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More than decoration: An investigation into the role of visual rhetoric and ethos in corporate visual identity

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**More than decoration: An investigation into the role of
visual rhetoric and ethos in corporate visual identity**

by

Jennifer R. Veltsos

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2009

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DEDICATION

To Noah, who was with me at the start of this journey.

To Nikolas, who was with me at the end of it.

And to Chris, who was beside me all the way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	iv
List of Figures	v
Abstract	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction: Visual Communication and Professional Communication Intersect.....	1
Understanding “Corporate Visual Identity”	2
Visual Identity and Visual Rhetoric.....	6
Why Study Corporate Visual Identity?	8
Corporate Visual Identity, Start-ups, and Ethos	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review & Theoretical Framework: The Role of Visual Rhetoric and Ethos in Corporate Visual Identity	15
The Importance of Establishing Ethos	17
The Role of Rhetoric in Visual Communication.....	21
Visual Rhetoric and Professional Communication	24
A Need for Design Heuristics.....	28
Chapter 3: Research Methodology: Analyzing Corporate Visual Identity.....	30
Qualitative Research Methodology	32
Research Philosophy	33
Research Participants.....	34
Data Collection.....	35
Data Analysis	40
Chapter 4: Results of Interviews: How Organizations Create Corporate Visual Identity.....	44
Voices of Experience	45
Voices of the Novices	50
What the Interviews Reveal About Creating Corporate Visual Identity	61
Chapter 5: Results of Document Analysis: The Methods and Techniques Behind Corporate Visual Identity.....	65
The Elements of a Corporate Visual Identity.....	65
Use of Typical Design Techniques in the Corporate Visual Identities.....	78
Using the Visual Techniques in Concert	85
What the Techniques Imply About the Novice Designers	92
Chapter 6: Conclusion and Implications: Visual Rhetoric in the Professional Communication Classroom.....	95
The Link Between Ethos and Visual Identity.....	96
Design Methods Used by Entrepreneurs	97
Design Techniques in the Professional Documents.....	98
Implications for Visual Rhetoric & Professional Communication Pedagogy.....	99
Suggestions for Future Research	102
Conclusion	104
Bibliography.....	105
Appendix A Prospecting Letter	114
Appendix B Sample Interview Questions	117
Acknowledgements.....	120

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Summary of data collected from participants.....	41
Table 2 Analysis codes developed from interviews with the nine participants.	41
Table 3 The continua of visual techniques used to evaluate sample documents.....	43
Table 4 A categorization of the visual techniques described by Dondis (1973).....	79
Table 5 A suggestion for teaching students how to experiment with visual techniques	101

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 The icon used by Sebastien's university.....	66
Figure 2 Emily's pet services logo	67
Figure 3 Emily's secondary icon.	67
Figure 4 Sarah's new logo featuring her main puppet.	68
Figure 5 The photograph that functioned as Sarah's former logo.....	68
Figure 6 Two versions of Susan's logo..	68
Figure 7 An imitation of Scott's logotype.....	69
Figure 8 Photos of Scott's facility featuring actual clients.....	75
Figure 9 Sarah's new photo..	75
Figure 10 Emily's pet taxi graphic.....	77
Figure 11 <i>Predictability, regularity, sequentiality, and singularity</i>	80
Figure 12 <i>Balance and symmetry</i>	81
Figure 13 <i>Complexity, fragmentation, and intricacy</i>	82
Figure 14 <i>Boldness, neutrality, and accent</i>	83
Figure 15: The typical "quadrant" business card layout.	86
Figure 16 <i>Symmetry, unity, and opacity</i>	87
Figure 17 <i>Accent and simplicity</i>	87
Figure 18 <i>Accent and balance</i>	87
Figure 19 <i>Spontaneity, irregularity, and juxtaposition</i> among other techniques.	88
Figure 20 <i>Balance and predictability</i>	88
Figure 21 <i>Predictability, regularity, fragmentation, episodicity, and complexity</i>	89
Figure 22 <i>Sharpness and diffusion</i> as well as <i>economy, spontaneity</i> and <i>accent</i>	89
Figure 23 <i>Accuracy, asymmetry, exaggeration, diffusion</i> and <i>consistency</i>	90
Figure 24 <i>Symmetry, instability, predictability, complexity</i> and <i>accuracy</i>	91

ABSTRACT

Companies rely on corporate visual identity (CVI), a collection of visual elements, to unify their communications and suggest a corporate persona. Start-up companies must quickly capture the attention of their audience and create ethos if they hope to be successful. Yet little is known about how start-ups create their CVI and use it for professional communication. Although the issues behind CVI—audience, ethos, visual rhetoric, and persuasion—are all very rhetorical, the topic has not yet received much attention in rhetoric or professional communication. Most of the existing research in marketing and graphic design focuses on large, well-known organizations with visual identities created by professional designers.

Using a theoretical framework based upon ethos, social construction, and visual rhetoric, this qualitative research study examines how start-up businesses develop CVI and use it to establish corporate ethos. Using document analysis and interviews with graphic designers, marketing specialists, and entrepreneurs from the Midwest, this study suggests that entrepreneurs recognize the informational and persuasive purposes of CVI but that they are not always able to implement the CVI consistently. The development and implementation of their CVIs indicated several common constraints: using personal experience and intuition rather than audience analysis, a lack of experience in design, limited technical skill and access to appropriate software, and reliance upon friends and family for assistance. The visual techniques used in their promotional documents suggest that the start-ups want to attract readers' attention and project a sense of order in their documents. Unfortunately, some of the designs are self-defeating because they present too much information, lack focal points and whitespace, and display cautious, structured layouts rather than spontaneous, unexpected ones.

These results demand a renewed emphasis on visual rhetoric in professional communication classrooms, including instruction in both theory and execution via technology. Visual elements are more than illustration: they communicate messages that can explain, reinforce, or even contradict the documents that contain them. By studying visual rhetoric in the workplace, particularly cases in the margins like start-up businesses, we can refine our understanding of its use by writers and its impact on readers.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

VISUAL COMMUNICATION AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION INTERSECT

Few people look at a company's stationery and think, "This is so beautiful, I'll triple my order," or "This is so ugly, I'll cancel my order." But when people see your stationery, they think *something* about you and it's going to be positive or negative, depending upon the design and feel of the stationery.

– Robin Williams, *The Non-Designer's Design Book*

While writing this dissertation I had an unusual experience. As I sat surrounded by books and notes, my three-year-old son picked up one of my library books and started reading it to me. To be fair, the book he read combines words, clip art, and shapes into a quasi academic graphic novel. In *Visual Language* Robert Horn (1998) explains that our early education begins with drawings and other visual elements. Gradually the visuals are integrated with words until verbal communication eventually overtakes the visual. As my son inadvertently demonstrated, Horn's explanation of the significance of visual communication in early literacy is correct: images can tell a story, although integration with text paints a much fuller and more nuanced picture.

Just as I was mulling over Horn's argument, the power of visual communication jumped into the popular press during the 2008 presidential campaign. In 2007, Michael Beirut of the design firm Pentagram analyzed several logos of the leading Republican and Democratic candidates for *Newsweek* magazine. He explained that "All the Democrats have swooshy elements, a curve somewhere designed to signify a suppleness and willingness to listen." John McCain's choice of Optima typeface is "a hybrid for people who can't decide between a serif or sans serif...It's wishy-washy, neither contemporary nor traditional." And Hillary Clinton's use of her first name in her visual identity was designed "to make her approachable and friendly, and to disassociate herself from the Clinton dynasty" (Stumper Stickers). But it was Barak Obama's visual identity—the typeface and graphics used on promotional materials such as yard signs, T-shirts, and his website—that received the most attention and praise for its simplicity and rhetorical effectiveness. In fact, the Obama "brand" received nearly as much attention as his position on the issues. Obama's typeface, Gotham, was created for *GQ* magazine to "feel modern yet authoritative and masculine" (Bennet 2008). His logo became one of the most

recognized icons in the country: a circle enclosing a field of red and white rows and a blue sky with a rising sun. The symbolism is as simple as it is effective: Obama will bring a new day of hope and change to America. Sol Sender, a graphic designer at the Chicago firm that created Obama's visual identity, explains that the design, one of eight submitted for consideration by the campaign, was developed in two weeks and was inspired by the candidate's two books. Obama and his team were ultimately impressed by the campaign's skillful implementation and evolution of the visual identity:

Various vendors needed to reproduce the mark on signs, banners, and they needed some rules. So our initial concern was compliance and consistency. Having said that, we did think it was such a strong mark—strong marks have the potential for broad successful application and viral growth—and we were cognizant of its possibilities. We saw (and visualized as part of the creative process) buttons, billboards, ads, Web banners, T-shirts and hats. We did not foresee the scope of the variations and the potential 'ownership' that emerged, though.

We handed the logo and design assets off to the campaign in the summer of 2007. From that point on, everything that you've seen was done by the campaign, including the "demographic" variations of the logo. They also evolved the typography to uppercase, incorporated Joe Biden's name and added a white line around the mark." (in Heller 2008)

The image of a rising sun is not unique, of course; many people have noted the similarities between Obama's icon and the logo used by Farm Aid as well as the Great Seal of the State of Ohio. But the power of Obama's icon and typography came from their ability to project qualities that the candidate seemed to embody: hopefulness, elegance, confidence.

As a junior senator embarking on a presidential campaign, Barak Obama faced a problem similar to that of many start-up companies: how to capture the attention of his audience and create enough ethos in a short span of time to earn its trust and, more importantly, its votes. And like many other new businesses, one solution he chose to use was a corporate visual identity.

