retention, as well as promoting inclusivity.

There is little question as to why sight has led the communications field for so long. It is by far our most used sense, because it is one of the easiest to understand. In fact, sight is considered to be “the most powerful of the human senses” as well as “the most seductive,” because of its ability to allow us to “discover changes and differences” according to Bertil Hultén et al. (2009). This is largely why sight and visual communications have been dominant for so long.

Sound is also fairly easy to understand and is very powerful. Historically, sound is one of the first ways we communicated. People told stories and passed them along through sound, long before stories were told visually in books. According to Ellen Lupton and

Andrea Lipps (2018), “sound is communication” and it can express emotion as well as convey meaningful messages and “construct intricate discourse.” Additionally, sound has often been linked to our identities and preferences, especially when it comes to music. John Groves (2012) states, “enables us to create associations, steer thoughts, and maybe even be instrumental in creating preferences.” We relate to sound and allow it to influence us as well.

Sight and sound are more rational, as opposed to smell, taste, and touch, which are “supposedly the least rational” according to David Howes and Constance Classen (2014) due to their primal nature and links to our instincts and memories. Smell is one of the most difficult senses to understand. Unlike many of the other senses, it does not have its own vocabulary. Instead smell borrows from the other senses or describes a noun, such as smelling like roses. For instance, something may *look* clean or *taste* sweet or *feel* sharp, but all of this descriptive vocabulary may be used to describe smells too. While difficult to understand, smell is our most emotional sense and is deeply tied into memories. It is said we can remember over 10,000 different scents (Hultén et al., 2009). This ability to remember so strongly from one scent could easily be used to enforce the retention of a message.

Have you ever heard, look with your eyes not with your hands in an attempt to stop you from touching something? We have a primal need to touch things in order to get a sense of their form and how they fit into space. Touch allows us to perceive many properties of objects according to Aradhna Krishna (2013), including “hardness, texture, temperature, and weight.” Touch allows us to gain our bearings, but it also relates to our memories and emotions. Once you have touched something, you will likely never forget how it felt or how

it made you feel. Touch is probably the most inclusive of the senses as well. You can feel something even if you can't see it or hear it. As Lupton and Lipps (2018) put it, "designing for touch creates a human and inclusive world" as it allows people with disabilities to use and interact with those designs.

Taste is another sense that is largely tied to personal preferences and associations. It is also the most difficult to tie into communication. However, it has been argued that taste might actually be more of an experience of all of the senses, rather than a stand-alone sense. According to Krishna (2013), when we think about our favorite restaurant or why we like a certain food, rarely is it just about the taste of the food, but rather it is about the smells, the textures, and the visual experience. In this way, taste is already heavily involved and understood in a multisensory experience.

Why should we utilize multisensory experiences and not stick to what we know: visual design? Well, it has been shown, when we combine the visual sense with other senses, the message becomes stronger. Martin Lindstrom (2009) even notes "visual images are far more effective, and more memorable, when they are coupled with another sense—like sound or smell." An example of this in action was shown through a magazine ad created for Diet Pepsi and placed in *People* magazine. According to Lindstrom (2009), the ad, created by Americhip—a company that integrates multisensory technologies into print advertisements—"contained sound, taste, and pop-up features" and the awareness of the ad was "one-hundred percent—for the first time in the history" of *People* magazine.

Yet, not only does multisensory design enhance engagement, understanding, and retention, it also promotes inclusivity. People have different sensory abilities and these abilities change as we grow. Some people cannot see and some people cannot hear, but we

should design to include all of these people. Lupton and Lipps (2018), note that ‘sensory differences are an essential aspect of the human condition’ and through “embracing these differences...designers are contributing to inclusive design languages,” as “light, color, sound, texture, movement, vibration, and smell are [all] ingredients of a full-bodied design vocabulary.” At its core, multisensory design is inclusive as it allows the message to be communicated in multiple ways to multiple audiences.

Of course, while multisensory experiences are beneficial in many ways and can greatly improve a design and its ability to communicate, there are some precautions to watch out for. First off, triggering too many senses at once or with multiple types of the same kind of sense, can lead to sensory overload. According to Lindstrom (2009), “studies have show that the more stimulated we are, the harder it is to capture our attention.” Therefore, it is important to be careful in how you bring multiple senses together. Another trait surrounding the senses to be kept in mind is their ability to be understood at a personal level. How we interpret smells, tastes, colors, sounds, textures, and so on, can be heavily influenced by our own personal experiences and memories. You can see different responses to the same sensual experience even though people have “the same sensory faculties” merely because they also have “different sensory associations and preferences” (Howes and Classen, 2014). Thus, it is possible for a person to misinterpret the design or the experience. Another possible area that leaves room for misinterpretation is how senses can have cultural meanings. For instance, it is a fairly well known fact white is a color of hope and purity in America, but in China, it represents sorrow and you’d be more likely to see it worn at a funeral than on a bride at her wedding. This chance for misunderstandings

on a cultural level would be especially important if your design is going to live on a national level or if people of different cultures may interact with your design.

It is clear to see that sight—although it has dominated the communication industry for quite some time—is not the most powerful way to communicate messages. Many of our other senses are stronger in certain aspects, and when we pair multiple senses together into a multisensory experience, the message gets even stronger. Not only does it become easier to understand and more likely to be remembered, it also becomes more inclusive, allowing people with disabilities—such as blindness—to understand and participate in the design experience as well.

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