
How to choose colors to represent your brand

Whether creating a new brand, refreshing an old one, or simply rearranging a window display, businesses and organizations large and small have an opportunity to boost returns by paying close attention to color selection and color psychology. A quick search online will turn up a number of handy charts purporting to link colors with moods (e.g. yellow = happy, red = passion), and while there is some truth to these claims, more in-depth consideration reveals nuances that businesses ignore at their own peril. When research showsⁱ that up to 90% of subconscious judgments about products and organizations are based on nothing but color, the importance of color selection becomes paramount.

1 Define your brand

The first consideration when selecting color should be your brand's identity. Whether you have an established brand color scheme or not, color can be used to distinguish your brand from competitors in the field. For example, many financial

brands feature a color scheme that is predominantly blue, so by using a contrasting scheme a brand can help distinguish itself from competitors.

Being different for difference's sake is not enough. A brand's personality should be taken into consideration. Consider how you want your brand to be perceived in the public eye. A paper released in 1997ⁱⁱ defined five core dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Determine which of these traits is dominant in your brand's personality and how this may distinguish you from competitors in your field.



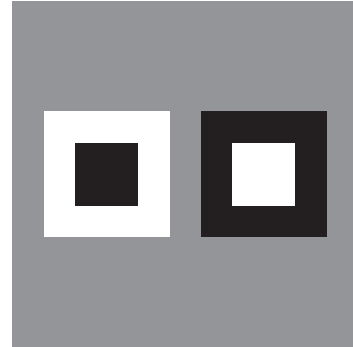
Many financial brands rely on the soothing qualities of the color blue to instill a feeling of trust and security in consumers. The Wells Fargo logo stands out against its competitors by choosing not to follow the trend.

Difference for difference's sake is a poor way to define a personality, whether for an individual or a brand. Consumers respond to colors that “fit” the product, and by contrast, have a negative reaction when the color doesn't fit. Imagine a brand of orange juice packaged in an opaque purple or brown bottle. Brands can also take this to an unfortunate place when they start creating versions of products “for her” simply by repackaging those products in pink.

Know your personality, know your market, and that will give you a solid foundation for determining appropriate brand colors.

2 Understanding color

Color is one of those wonderful examples of art blending with science, and there is a great deal of science involved. Color theory, in part, examines the ways in which our perceptions of colors don't necessarily match simple reality. For example, a white square on a black background will appear



larger than a black square of the same size on a white background. Grey has a tendency to make colors next to it appear desaturated, and less vibrant. Black has the opposite effect.

Saturation is essentially a measure of the purity of a particular hue. In color theory, a color is defined by three characteristics: hue, saturation and brightness (HSB or HSV for value). Hue is the pure color, such as red, blue, green, purple, etc. Saturation and lightness can be viewed as the amount of white and/or black respectively mixed in with this pure hue. For example, pink is a form of desaturated red, whereas brown is essentially dark yellow or orange. In painting terminology, these are often referred to as tints (a pure hue mixed with white) and shades (mixed with black). The combination of the two is



referred to as a tone (a pure hue mixed with grey). Using these three factors, we can define the entire range of colors visible to the human eye.

In addition to the hue, consider how these other factors may reflect on your brand and product, and how the colors you select may interact with other colors and their environment. One striking example is the case of complementary colors. Complementary colors are colors which lie on opposite ends of the color wheel, for example blue and orange. If you place these colors against each other directly, with no border, you will notice what appears to be a line at that border, even when no line is present. This effect is called “buzzing” and can be unpleasant to look at. If you wish to make use of a complementary color scheme, using tints or tones of the pure hue can lessen this effect.

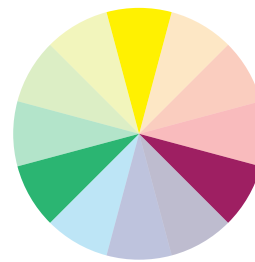
There are many other forms of color harmonies, including split complements, triads, tetrads, analogous and monochromatic color schemes. Experiment and see what works for you.



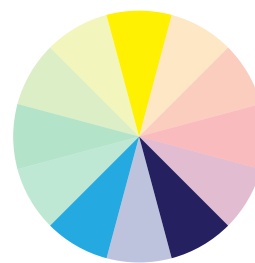
Complementary



Analogous



Triad



Split Complement

3 Color and culture

Different people and different cultures experience color in different ways. A much-cited studyⁱⁱⁱ found that both men and women were most likely to say that blue was their favorite color. By this token, if you want to create a popular brand the

logical choice would seem to be blue, every time. However, plenty of very popular brands (e.g. Coca-Cola, UPS, Amazon) are doing quite well with “unpopular” colors.