Understanding "Corporate Visual Identity"

This research study investigates a typical task encountered by organizations of all sizes and structures. How can an organization attract the attention of its audience, particularly when competing with other businesses who may be more well-known or when potential readers are

unfamiliar with its product or service? One way is to create a visual identity that is memorable, attractive, and informative. A *corporate visual identity* is a package of elements used by organizations to unify their communications. The elements of a visual identity provide an organization with an opportunity to differentiate itself from competition, build a relationship with the audience, create credibility, and bring order to chaos (Adams, Morioka, and Stone 2004, 15). The corporate visual identity (CVI) is a visual expression of the corporate identity and an external representation of its culture, people, behavior, and communication (van Riel and Balmer 1997; Witt and Rode 2005). “Identity is expressed in the names, symbols, logos, colours and rites of passage which the organization uses to distinguish itself, its brands and its constituent companies. At one level, these serve the same purpose as religious symbolism, chivalric heraldry, or national flags...At another level, they represent consistent standards of quality and therefore encourage consumer loyalty” (Olins 1989, 9).

Effective visual identities are memorable and flexible, appearing on everything from letterhead and business cards to websites and promotional materials and even employee uniforms and company cars. The visual identities, like written or oral messages, are carefully constructed to catch readers’ attention and persuade them to use the organization’s products or services. For well-established organizations, a strong corporate visual identity makes a statement that viewers instantly recognize and associate with a host of qualities that the organization wishes to promote. For example, the Nike “Swoosh” is one of the most recognized logos in the world. The simple design, suggesting movement and energy, has achieved such iconic status that the design has not required much updating in its thirty-six years. The appearance of the Swoosh on a pair of shoes, a shirt, or other sports paraphernalia validates an expensive price tag by inspiring thoughts of specialized design and quality workmanship or a desire to emulate the professional athletes associated with the brand.

Three key terms appear regularly in discussions of the public face of an organization: corporate identity, brand or brand identity, and corporate visual identity. In graphic design the terms often appear interchangeable (Fishel 2000; Peterson 1999) whereas marketers seem to view corporate visual identity as merely an expression of the larger concepts of branding and corporate identity (Baker and Balmer 1997; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa 1997; Topalian 2003).

For the purposes of this project, I define the terms in the following manner:

- Corporate identity is an internal factor composed of the organization's culture, people, behavior, and communication (Olins 1989, van Riel and Balmer 1997; Witt and Rode 2005).
- Brand identity is the visible expression of corporate identity that helps us classify, recall, and navigate the world around us (Bernstein 1984).
- Branding encompasses any contact with customers and suppliers from the product to the architecture of buildings and from the way employees dress to the way they answer the telephone when customers call (Smith 2000).
- Corporate visual identity is the collection of graphical and textual elements that make up the brand.

A corporate visual identity (CVI) typically includes “a name, a symbol and/or logo, typography, color, a slogan, and—very often—additional graphic elements” (van den Bosch, de Jong, and Elving 2005, 108). For example, the McDonald's brand is made up of CVI elements such as the red and yellow color scheme, the golden arches logo that is often reflected in the architecture of the restaurants, and the Ronald McDonald mascot. CVI creates an image that attracts readers' attention and reveals information about the culture or personality of an organization as well as its products or services. The purpose of the CVI is to unify the organization's communication and reinforce its ethos by presenting a positive image that customers remember and associate with the reputation of the organization.

An organization creates or alters visual identities to accomplish one of five purposes: to position or reposition itself within its market, to modernize its look, to reflect changes in the business, to promote growth, and to start over (Fishel 2000, 9-11). In industry some familiar visual identities include the red and white script and hourglass bottle of Coca-Cola and the distinctive green of John Deere, both of which have been immensely successful in positioning the products in the minds of national and international consumers. In 2002 UPS even used its signature color as a tagline, asking customers “What can BROWN do for you?” In a press release posted on UPS.com Dale Hayes, vice president for brand management and customer communications, explained that the company wanted to capitalize upon its familiarity as it launched new services. “At UPS, brown is more than a color – it's a tangible asset that people associate with all the things that are good about our brand.”

And just as a personal identity can grow and change over time, so can corporate visual identities. For instance, the IBM logo has changed seven times since the company was founded in 1889. Several of these changes occurred when the company's name changed, but even the famous logotype has been updated four times (IBM.com). The iconic apple logo of Apple Corporation received a facelift in 1998 when the company replaced its rainbow design with a series of icons in monochromatic colors. On a local scale the corporate visual identity for Iowa State University has been in place for twenty of its 150 years, says university marketing director Carol Custer. In fact, the ISU visual identity demonstrates how complex a CVI can be. The Visual Identity System webpage explains that the university's visual identity consists of a nameplate, typography, several variations of color palettes, stock photography, various athletic marks, the university seal, and detailed editorial guidelines. The objective of such a comprehensive CVI is to "[tie] all the colleges, institutes, centers and units of our university together." The thoroughness of these guidelines suggests that the CVI is used to unify official university documents and avoid a "visual Tower of Babel" (Baker and Balmer 1997, 377).

Each of these organizations uses its visual identity as part of its corporate communication strategy to unite messages, establish ethos, and even make pathetic appeals to loyalty and previous experience with the brand. A fundamental concept of sales and marketing is the Marketing Mix of product, price, place, and promotion, also known as "the 4 Ps." Corporate visual identity addresses two elements of the mix: product (brand, packaging) and promotion (recognition, advertising, consistent message). Corporate visual identity, as an element in a larger branding program, can "help customers to reduce their anxiety when purchasing products or services" (van den Bosch, de Jong, and Elving 2006, 139) because the visual identity can serve as shorthand for the organization's name and reputation and can also cue memories of past experience (Baker and Balmer 1997). In fact, when there is no difference between the quality or price of two products consumers often rely solely upon the reputation of the organization—whether real or perceived—or upon past experience with the product to differentiate (Alessandri, Yang, and Kinsey 2006; Melewar 2001; Olins 1989). A strong CVI is thus important to all organizations but crucial to start-ups because customers do not have prior experience to use in evaluating the organization or its products/services (Witt and Rode 2005).

Visual Identity and Visual Rhetoric

In recent years the value of visual communication has earned increasing attention in composition and professional communication classrooms. Scholars such as Charles Hill (2004), Diana George (2002), and others have argued that the traditional emphasis on verbal literacy in composition has largely excluded visual communication to the detriment of our students. George writes that "Literacy means more than words, and visual literacy means more than play" (16). Bringing visual communication into composition classes can take a variety of forms including web page design, poster presentations, quantitative data analysis, and analysis of advertising and other promotional materials. This turn to visual communication is part of a larger movement by composition instructors to explore the intersection of verbal and visual literacies in electronic and multimodal communication (Williams 2001). Just as verbal literacy refers to the ability to read and construct text, visual literacy refers to the ability to both read and interpret visual messages and to create visual messages to communicate with others (Brumberger 2007; see also Braden & Hortin 1982; Curtiss 1987). Jonathan Matusitz (2005) takes this idea one step further by arguing that we should go beyond visual literacy and develop "visual intelligence." The difference between the two seems to be an ability to think critically about visual communication and to recognize manipulation within designs. He explains that "visual intelligence requires the student to learn to distinguish between good and bad information" (106).

Visual intelligence would help readers be aware of (and beware of) the power of rhetoric in visual communication. Extending the traditional definition of rhetoric—the art of using language effectively and persuasively—to visual rhetoric would indicate that an author is able to use visual elements to persuade or please an audience. The power of visual rhetoric, explains Charles Kostelnick (1989), is that the choices an author makes for the visual elements of a document "make a difference—in readers' attitudes toward a document, in how readers process its information, and in which information they value" (77). As authors such as Edward Tufte (2001, 2003) and Howard Wainer (1997) have demonstrated, data do not speak for themselves; rather, the person who uses the data to construct a visual has the power to both reveal and hide information from the reader and to inform or mislead as he/she sees fit. And the logistics of creating visual messages has never been easier. With desktop publishing software and a good printer, novices can now do the work that used to require teams of people with specialized skills.

But are novices aware that even subtle design choices like typeface affect the tone (ethos) of a document and the organization the document represents (Kinross 1985; Allen 1996; Henderson, Giese, and Cote 2004)? Are they aware of the influence of culture and discourse communities in their ability to identify and exercise conventions and in the ability of the audience to understand the meaning they are trying to create in their designs? These are questions that are essential for visual literacy. Unfortunately, incorporating visual literacy into the business communication classroom can be difficult in already full curricula. A 2005 survey by Eva Brumberger showed that in business communication classrooms visual communication is overshadowed by written and oral communication; two-thirds of her respondents spend less than 20 percent of their time teaching visual communication in undergraduate courses.

The changes in communication brought on by the economy, technology, and the Internet make visual literacy an essential skill for modern professional communicators. Cheap computers and software have put the tools for visual communication at their fingertips while budget crunches have condensed many jobs into few and made professional writers responsible for more than just writing words. Additionally, readers are savvier about visuals and often expect elements of document design in even simple documents like interoffice memos. As Brumberger (2005, 320) explained, “To meet users' needs...business communicators must be more than good writers. Given the prevalence of visual rhetoric in the workplace, their proficiency with written and oral language must be complemented by proficiency with visual language.” Yet she warns that if professional communication courses do not value the visual mode of communication as highly as the verbal mode then we risk creating a generation of “visual technicians” (Brumberger 2007) who may have technical skills to create documents that include visual elements but who are not able to think critically about the work they produce.

An informal review of online articles about visual communication published in four of the leading professional communication journals (*Journal of Business Communication* 1988-2007, *Business Communication Quarterly* 1993-2007, *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 1996-2007, and *Technical Communication Quarterly* 1996-2007) demonstrated that visual communication is a popular topic in professional communication. They include articles about general document design, charts and graphs, web pages and writing for the web, new media and multimedia, and several about PowerPoint. Business communication textbooks often suggest that authors who incorporate visual rhetoric into their documents improve readability, present quantitative

information more efficiently and effectively than text alone, and enhance the persuasiveness of their writing (for example see Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred 2008 or Locker and Kinzler 2008).

I propose that studying corporate visual identity offers professional communication instructors an additional way to bring visual rhetoric into their curricula. As Brumberger's 2005 study suggested, in many universities business communication is a single course within existing programs. Rather than limiting visual rhetoric to a single unit within that course, corporate visual identity offers an opportunity to add a visual component to existing units such as job applications and corporate correspondence. Furthermore, as the participants in this study show, corporate visual identity offers a glimpse at how visual communication can help users establish corporate ethos and practice some typical visual techniques that have long been used in specialized fields like graphic design.

Why Study Corporate Visual Identity?

This study was inspired by my entrepreneurial family and friends as well as by my students who aspire to be entrepreneurs. When my husband started an information security consultancy in 2006, he spent a summer debating names and designing the “stuff” that would help him communicate with his audience. That “stuff” now includes letterhead, return address labels, business cards, notepaper, postcards, a website, and promotional clothing. Everything is united by the elements of his visual identity. He chose to forgo a graphical logo in favor of a logotype using the Handel Gothic typeface. He also uses a few choices of stock photography, a blue and white color palette, and Futura as his body text typeface.

My husband's experience even inspired an assignment for my business communication class. As part of the WOVE composition pedagogy at Iowa State University we are encouraged to have students practice written, oral, visual, and electronic modes of communication, so in the Fall semester of 2006 I asked my students to create a personal visual identity to practice the visual mode of communication as well as to experiment with some of the basic features of desktop publishing software. My hope for the assignment was to have the students think about the design choices that are made for them by software templates and default style sheets and to encourage them to take control of those choices to impart a sense of self in their documents. Additionally, the personal visual identity would unify their resume, cover letter, and professional portfolio and help them stand out from the masses at the annual career fair who simply use

Microsoft Word templates. When the semester finished, students had a visual identity package consisting of two typefaces, a color palette, and a logo that could be a symbol, monogram, or logotype.

This project is an example of what John B. Killoran (1999) calls “synthetic institutionalism,” an effort by individuals to make their visual identities resemble that of established corporations in order to construct ethos with their audience. My intention for the assignment was not to make students imitate corporations, although sometimes that is what happened. Rather, my intention was to help students understand the decisions that go into document design, recognize the opportunities and limitations before them, and become better consumers of visual information. In *The Crystal Goblet* Beatrice Warde (1956) addresses the need to include typography in secondary education, not just for those who plan to enter the printing trade but also for those who will one day become print customers. She suggests that the need for education for professionals extends on both sides of the company. “Understanding the problems of Design helps Management...[An] awareness of Design, or consciousness of the look of the job and the way in which it affects the ultimate reader’s eye, tends to make a good manager a better one...” (50-51). A basic introduction to design such as the visual identity assignment is one way of preparing these future managers for some of the work that lies ahead of them beyond writing text.

There are three issues about corporate visual identity that I find particularly interesting and that inspired my research study:

Good designs exhibit consistency, clarity, and flexibility. A good design can be used in many sizes and on various media. As the Obama CVI illustrated, the design must function equally well on paper, on business cards, on posters, and on promotional items like clothes or gifts. When my husband started designing his CVI, he did not think beyond the document he needed at that moment. He based each design upon the last one, repeating the things that worked and revising the things that had not. As a consumer he knew that consistency was important, and each new product convinced him that flexibility was important too, but these lessons were learned through trial and error rather than by consulting experts or reading identity design books. Was his experience the exception or the rule?

Designing a visual identity often involves technology. Although conventional wisdom says that “millennial” students are tech savvy, I have found that is not always true. They

surf the web and use most of the standard productivity software, but when it comes to being creative, they are often stumped. In my experience only a handful of students in professional communication classes know how to use specialized graphic editing or desktop publishing software like Adobe Photoshop, InDesign, or even Microsoft Publisher. In fact, most of the students persist in trying to create their visual identities in Microsoft Word in spite of the frustrations it causes. If entrepreneurs in the field have similar backgrounds to my students, many of whom wish to become entrepreneurs themselves one day, then what technologies are entrepreneurs using, and how are they making it work?

Corporate visual identities are an opportunity to explore creativity. Eva

Brumberger (2007) argues that design is not a mysterious gift that some lucky people have and the rest of us do not. Creativity, she says, is a way of thinking and working that can be developed through practice and experimentation just as we do with writing. The corporate visual identity project is one example of an assignment that allows students to experiment with visual rhetoric and practice creative thinking. But where do novices get their inspiration? What are the reasons behind the decisions they make regarding the elements that form their visual identities? And what techniques do they use to implement those elements into their documents?

Of course, all of these questions are addressed if an organization hires a professional graphic designer. The designer has the education and experience to know what a corporate visual identity consists of, how to create one that is flexible enough to be used on various media, and how to use it consistently across various messages. The designer uses the right software, reads industry journals for information about trends and innovations, and pays attention to visual messages for inspiration. But if an organization does not hire a graphic designer, as my husband did not for financial reasons, then how does it create a visual identity on its own? That is what I wanted to discover.

Corporate Visual Identity, Start-ups, and Ethos

Most of the existing research about corporate visual identity appears in marketing and graphic design literature; it usually focuses on large, well-known organizations in which the visual identities are created by professional designers, tested extensively with potential users, and protected fiercely against imitators. Yet while companies like Coca-Cola, Nike, or UPS fill the

spotlight, 99 percent of U.S. employers are small businesses¹. According to the Small Business Administration, every year more than 600,000 new businesses are formed. In spite of these statistics, very little is known about how start-up organizations and entrepreneurs create their corporate visual identities and use them as a form of professional communication. Furthermore, although the issues behind corporate visual identity—audience, ethos, visual rhetoric, and persuasion—all fall within the realm of rhetoric and professional communication, the topic has not yet received much attention in this field.

The purpose of my dissertation research is to fill that gap: to identify and examine the ways that start-up organizations develop their corporate visual identities and use them to develop corporate ethos as they communicate with their audiences. Like President Obama, start-up organizations need to quickly create visual identities to unify their corporate communications and establish their ethos; unlike the Obama campaign, however, many start-ups create their visual identities on their own because they cannot afford to hire professional graphic designers. Their own expertise may not include graphic design, nor do they have the tools, technical skills, or research to develop a corporate visual identity with the same flexibility and consistency as a professional would do. Instead they shape their identities based upon trial and error, experimentation, intuition, and a little help from family and friends. To explore this endeavor I conducted a qualitative research study guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways do start-up entrepreneurs perceive a link between their corporate visual identity and their corporate ethos?
2. How do start-up entrepreneurs create their visual identities?
3. What design techniques do start-up entrepreneurs use in their corporate visual identities and in professional or promotional documents?

Using a theoretical framework based upon theories of ethos, social construction, and visual rhetoric, I conducted a series of interviews with two graphic designers, two marketing specialists, and five entrepreneurs in the Midwest. This sample was selected to explore the experiences of participants in different industries and different stages in their development in order to focus on conceptual issues. The start-up participants own companies that were no older

¹ According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, a small business employs less than 500 people. In 2007 approximately twenty-seven million companies were classified as “small” businesses compared to seventeen thousand “large” businesses. Of those small businesses, nearly twenty million (75 percent) had no employees.

than five years at the time of the interviews; the rationale for this age restriction is that younger companies are still in the process of constructing their professional identities and thus are more likely to either be creating or have recently created visual identity designs. Since the object of my research is to understand the design process and decisions used by untrained practitioners, companies that are franchises of established businesses or that used the services of professional graphic designers or advertising agencies were excluded. In order to put the information from the start-ups into perspective and to get a richer idea of how organizations use visual identity to establish their ethos, I then broadened my sample to include both graphic designers who create visual identities and organizations that have been in business longer than five years and have received assistance from professional graphic designers in creating and implementing their visual identities.

The results of these interviews follow the qualitative methodology of instrumental case studies which use the case to focus upon issues and to understand a general situation (Stake 1995). The opinions and experiences of the participants in this study helped me investigate the rhetorical nature of corporate visual identity as a form of corporate communication. Based upon this information I arrived at the following conclusions:

1. The start-up entrepreneurs recognize that a corporate visual identity is a conventional element of business communication that serves both informational and persuasive purposes. They also recognize that, in addition to providing a consistent look and feel to corporate documents, the corporate visual identity has the potential to affect their ethos with their audience. Yet for a host of reasons—the software they used, their lack of technical skill in design and printing considerations, or even just lack of time and attention—they have not always been successful in being consistent in the design of their documents.
2. Largely because of concerns about cost, the start-up participants relied upon their own experience and intuition to design their visual identities rather than doing audience analysis research as the experienced participants have done. This lack of research threatens the effectiveness of their ability to construct ethos in the traditional sense of interaction between the speaker/author and the audience. In other words, the start-ups know what they want their identities to say about their businesses, but the effectiveness of that message is unproven and largely anecdotal.

Furthermore, the development and execution of their visual identities were constrained by their lack of experience in design, their technical skill and choice of technology, and their reliance upon assistance from outsiders for some specialized tasks.

Beyond the interviews I analyzed a collection of corporate documents from the start-ups to search for patterns in the use of visual techniques using a framework suggested by Donis A. Dondis (1973). This analysis led to the following conclusion:

3. Without any special research or training, the start-up entrepreneurs developed their own versions of the conventional elements of a visual identity: logo, color palette, typography, tagline, and imagery. The techniques that they used to implement these elements in their documents imply that the participants prefer order in the layout of their documents and that the purpose of their documents is to attract attention and serve as informational as well as persuasive documents. Unfortunately some of the designs are self-defeating, presenting too much information and lacking focal points and whitespace. The way the start-ups employ the visual techniques suggests that untrained users may prefer cautious, structured designs rather than more spontaneous, unexpected ones. It also suggests that novices need more instruction in how to execute the visual techniques both in theory and in practice using typical desktop publishing software.

In the remainder of this dissertation, I discuss my theoretical framework, research study, and results in the following manner. I argue that corporate visual identity is a form of visual rhetoric that helps organizations establish their reputations and promote their products or services to their audiences. In Chapter 2 I review literature from the fields of rhetoric, professional communication, graphic design, and marketing to explore the role that visual rhetoric plays in developing an organization's ethos through its corporate communication and branding materials.