So simply going by what consumers self-report as their favorite colors is out. Try instead to put your product in context. If you’re selling hot sauce, a cool color such as blue or teal will just confuse customers. If your product is water, or swimming pools, however, featuring red or brown may be ill-advised. Pay attention to natural associations, as these are likely to be the most universal.

Narrowing the focus somewhat, consider cultural contexts. If appealing to an international audience, you need to consider how different colors may be perceived in different cultures. For example, the color orange can symbolize warmth, or autumn in the United States, and is relied upon for its visibility. In the Netherlands, the color is associated with the royal House of Orange, and in predominantly Buddhist countries, the orange would be familiarly associated with the color of monks’ robes.



Another, even narrower layer of context is the professional. Luxury goods have a tendency towards black and white color schemes. Financial organizations often rely upon calming blues or green to allude to the color of U.S. “greenbacks.” Different fields have different language or jargon that they use to communicate with each other, and just as often, there are color associations that are unique to a profession, or even a particular task. Try to assume the perspective of your likely audiences, and what their associations with color will be.

4 Point of view

Perceptions of color are ultimately personal. We can never be 100% certain that what one person calls “red” appears to them the same as to someone else. Even if we could say with certainty that everyone perceived color the same way, everyone has different experiences which may color (pun intended)

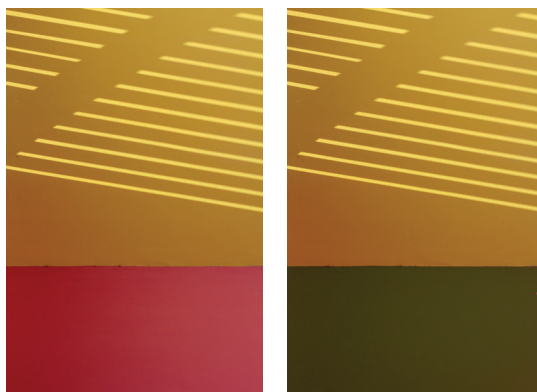


In 2015, the dress pictured above went viral due to disputes over whether it was black and blue or white and gold. The original dress was actually blue and black.

their perceptions. While most people might find the color red stimulating and exciting, another may have had a red blanket as a small child, so they view it as calm and comforting. Weigh your own perceptions of color accordingly.

It's also worth noting that some people verifiably do not see color the same way.

There are varying degrees of color blindness that can affect upwards of 8% of males, and 0.5% of females.^{iv} This can range from a mild red-green deficiency, in which people may have minor difficulty distinguishing between red and green,



or blue and purple — all the way up to full monochromacy, in which people perceive the world strictly in black, white and gray. These cases are rare, but it can be helpful to consider some forms of color perception disorders when targeting a broad audi-

ence.

A few more thoughts

The subject of color is vast, and there are many resources, both digital and in print, that can help you gain more in-depth knowledge of color theory, color psychology, and cultural associations with color, but simply taking the time to carefully consider how colors are perceived by different people will make an impact on how they will affect perceptions of your brand. Some additional things to consider.

Taster, sample the rainbow: A branded color scheme can be just one dominant brand color, up to an entire spectrum of colors for specific situations, products, campaigns, seasons, etc. Consider where you plan to use color (and even where you will be limited to black and white), and build your palette around that. Experiment with different color harmonies, using two, three or four colors and exploring how they interact with each other. Play with the relative sizes of areas of color and how that affects their interactions. A useful exercise in color harmony is to take bands of color of different widths and arrange them against each other.

What's in a name: While many people may cite brown as their least favorite color, this doesn't seem to have had a negative effect on the sale of brown beverages such as coffee. Giving colors more "creative" names, such as "mocha" or "latte" for browns, or "sunshine" for yellow, or even "toxic slime green" can be more attention grabbing. A drink or candy named "razzmatastic blue" may perform better (with certain audiences) than simple "blue raspberry."

One color to rule them all: A quick search will reveal a plethora of websites claiming that red is the color of passion, yellow is happiness, purple is creativity and so on. While there is a kernel of truth to this, there is no straightforward translation of

“color = emotion” that is universally applicable. Do the research and figure out what makes the most sense for your brand, your products, and your audience.

Ultimately, it's up to you: No matter what experts and studies say, when it comes down to it you can choose whatever colors you like. After all, color is in the eye of the beholder.

- i CCICOLOR - Institute for Color Research
- ii Aaker, J. (1997). Dimensions of Brand Personality. Journal of Marketing Research
- iii Hallock, J. Color Assignments, <http://www.joehallock.com/edu/COM498/preferences.html>
- iv Facts About Color Blindness. https://nei.nih.gov/health/color_blindness/facts_about

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