In Chapter 3 I introduce my research participants and describe the qualitative research data collection and analysis methods used. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the results analysis of the interviews with the graphic designers, marketing specialists, and entrepreneurs. I describe the methods and design techniques that a group of start-up entrepreneurs use in developing their visual identities, how they use their visual identities in their corporate

communication, and I consider how their visual identities may or may not shape their corporate ethos. In Chapter 5 I present examples of the visual identity elements from the start-up participants. From there I review a sample of corporate documents that feature those elements and identify trends in the use of nineteen visual techniques suggested by Dondis (1973).

Finally, in Chapter 6 I discuss the conclusions of my research questions. I also identify implications of this study for professional communication instructors, students, and practitioners. In doing so, I argue that visual rhetoric is more important than ever in business communication classes. Furthermore, corporate visual identity is a useful way to teach visual rhetoric in business communication while introducing an authentic assignment into the curriculum (McCarthy and McCarthy 2003). I also propose that the information gleaned from the start-up participants, a group of design novices who chose to experiment with their own visual identities, may help instructors teach students to read and create their own visual documents.

The results of this study will inform the discipline of rhetoric and professional communication about the practice of professional communication and visual design in a non-academic setting and provide business communication teachers with information about visual rhetoric that is closer to actual practice. In doing so, this study answers the call from Kostelnick (1994) to use contextual research to inform document design and to develop the discussion of visual rhetoric within professional communication literature. Furthermore, this study elaborates on a call to include design principles in lessons about visual communication in composition classes by Margaret Graham, Katherine Hannigan, and Paula Curran (2005). They argue that both writing and design focus upon a rhetorical situation of writer/designer, reader, content, and context, but by teaching only rhetorical analysis in composition we privilege the verbal over the visual and make visual communication suspect. Finally, the results of this study will also provide a basis for more detailed study of corporate visual identity from the perspective of both professional design professionals and design novices. In the following chapter I begin by reviewing literature that may inform these perspectives.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

THE ROLE OF VISUAL RHETORIC AND ETHOS IN CORPORATE VISUAL IDENTITY

The way something is presented will define the way you react to it. So you can take the same message and present it in three different typefaces, and the response to that, the immediate emotional response will be different. And the choice of typeface is the prime weapon, if you want, in that communication. And I say weapon largely because with commercial marketing and advertising, the way a message is dressed is going to define our reaction to that message in the advertising.

- Neville Brody, graphic designer, in *Helvetica*

Branding is the combination of visual elements used to communicate with stakeholders like customers, vendors, investors, and employees. In addition to explicit claims about the company and its products or services, organizations make implicit claims through the symbols they use such as a logo, a color scheme, and typefaces (Adams, Morioka, and Stone 2004), or even the architecture of its buildings (Walters 2007) and the art it hangs on its walls (Hoeken and Ruikes 2006).

The role of ethos in persuading and informing potential audiences helps us understand why organizations carefully manage their image through coordinated branding. Naomi Klein (2000) explains that in pre-industrial times consumers usually lived in small towns and shopped at the local store or bought food from local farmers. The shopkeepers and farmers developed relationships with their customers and established their ethos through these relationships. In the last century, however, the small stores and farms have been replaced by large, often faceless corporations. Responding to fears about quality and anonymity, as well as competition from products with little differentiation in quality or price, companies began to use branding and fictional characters such as Aunt Jemima or the Jolly Green Giant to give the organization a face and to develop surrogate relationships with consumers (Klein 2000). Consumers expect spokes-characters to be honest, sincere, and reliable, a set of qualities that maps to Aristotle's ideals of good sense, good moral character, and goodwill. In some instances consumers even ascribe expertise to spokes-characters, an attribute that is often at play in the audience's evaluation of ethos (Garretson and Niedrich 2004). By the 1980s, the idea of branding began to overshadow the products or services it was supposed to represent and companies like Nike, Benetton, Apple

Computer Corporation, and others began to co-op values like diversity and rebellion to create “brand tribes” (Klein, Garner, and Jhally 2003). As Richard A. Lanham (2006, 2) explains, “It is the relationship to the consumer that matters now, not the object that engenders it.”

Many companies turn to professional graphic designers to create visual identity packages that will create a unique look for the organization and provide an element of consistency to its external communications that enhances its ethos and sense of professionalism. “All my outward communications are now consistently branded, so I look more businesslike,” says one technical communication consultant regarding the visual identity she uses to brand her work (Frick 2008, 37). Corporate visual identities build the organization’s ethos with its stakeholders by using visual elements that signal a deliberate message about the organization’s product or service as well as its corporate identity. The choice of visual elements is based in part upon expectations of the audience. By using conventions that match those expectations to guide their decisions about format, layout, color, or typography, designers create a visual identity using a vocabulary and structure that the audience can “read.”

In communication, the use of conventions is an example of social construction. Conventions are techniques or practices that have been developed through negotiation and experience within a discourse community; they exist because they represent a useful way to perform a design task. Like textual genres, conventions are not just containers for ideas but methods and techniques with historical backgrounds that “serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community” (Miller 1984, 165). Design conventions tell us not only about the individual who uses them but also about the communities she lives and works within and the culture that surrounds her. Novice and experienced designers alike rely upon conventions in the same way that writers rely upon rhetorical commonplaces. Because the texts we create are inspired by or based upon existing texts, designs, and ideas within the discourse community, we can consider all texts as intertextual. Because we make choices about when and how to use conventions based upon our audience and context, all design is rhetorical (Kinross 1985).

In this dissertation I argue that corporate visual identity is a form of professional communication that helps organizations promote their products or services to potential customers and establish or enhance their own reputation. In this chapter I review literature from the fields of rhetoric, professional communication, design, and marketing to explore how each

contributes to design decisions. I begin with a review of the concepts of ethos and social construction to explain the significance of a corporate visual identity as a representation of the corporate persona. Next, I examine the intersection of visual rhetoric and corporate communication in order to emphasize that visual rhetoric is ubiquitous and to consider its role in corporate visual identity. I conclude with a survey of visual rhetoric in professional communication literature to identify theories and advice that even novice professional communicators can use to guide the design decisions for their corporate visual identities.

The Importance of Establishing Ethos

From a graphic design perspective, the corporate visual identity (CVI) is a reflection of the organization's "inner self" (Fishel 2000) or an interpretation of its character (Arnheim 1969, Olins 1989). Using appeals to one's character as a means of persuasion is a widely used technique that dates back to classical rhetoric and the concept of ethos. The term is frequently used to describe the personal characteristics of a speaker (or author) that he or she uses to affect an audience and influence decisions about the topic at hand (Lanham 1991; Hauser 2002).

The concept of ethos is usually described in one of two ways: as a moral quality of the speaker (see Plato, Longinus, Quintilian, Blair) or as a strategic device that the speaker deploys (see Aristotle, Cicero, Burke). These two perspectives shed light on different views of the role of rhetoric: the idealistic or Platonic view of rhetoric and more specifically dialectic as a way of discovering truth, or the pragmatic or Aristotelian view rhetoric as a means of persuasion (Johnson 1984). Since marketing—the broad discipline that encompasses advertising, branding, and CVI—is generally associated with persuasion, I will focus my discussion of ethos upon the pragmatic perspective.

As Aristotle explains in *Rhetoric*,

Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is spoken as to make us think him credible....This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of this character before he begins to speak. It is not true...that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be the most effective means of persuasion he possesses (I, 1356a).

Aristotle argues that the audience views each interaction as a *tabula rasa*, ignoring any previous interactions with the speaker. Hauser (2002) concurs, adding that the audience

evaluates the speaker through inferences about her mental, moral, and emotional habits based upon the information that she chooses to include or omit from her speech. Thus ethos is not a pre-existing quality of the speaker or author but rather “an interpretation that is the product of speaker-audience interaction” (147). Although the reputation of the speaker may precede her, each instance of communication is a new opportunity to create ethos.

In recent years rhetoric and the concept of ethos have been adapted from the tradition of speech communication to describe both textual and visual communication. Discussions of ethos in composition are often disguised by terminology like tone, voice, persona, and credibility (Johnson 1984), but the focus upon the expectations and needs of the audience remains (see Faigley 2003 and Lunsford 2002 for examples). In design ethos is described as a reflection of designers “not as they are, but as they wish to appear” (Buchanan 1985, 14). In order to build ethos, designers often associate a new idea or organization with qualities that the audience values such as good sense, virtue, or even irony (Tyler 1992). The success of a design “is not judged theoretically by appealing to the knowledge of a small group of experts, but practically by appealing to the interests, attitudes, opinions, and values of users” (Buchanan 1985, 19). In other words, ethos is a fiction that is mutually created by a speaker, author, or designer and an audience.

The concept of ethos is particularly important for entrepreneurial organizations. In the early stages of operation entrepreneurs are focused on developing their product or service (as they should), but start-ups may also find it useful to spend time developing an identity that will attract attention and encourage potential clients to try their products or services. Conventional wisdom says that logos, or an appeal to reason, is a particularly effective method of persuasion. However, in situations in which arguments are equally compelling or in which the audience lacks information, ethos is actually more persuasive than logos (Braet 1992; Hauser 2002). A customer’s lack of information is particularly problematic for start-up organizations since they are often competing with the visibility and audience awareness of more mature competitors. Furthermore, start-up entrepreneurs must establish ethos with their audiences quickly. A common myth is that up to 90% of new businesses fail in their first year; in actuality, U.S.

Census data indicate that the odds of success are marginally greater: only 50% of businesses survive their first four years (Headd and Kirchhoff 2007).²

Ethos, Social Construction, & Conventions

In rhetoric, social construction is the foundation of ethos. The concept of social construction may date back to Protagoras and his observation that “Man is the measure of all things.” Yet it was the social turn in composition in the 1980s that truly helped scholars in composition and rhetoric explore the interplay between an author and an audience. Influenced in part by Thomas S. Kuhn’s (1962) idea of paradigms and community-based knowledge in science, the social perspective (Faigley 1985) argues that there is no universal knowledge waiting to be discovered. Everything we know is based upon language (Bruffee 1986; Berlin 1992), and the language we use is governed by the discourse communities we belong to. Discourse communities determine what “knowledge” is for their specific contexts, and members of the communities know what kinds of information other members are likely to know or value (Faigley 1985). The ability to participate in a community’s discourse—to use the jargon, draft the documents, practice the traditions, or cite the right sources—demonstrates membership (Winsor 1990). Thus a competence with community conventions is one way to build ethos within that community.

A potential problem with conventions is the tendency to hide issues of power and to suppress difference in favor of the status quo (Berlin 1992; Barton and Barton 1993a, 1993b; Hall and Jhally 1997). The ideological approach to social construction (Thralls and Blyler 1993) asks writers to consider the issues of power and control that underlie conventions and shape the way that writers construct their messages and identities. For example, maps often use an ethnocentric design that centers the designer’s homeland in the center of the page; this design convention dates back to the original Mercator projection in the fifteenth century (Barton and Barton 1993a). Many readers accept this convention without question, even though the resulting maps often distort land masses and may even subjugate other countries by relegating them to the fringes of the page. Similarly, readers generally accept the conventions that control business

² While business failures are tallied by organizations like the Census, the Small Business Administration, and private firms, the term “failure” actually includes companies that change name or structure or that close even though the business was successful. Thus any generalizations about small business failures are difficult to substantiate. For more information see “Redefining Business Success: Distinguishing Between Closing and Failure” in *Small Business Economics* 2003, available online at http://www.sba.gov/advo/stats/bh_sbe03.pdf.

documents, such as North American and International standard paper sizes, without considering the cultural, political, and financial influences that created them.

In design, however, the unstated power and control can work to a designer's advantage. For example, Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett (2003) describe five ways that designers can misdirect readers: bungling conventions, hiding them, mocking them, using stealthy conventions, or simply flouting conventions. The first misdirection, bungling, is a user error: the designer either does not know the appropriate conventions or is unable to conform to them because she lacks the necessary technical skill. For example, some commercial websites use Comic Sans as a body font, silently sending a message that the information is humorous or trivial.

The other forms of misdirection, however, are intentional challenges to the conventions of the discourse community on the part of the designer. In 2008 the web design site [Re]encoded.com³ featured more than eighty business cards that either mock or flout the traditional 2.5 x 3 inch card in favor of designs such as a packet of seeds or a set of dog tags. For example, former hacker Kevin Mitnick uses a die-cut metal card featuring a selection of lock-picking tools to promote his information security consultancy. Other examples (a flash drive, a bottle opener, a fingernail file) ignore the business "card" convention altogether, although a case could be made that the items are actually promotional items rather than variations of a business card. In each case the decision to mock or flout a convention is a deliberate one that requires considerable skill and knowledge of the expectations and norms of the discourse community. Designers who engage in deliberate misdirection are so familiar with conventions that they are able to manipulate them to their own advantage or ignore them altogether. The designers who deliberately misdirect, then, have recognized the conventions that guide their work and the ideology that influences them; they have also recognized their own power to exercise influence through unconventional practices.

For most users, however, conventions serve a useful purpose of guiding the user and offering reliable solutions to common design questions or problems. As this review of literature has demonstrated, meeting the needs and expectations of users allows an organization to build its ethos, even if the user meets those needs in an unusual way. Yet while it may seem

³ The complete list of creative business cards is available at <http://www.reencoded.com/2008/05/20/42-awesome-business-card-designs-with-links-to-100s-more/>.

impossible to create a polished, visually appealing document without a background in graphic design, the reality is that all documents contain elements of visual rhetoric that affect everything from the reader's first impression of the document to how she navigates through it and understands relationships and hierarchies in the information.

The remainder of this chapter explores the topic of visual rhetoric from the perspective of corporate communication and document design. First I consider how the discussion of visual rhetoric and document design applies to various elements of corporate visual identity. I then review the advice of several academic and popular press authors to explore visual guidelines that professional communicators can use to improve the eloquence and persuasiveness of their documents.

The Role of Rhetoric in Visual Communication

Visual rhetoric has a long history in graphic design. For example, in 1965 Gui Bonsiepe argued that theories of rhetoric should be updated to include the interplay of words and images. Until then rhetoric was largely the domain of speech and writing programs, and designers liked to think that they worked with pure information. Bonsiepe argued that pure information does not exist. All of the decisions involved in the layout and presentation of information, no matter how banal, are rhetorical. Claiming that "the practice of rhetoric has far outrun its theory" (24), Bonsiepe nonetheless endeavors to apply the classical figures of speech to visual/verbal communication in the form of advertising.

One of the more useful elements of Bonsiepe's argument in respect to this research project is that Bonsiepe directly links rhetoric to advertising and consumerism, suggesting that rhetoric can be used in tandem with design to "implant an opinion" that will persuade buyers (23). He explains that "The consumer is given a wide range of choice between goods and services and it becomes desirable to influence him in the selection he makes" (24).

It is useful to remember that Bonsiepe's argument about the pervasiveness of visual rhetoric was made during the height of the Swiss influence on design, an influence that favored neutrality rather than rhetoric. Twenty years later Robin Kinross (1985) reaffirmed Bonsiepe's argument that all design is rhetorical. Analyzing an example of "pure" information—a railroad timetable—Kinross asks: If design is neutral and information is pure, as many designers insist, then what was the purpose of a 1930 redesign of the London railways timetable to feature

Monotype's new Gill Sans typeface? Or the use of color on a Dutch railway table? In both cases, Kinross explains, the designers sought to create documents that were not just informative but eloquent. Thus, argues Kinross, while modernism may have promised a future in which design could produce information in a manner that is free of rhetoric, the distinction between design for information and design for persuasion is not at all clear (21).

Yet Bonsiepe's claim that rhetoric could "implant" opinions implies that consumers passively accept information. Ann C. Tyler (1992) disagrees, asserting that the audience is often an active participant in visual rhetoric. She explains that "The goal of visual communication is to persuade an audience to adopt a new belief" (29). By working with a carefully identified audience in mind, the designer can select elements that tap into or coincide with existing beliefs and cultural expectations of the audience in order to make visual arguments more persuasive. The designer may also go one step further and turn the audience into a dynamic participant by constructing a visual argument with a negotiated meaning rather than merely an image to be viewed or read. The audience approaches the design with a set of beliefs; the designer hopes to use those beliefs to persuade by linking old beliefs with the new idea (22).

Tyler goes on to explain three purposes of design: to persuade the audience to act, to educate the audience, and to provide the audience with an experience. It is in the second purpose that Tyler's work intersects with corporate visual identity. She explains that

Corporate and institutional logos are an example of design that attempts to educate. The logo defines the company and persuades the audience that the qualities of the logo are also the qualities of the institution it represents. The audience includes both the company employees and those who come in contact with the company. Audience identification with the values of the organization serves the goals of management as well as those of public relations (26).

However, the power of a corporate logo is only as strong as its interpretation by the audience. The problem with many icons that are pressed into service as logos is that they are only "part-time symbols" that have different meanings in other contexts (Arnheim 1969). To create a symbol that is uniquely associated with a company's corporate visual identity, many designers turn to abstraction. Faced with competition first from printers and later from desktop publishing software, graphic designers began to position themselves as specialists who have "the unique ability to analyze and project images that constitute the symbolic meaning in the public message of their clients" (27). But abstraction and symbols, suggests Frances C. Butler (1984),

create a gap between graphic designers and their audiences. Using Ong's (1982) concept of orality and literacy, Butler asserts that graphic designers (the "literate" culture in terms of design) value abstraction and innovation whereas clients (the oral culture) value realism, detail, repetition, and reliance on standard forms. Butler warns that designs based upon abstraction may not be what their clients really want, nor are they even rhetorically effective because concrete images, not abstractions, help readers draw upon memory to understand and remember the message. "When the image is too general, it cannot activate memory because it cannot be assimilated into any personal experience, and thus can only substitute itself for any past memory" (Butler 1984, 38). In other words, abstract icons lead to generic associations that do not really serve the client or the audience unless the icon is surrounded by an explanatory context or consistent, unique usage (Arnheim 1969).

Abstraction is not necessarily a bad thing, however. Arnheim suggests that abstraction is really a complex process in which the reader's mind searches for similarities and differences between objects, making generalizations by distilling information. Perhaps for this reason Scott McCloud (1993) differentiates between abstract and realistic images rather than concrete ones, claiming that abstract images are better for general purpose use. He suggests that realistic images may contain too much information or offer too many possible interpretations whereas the simplicity of abstraction allows the author more control over meaning.

This is not to say that realistic or concrete visuals cede all control over meaning to readers. The staging of the image and cropping effects on photos can be used for very rhetorical purposes (Kienzler 1997). In fact, the process of taking professional photos, often called "composition," involves a collection of techniques that indicate photographs are carefully constructed visuals rather than mere reflections of reality (see Douglass 2006). Furthermore, images used in advertising do not usually represent reality anyway. Instead, they often consist of rather complex rhetorical arguments that use the same techniques as verbal arguments (invention, arrangement, and delivery) and that rely upon a pictorial vocabulary grounded in the shared culture of the author and the reader (Scott 1994). Advertising exploits the shared culture by creating an extrinsic visual metonymy in which the relationship between the elements in a design and the product or service being publicized is artificially created by the designer (Willerton 2005). A particularly effective method of creating extrinsic metonymies in advertising involves using rhetorical figures of speech such as puns and metaphors (Ehres 1984; McQuarrie

and Mick 1999). These figures are useful conceptual tools in designs because they help writers and readers make sense of the world around them by mapping abstract ideas to concrete ideas (Lakoff and Johnson 1981).

Visual Rhetoric and Professional Communication

Up to this point I have reviewed the role of visual rhetoric advertising and visual identity mainly from the perspective of graphic design. Yet many of the individuals who become entrepreneurs do not have experience with art or design. For these individuals, their exposure to visual rhetoric may only be their own experience as readers of visual messages or perhaps from classes or books about professional communication. Both academic and popular press authors emphasize that successful visual communication hinges upon meeting the needs of the reader, purpose, and context. Authors must consider whether the document design choices support the rhetorical function of the text; otherwise, document design could easily become “the grammar and punctuation of current-traditional rhetorics, with an emphasis on the correctness of surface features” rather than the interplay of the visual and verbal elements (Takayoshi 1996, 250). In the following section I review several frameworks that can guide design decisions about visual elements in professional communication.

Frameworks for Using Visual Rhetoric

Several scholars have suggested guidelines for professional communicators who want to make their documents more visually effective. For example, Gestalt theory is often used to provide document designers with a vocabulary or list of principles that describe how readers perceive visual elements (Bernhardt 1986; Moore and Fitz 1993a, 1993b; Kostelnick and Roberts 1998; Ball and Arola 2004, 2006). The principles of Gestalt psychology explain how humans read visual images by perceiving them holistically rather than as a collection of individual elements. First, our mind looks for *figure-ground contrast* to separate shapes from their background. The mind naturally groups shapes based upon their *similarity* to each other, their *proximity* to each other, and their location along a line of *symmetry*. It tries to connect elements or create patterns through *continuation* and to complete missing elements through *closure* (filling in missing areas within the shape). In fact, some authors contend that humans have a biological preference for some of the Gestalt principles. Contrast, rhythm, and balance, which correspond to figure-ground, similarity, and symmetry, are “basic principles in the organization and biology of the

organic form” that helped our predecessors recognize organic forms and survive by recognizing similarities between new and previously known organisms (Stebbing 2004, 64).

Another vocabulary for designers is the visual/verbal cognates of arrangement, emphasis, clarity, conciseness, tone, and ethos suggested by Charles Kostelnick and David D. Roberts (1998). When used successfully, the cognates guide authors in creating documents that are both pleasing and persuasive. In addition to reviewing the ways that the cognates can help professional communicators create visual documents, the authors also provide a twelve-cell matrix of visual coding modes to help designers understand how elements, both textual and visual, work together to structure information.

Visual rhetoric extends beyond structuring the layout. It can also provide cues that help the reader evaluate what the document is and whether it is worth her time and attention. Eric C. Kumpf's (2000) theory of visual metadiscourse identifies ten design issues that affect the way readers understand a document. A successful design matches the expectations of the audience. For example, the category of heft describes the size, shape, or “bulk” of a document relevant to the expectations of readers. The right heft for the assembly instructions of a wheelbarrow is probably a single page with diagrams; a thick booklet would exceed reader's expectations and probably go unread. The category of expense describes how the design of the document is perceived in terms of money. Readers will expect formal reports or sales brochures for expensive goods to be printed in full color on heavy, glossy paper rather than in black and white on copy paper. Conflicts between the visual and verbal tone of the message confuses readers and affects their perception of both the document and its author, argues Kumpf, so understanding of how visual rhetoric influences the reader's interpretation of the document can help writers both improve their documents and establish ethos.

Other scholars focus their attention on more concrete document design decisions such as layout. For instance, Robert Kramer and Stephen A. Bernhardt (1996) demonstrate the efficacy of several document design techniques by contrasting a “typical” composition essay page with a professional document layout. The elements that work to make the document more visually appealing and rhetorically persuasive are the use of a grid for page layout, active whitespace, text structures that guide the reader, thoughtful use of fonts and spacing, and controlling the document through style sheets. Several popular press authors have echoed this advice. For example, Robert C. Parker (2006) provides a thorough introduction to document

design concepts and terminology including organization, type, white space, and graphics. Christine Sevilla (2002) addresses page layout, color, document appearance (paper, binding, or what Kumpf would call expense), and illustrations. Robin Williams (1994) adapts the Gestalt principles of similarity, symmetry, and proximity into guidelines for laypeople, telling novice designers to develop the document's unity using repetition of elements, connecting the elements to one another via alignment, and placing related items close to each other. On the other hand, she writes, "If the elements (type, color, size, line thickness, shape, space, etc.) are not the *same*, then make them **very different**" using contrast (14, emphasis in original).

Another design element that is widely addressed in visual rhetoric literature is the selection and use of color. As Kinross suggests in his discussion of railroad timetables, the use of color goes beyond mere decoration to serve a rhetorical function in documents. Ann R. Richards and Carol David (2005) argue that color functions as emotional, ethical, and logical appeals in document design. Studying the design of corporate websites, they suggest that color pleases viewers aesthetically in order to encourage them to explore the site (emotional function), links the website with an organization through consistent use of color palettes (ethical function), and leads the eye through the design to the designer's intended focal point (logical function). The logical function is especially important in online documents like websites. If readers do not actually read but rather scan websites, then the rhetorical use of color may help communicators slow their progress, point out items of importance, and lead them through the document. In fact, applying color to typographic cues can illustrate structure, create focus points, and highlight important information within the structure (Keyes 1993). Sophisticated use of shades and hues of one or two colors can help readers differentiate information in data rich documents (Tufte 1990) and create hierarchies within the information (Puhalla 2008).

With so many colors at one's disposal, however, how can a communicator pick one or two that are both aesthetically pleasing and that convey the intended message? Paul A. Bottomley and John R. Doyle (2007) suggest matching the connotations of colors and products. For example, they found that black, gray, green, and blue were more appropriate for functional products such as household cleaner or anti-freeze; red, yellow, bright pink, and purple were more appropriate for sensory-social products such as upscale restaurants or ice cream. Relying upon color connotations is a popular technique of selecting colors, and explanations of color

connotations are widely available online⁴. Yet Richards and David warn that most color connotations are culturally specific. Designers and users sometimes select colors based upon trends, such as those established annually by the Pantone Corporation⁵. But Richards and David remind technical communicators that the best way to ensure that a color scheme evokes the intended response is to interview users. They advise technical communicators to use color to tell a story via conventional color connotations, to link the organization to the material world, to symbolize a primary characteristic of the organization, or to humanize large organizations, particularly if the name is rather anonymous or generic.

Even seemingly trivial decisions about visual elements affect the way readers interpret documents. Conventional wisdom suggests that the choice of typeface can affect the tone of documents. As Rick Poyner explains, “Type is saying things to us all the time. Typefaces express a mood, an atmosphere, they give words a certain coloring” (in Hustwit 2007). Studies indicate that readers do attribute personality traits to typefaces (Brumberger 2003a; Henderson, Giese, and Cote 2004) and that readers also perceive typefaces to be more appropriate for texts with similar personas (Brumberger 2003b). In fact, consumer decisions to investigate or try a product may be influenced by the use of a font that is perceived to be “appropriate” to the product and brand name (Doyle and Bottomley 2004). Although there is no evidence that mismatches between typeface persona and text persona cause problems with readability or usability (Brumberger 2004), these studies do suggest that the relationship between the text and content may affect the reader’s perception of the author’s or organization’s ethos. Regarding corporate communication, one may infer that using a font that matches the message or product featured in a document may positively influence both brand perception and market share. As graphic designer Neville Brody explains, the choice of typeface for advertising can influence the reader’s perception of both the company and the product:

So if [a sign] says “buy these jeans” and it’s in a grunge font you would expect it to be some kind of ripped jeans or to be sold in some kind of underground clothing store. If you see that same message in Helvetica, you know, it’s probably

⁴ An excellent collection of color connotations is available on the site “Color in Motion” by Claudia Cortes (2003). <http://www.mariaclaudiacortes.com/colors/Colors.html>

⁵ The Pantone Corporation’s Color System standardizes colors used in graphic design, industrial design, fashion, and paint. Its biennial Colour Planner forecasts color trends for fashions and interior design; the 2009 color, a yellow called Mimosa, was chosen to project “hope and reassurance” during the economic recession. For more information see <http://www.pantone.com/pages/pantone/pantone.aspx?pg=20634&ca=10>.

on sale at the Gap. It's going to be clean, well fitted, and you're not going to stand out. (in Hustwit 2007)

Yet while conventional wisdom says that typeface should be chosen to influence the tone of the message and reader's perception of the message, the practice is far from universal. Dutch graphic designer and typographer Wim Crouwel argues that "It [the typeface] should be neutral. It shouldn't have a meaning by itself. The meaning is in the content of the text, not in the typeface" (in Hustwit 2007). Brumberger even warns that the results show no support for a prescriptive method of selecting typefaces based upon persona or for "practitioner's lore" that particular typefaces affect the way readers interpret messages (2004, 21). Instead, designers must consider the context and the interaction between the individual text and the typeface they select.

A Need for Design Heuristics

As I have explained in this review of literature, the concepts of social construction, ethos, and visual rhetoric converge in corporate visual identity. Consciously or not, individuals who work together, play together, or live together collectively form a culture that determines what is considered knowledge and what is considered acceptable behavior. Furthermore, the culture tells members of an organization how to "express what they know, what they mean, and what they feel through their use of idiosyncratic vocabularies, images, metaphors, slogans, rituals, and stories" (Harrison and Katz 1997, 20-21). Using the "right" images, slogans, typography, and colors can help an organization establish ethos by signaling its membership in the same discourse communities as the audience it wishes to reach.

Computer technology combining word processing with desktop publishing is so widely available that nearly anyone can create sophisticated documents with very little formal training. In fact, the desktop publishing features incorporated into modern word processors allows decisions about document design to occur simultaneously with decisions about text, putting more control about the final document in the hands of professional communicators who may not be familiar with guidelines or conventions governing visual communication (Kostelnick 1994). Therefore we must remember that visual communication requires more than just competence with desktop publishing. A study of student websites revealed that they modeled the design of their personal websites on existing corporate designs that they admired without considering how the design might or might not be relevant or appropriate for them (Karper

2005). The students wanted to look "professional" but weren't really able to explain what that meant. This inability to explain or reflect upon design decisions is dangerous because it suggests that technology is encouraging the development of a generation of visual technicians (Brumberger 2007, 378). This review of literature provides several frameworks that can provide guidance for professional communicators who plan to incorporate visual elements into their documents. Visual rhetoric goes beyond decorating texts; it provides guidance for decisions at both the local and the global levels of the document's design. Furthermore, effective use of visual communication improves an author's ethos by demonstrating her ability to execute a design that meets the needs and expectations of her readers (Brumberger 2004; Kostelnick 1989; Kumpf 2000).

Unfortunately, many individuals still have difficulty applying visual rhetoric to actual documents. Novice users also need heuristics to guide their decisions, particularly those that are made "by intention or default" (Allen 1996, 103). One such heuristic can be found in the work of Donis A. Dondis (1973). She suggests that the concept of visual literacy lags behind its verbal counterpart. Verbal literacy is clearly understood as the ability to read and write basic textual messages; traditional education in the U.S. teaches these skills from an early age. Yet the skills of reading and creating visual messages is not as widely taught or practiced. Most readers, she writes, "would not, to make a verbal literacy analogy, recognize or know what was a misspelling, and incorrectly phrased sentence, a badly organized theme" in visual rhetoric (10). Dondis identifies eight "basic elements" of visual composition: dot, line, shape, direction, texture, dimension, scale, and movement (108). She then illustrates how twenty basic design techniques can be used to manipulate the elements to create effective designs. These techniques are presented as polarities (e.g. symmetry/asymmetry); she acknowledges, however, that they are not binaries but rather poles on a continuum that allows nearly an infinite number of potential designs. To use her analogy to verbal literacy, the visual techniques are the grammatical rules that can help users understand how to construct visual messages.

The following chapter describes the research methodology that guided this study. First I introduce the participants, a group of start-up companies as well as some graphic designers and marketing specialists from the Midwest. Next I describe the methods of data collection and analysis that I used to investigate how start-up companies create and use their visual identities.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

ANALYZING CORPORATE VISUAL IDENTITY

The second important thing to remember about your personal visibility campaign is: it all matters. When you're promoting brand You, everything you do—and everything you choose not to do—communicates the value and character of the brand....It even gets down to the level of your brand You business card: Have you designed a cool-looking logo for your own card? Are you demonstrating an appreciation for design that shows you understand that packaging counts—a lot—in a crowded world?

– Tom Peters, “The Brand Called You”

I began to learn about corporate visual identity (CVI) by exploring graphic design literature. The topic of visual identity and branding are common, but I was surprised to find that discussions of corporate visual identity are often dominated by exemplars of design rather than descriptions of the process that led to the design. For example, Fishel (2000) fills the pages of her book *Redesigning Identity* with glossy full-color examples of design ranging from the ubiquitous Coca-Cola to the somewhat more obscure Taco Bueno (<http://www.tacobueno.com/>). However, Fishel (and others like her) describes what the designers did and not always why they did it. For example, she describes the CVI development for Mexican fast food chain Taco Bueno in the following manner:

After immersing itself in the fast-food business, Pentagram [the design agency] explored a series of identities, starting with a taco shell full of alphabet letters spelling out Bueno and progressing to the ultimate choice, a caricature face formed from the word taco. The face expressed through a dialogue bubble—another cartoon device—the word Bueno. (Part of the chain's and the design firm's thinking was that the Taco half of the name would eventually go away, leaving a well-established and far more flexible and unique Bueno identity” (60).

In the nine years since Fishel published her book, the CVI of Taco Bueno has continued to evolve. The taco face has disappeared but the name remains the same. Fishel's description is entertaining, and it is clear that both the client and the design team included flexibility for the design to be modified in the future, but descriptions like this feel incomplete to an outsider. For instance, why did the designers choose to use a cartoon-like image? How did the team “immerse itself” in the fast-food business? What did the team learn about the fast-food business and Taco Bueno's target market that led them to believe (with reported success) that customers would

respond positively to the “lively, informal feel” and its “spicy color scheme [that] speaks volumes about the establishment’s food offerings” (Fishel 59)?

In management and marketing journals, on the other hand, authors discuss the impact of corporate visual identity and its importance on a company’s reputation. These articles normally focus on what was changed and why but not how the decisions about the changes were made. For example, in March 2000, France Télécom (www.francetelecom.com/fr) revealed a new visual identity consisting of a new symbol, color scheme, typography, and slogan. The previous identity, created seven years earlier, was considered restrictive and dated (in part due to a slogan that referred to the year 2000); the new visual identity, based upon extensive interviews with both internal and external customers, reflects France Télécom’s wider product mix and suggests warmth and relationships, a personality that the company wishes to project to customers (Melewar, Hussey, and Srivoravilai 2005). The article begins by describing the perceived need for the change and ends by describing what was changed (and, of course, that the effect of the change on the corporation’s image was positive). But the voices of both the designers and the clients are silent.

Why do we know so little about the way start-up entrepreneurs work on CVI? The authors of books and articles about CVI tend to be either professional designers or branding consultants or the academics who study them. If an entrepreneur chooses to create a CVI package on her own or is forced to do so by constraints of time or budget, then her actions would go largely unnoticed. Another reason for a lack of attention to CVI in start-up companies may be resistance or difficulty in identifying the personality that will drive the corporate visual identity. A study of small- to medium-sized businesses in Great Britain revealed that the “CEOs struggled to identify the central message they wished to convey about their organization. Those messages they did create suffered from being either banal or grandiose, and the task defeated many” (Inskip 2004, 360).

In his seminal book on corporate visual identity, Wally Olins (1978) defines two developmental phases within organizations that affect their CVI packages.

In the first or heroic period of a company’s development the personality of its founder gives it its identity. In the second or technocratic phase the carefully cultivated and developed corporate identity is the major element that provides this link. It becomes the substitute for the personality of the entrepreneur. (Olins 78, as cited in Baker 1989, p. 287-88)

Olins uses the phrase “cultivated and developed corporate identity” to describe the stage when design professionals are consulted to devise the CVI for a maturing organization; this technocratic phase is described most often in marketing and graphic design literature. Olins seems to believe that “a company should and can unproblematically look like what it is like...companies do have a sense of identity (no matter how trivial, as in ‘we are modern’) and the designer’s job is to truthfully reflect that identity” (Baker 1989, 278).

While students of design and marketing may find it easy to locate research and examples of CVI to guide them, little is known about the ways that start-up entrepreneurs perceive and create their visual identities as they begin to establish themselves during what Olins termed the “heroic period” of the company. Typically, while professional graphic designers have extensive preparation and training for CVI projects, start-up entrepreneurs and students with entrepreneurial aspirations often have no training in design and thus may “go it alone” in their early efforts at creating a corporate presence.

Qualitative Research Methodology

To explore the ways that start-up organizations use and create visual identity, I used qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is exploratory in nature and provides a “detailed understanding of a central phenomenon” (Creswell 2005, 45). Since corporate visual identity is a relatively new topic within rhetoric and professional communication, the characteristics of qualitative research—naturalistic, humanistic, participatory, interpretative, reflexive, and inductive (Creswell 2003)—suited my intention to develop a greater understanding of how CVI functions as strategic professional communication. My methodology follows the conventions of qualitative research case studies. The data collection methods I employed in this project are interviews and document analyses. These methods are widely used in qualitative research including case studies (Stake 1995), grounded theory (Creswell 2005), and ethnography (Miles and Huberman 1994; Creswell 2005; Doheny-Farina and Odell 1985; Katz 2002).

I focused on a small sample (nine participants) and attempted to gather very rich data about perceptions, opinions, and processes of developing corporate visual identity. Since corporate visual identity is a relatively new topic within professional communication, I used the data collection to develop working theories about CVI as professional communication rather

than to test or confirm a hypothesis. My objectives and methods correspond with Creswell's (2005, 396) definition of grounded theory as "a systematic, qualitative procedure used to generate a theory that explains, at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or an interaction about a substantive topic."

The results of the data collection take the form of instrumental case studies. As Robert E. Stake (1995) explains, instrumental case studies use the case to focus upon issues and to understand a general situation or understand other cases. Case studies use small sample sizes and focus upon particulars. The purpose of case study research is not to make generalizations but rather to refine them. These methods echo several characteristics of ethnographic research: inductive in nature, open interpretation of data, and small number of cases (Bishop 1999, 6). The researcher analyzes data by looking for "correspondence" (78) or patterns and then constructs an assertion based upon the interpretation of the data. In this way the results of case study research are quite similar to the "fiction" of ethnographic research (Clifford 1986). As Gary Alan Fine (1993, 270) explains, "Everything is capable of multiple interpretations, and misunderstandings stem not from incompetence but from competencies in other domains."

Research Philosophy

My research was based upon the following assumptions:

1. The research report is a narrative based upon the responses of the participants.
Although I do not expect the participants to intentionally lie, it is possible that they may tell me what I want to hear (Goetz and LeCompte 1984) or accidentally misrepresent their actions or opinions in recounting their experience (Schriver 1997).
2. The research report is a "true fiction" (Clifford 1986) based upon my interpretations of the participants and their work, which are in turn influenced by my academic culture, my disciplinary training in marketing and rhetoric, my objectives for the project, and many other social and personal factors (Van Maanen 1988; Creswell 2005; Fine 1993; Clifford 1986; Geertz 1973). Therefore, reflexivity is a crucial aspect in my analysis.
3. The research report is limited in scope to a few "bounded systems" of particular individuals engaged in a particular task (Stake 1995). While I may begin forming a theory about the ways that entrepreneurs use CVI, the data is not truly representative

and will not be useful for making generalizations about opinions, perceptions, or practices.

In the remainder of this chapter I discuss both my research participants and the data collection methods. I begin by describing my participant selection methodology and introduce the individual participants of the study. I then describe the methods I used to collect, sort, and analyze the data accumulated.

Research Participants

My objective was to identify three to five organizations that were established or incorporated within the last five years. The rationale for this age restriction is that younger companies are still in the process of constructing their professional identities and thus are more likely either to be creating or to have recently created visual identity designs. Since the object of my research is to understand the design process and decisions used by untrained practitioners, companies who have used the services of professional graphic designers or advertising agencies were excluded. The sample was theoretically driven with a concern for participants in different industries and different stages in their development in order to focus on the conceptual issues rather than true representativeness (see Miles and Huberman 1994, 29).

To identify this small purposive sample of entrepreneurial companies, I relied upon reputational case selection (Miles and Huberman 1994, 28) by getting recommendations from experts in entrepreneurship and economic development. I began by contacting several business assistance organizations: Minnesota Small Business Development Center (SBDC), Greater Mankato Growth Inc., Riverbend Center for Entrepreneurial Facilitation (RCEF), and the Pappajohn Center for Entrepreneurship at Iowa State University. Additionally, I contacted professors of marketing and entrepreneurship at Minnesota State University, Mankato, for assistance in identifying potential research participants. The organizations and professors were sent a prospecting letter that introduced me, outlined my research project and the type of data collection I planned to complete, and asked them for assistance in locating potential research subjects. (See the prospecting letters in Appendix A.)

The Director of Emerging Markets at Greater Mankato Growth Inc. and the Facilitator of RCEF both agreed to contact clients who fit my project specifications, describe my project, and invite them to contact me if they were interested in participating in the project. Each contact

yielded three potential participants. The entrepreneurship instructor at MSU provided the name of two potential participants.

The Pappajohn Center did not have any clients that fit my specifications. The Minnesota SBDC informed me that state privacy laws prevent the SBDC from sharing information about their clients, so I broadened my search by purchasing a list of new business filings from the Minnesota Secretary of State's office. I requested filings of sole proprietorships, LLCs, corporations, and non-profit corporations for the cities of Mankato, North Mankato, and St. Peter (zip codes 56001, 56002, 56003, 56006 & 56082) during the years 2006 and 2007. This search yielded 627 start-up organizations. Ultimately, based upon the positive responses from clients of Greater Mankato Growth, RCEF, and the entrepreneurship professor, I did not use this list.

Companies who indicated interest in the project were contacted via e-mail or telephone to arrange an initial meeting. Participants agreed to initial interviews of 30 minutes to one hour in length and shared samples of corporate materials featuring their visual identities. Follow-up interviews were then scheduled to review the responses and materials in more depth.

In order to get a richer idea of how organizations use visual identity to establish their ethos, I broadened my sample to include both graphic designers who create visual identities and organizations that have been in business longer than five years and that have received assistance from professional graphic designers in creating, maintaining, and updating their visual identities. The rationale for including these participants was to compare and contrast their opinions and experience with the start-ups who had little or no professional assistance.

My final participant sample consisted of nine individuals representing four start-up companies (less than five years old) and three well-established organizations, as well as two graphic designers who create corporate visual identities.

Data Collection

Interviews with Adam and Angelina were conducted in April and early May of 2007. The remainder of the data were collected from March to September of 2008 via interviews and document analysis of promotional materials featuring the visual identity.

Interviews with Start-up Organizations

The primary data for this research project consist of interviews using open-ended questions. Interviews with the start-up organizations occurred between February and September 2009. Each participant was interviewed twice; each meeting lasted approximately one hour. During the interviews the participants shared samples of materials featuring their visual identity elements and discussed their methods of developing the materials, from the decisions they made to the software they used and the assistance they received from others. The interviews also explored the participants' perceptions of the audience and purpose for their materials and how effective they perceive them to be.

Many of the interview questions were inspired by Kostelnick and Hassett's (2003) theory of visual conventions. In particular, I inquired about the following factors that shape conventions and how they may have influenced the design of the visual identities:

- *Discourse community factors*: organizational structure and expectations, discipline-specific conventions, and cultural norms (82)
- *Rhetorical factors*: genre and reader expectations (82-83)
- *External practical factors*: technology, costs, and legal issues (83)

Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded for common themes. This phase of the research project was approved by the Iowa State University Institutional Research Board (IRB ID 07-532).

Participant 1: Emily

Emily, the sole proprietor of a pet services company, has been in business since February 2008. Her services focus mainly on walking dogs, short-term in-home care for dogs and cats, and the newer services of pet transportation and pet photography. At the time of our first meeting her company was only a few weeks old, and she was still in the process of designing her corporate visual identity, which consists of a name, a logo, a color scheme, some typography, and several icons. She was also actively developing materials that feature the CVI. She shared samples of her business card, a brochure, a sign that she posts on bulletin boards, a photograph of her car door sign (a magnet), and window signs pasted on her van. She even had a cake made for a promotional event featuring her nameplate written in frosting.

Participant 2: Sarah

Sarah is a ventriloquist and motivational speaker who performs with a collection of puppets at schools, nursing homes, and libraries. She has been in business for six years. Sarah was able to share several promotional materials including business cards, brochures, flyers, letters, and early prototypes of two documents that she has since rejected. Her CVI currently consists of the company name, a color scheme, stock photography of herself and her puppets, and a tagline. She briefly hired a local marketing person to assist her with promotional materials but was undecided on the results. In the summer of 2008, her fifth year of business, she finally received a logo designed by her brother-in-law. She plans to begin incorporating the logo into future documents and reprints of her business cards.

Participant 3: Susan

Susan, the co-owner of an alpaca breeding farm, has been in business for five years. In addition to her farm, she has a full-time job as a career counselor; in the past she has worked in marketing and personal sales. Because of this breadth of experience, Susan can speak very clearly about the image she wants to project, but she feels that her own lack of time and experience is limiting the effectiveness of her branding and promotional materials. Susan's CVI consists of a logo that is used on her business cards; a color scheme that she uses on her barn, her cards, and her flyers; and typography. She shared samples of her sales flyers and business card as well as a photograph used for her logo.

Participant 4: Scott

Scott is a co-owner of a sports training company that has been in business for two years. Scott is a unique case in that he is also a professor at the local university specializing in entrepreneurship. He understands the importance of visual identity but does not feel as though his company's CVI is well established. However, of the four start-up participants he seems to have the most elements of visual identity: a color palette, a logo, some imagery, some animations/video, a tagline, and some copy. He uses the visual identity on items like the website, T-shirts, letterhead, business cards, flyers, videos, print advertisements, and in the interior of his facility.

Interviews with Established Organizations and Marketing Professionals

In order to lay a foundation upon which to develop the research project, I interviewed two graphic designers, Adam and Zoe. Both are entrepreneurs who work on a freelance basis. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the purpose of corporate visual identity, the elements that compose the identity, and the general methods that professionals typically use in developing corporate identities. To develop a more balanced perspective on developing and employing visual identity I also interviewed representatives of three well-established organizations who are responsible for making decisions about visual identity as part of the larger process of advertising and corporate branding. Sebastien and Angelina are marketing specialists who have been directly involved in corporate visual identity programs. Lola is an entrepreneur who has been in business for twelve years.

The interviews with Adam and Angelina were conducted in March and May 2007, respectively. The interviews with Sebastien, Lola, and Zoe occurred during the summer of 2008. During the interviews each participant demonstrated several examples of their organization's visual identity and discussed how the identity builds ethos within their communities.

Digital recordings of the interviews have been transcribed and have been coded for themes in conjunction with the data from the start-up organizations. This phase of the research study was approved by the ISU Institutional Research Board (ISU ID 07-031).

Established Organizations and Marketing Professional Participants

Participant 5: Adam

Adam, a graphic designer in a small Midwestern city, has worked on "a dozen" CVI projects for clients in both the Midwest and the Northeast United States. Adam's clients include both small and large businesses, including a major medical and research facility on the East Coast. At the time of our interview he was working with an Iowa economic development group to create visual identities for several towns. The interview with him helped me understand the importance of a visual identity and learn some of the terms and resources that designers use on these projects. Following his interview Adam shared three sample documents that he regularly uses with clients: a creative brief, a description of effective branding, and a statement of requirements for branding projects.

Participant 6: Zoe

Zoe is a graphic designer in a small Midwestern city. Her career began as a marketing communications specialist for a large medical products company, but she soon found herself drawn to graphic design when she began working with her company's designer on marketing materials. In her "second life" she relocated, enrolled in a graphic design course at an area technical college, and eventually opened her own company. Ten years later she has a successful graphic design business that has largely focused upon designing visual identities and marketing materials for small businesses and non-profit organizations.

Participant 7: Angelina

Angelina is a marketing specialist for a large public university in the Midwest. She supervised the rebranding of her university nearly twenty years ago (the university is more than 100 years old) and continues to be the self-proclaimed "logo cop." During our one-and-a-half hour interview, Angelina helped me understand the design decisions from the perspective of both a client who wants to improve a visual identity and a marketing specialist who must constantly protect the standards of consistency of the identity. Angelina shared several documents featuring her university's identity during our interview and directed me to the page on her university's website that contains the identity standards.

Participant 8: Sebastien

Sebastien is in charge of integrated marketing for a mid-sized public university in the Midwest. He represents the interests and actions of a well established organization (the university is more than 100 years old). Although his university's visual identity has been in place for the last ten years, Sebastien was quick to point out that the university failed to consistently use its visual identity until his position was created three years ago. The one hour interview yielded much information and both print and video samples featuring his university's visual identity.

Participant 9: Lola

Lola owns a popular yoga studio in a small Midwestern city. She started the business out of her home twelve years ago; nine years ago she rented a former auto dealership in the downtown area and has been in that location ever since. She admits that by the standards of

most business how-to books she should be a failure but suggests instead that the books are wrong. Lola admits to changing her visual identity several times over the past decade, all with the purpose of improving it. She provides an interesting perspective from a successful business woman that both supports and conflicts with information provided by the other participants. Samples of Lola's present and past visual identity were collected from her business, downloaded from her current website, and retrieved from the Wayback Machine archive website.

Document analysis

To complement the interviews I analyzed the corporate visual identity elements of each start-up and their use on promotional and internal materials (e.g. letterhead, business cards, websites, company vehicles). The study of these documents not only stimulated discussion with the research subjects and helped me trace the development and use of the identity design but also shed light on the importance that the organizations place on visual identity.

In addition to exploring the conventions of visual identity design and implementation, I also hoped to understand how the results of this research might be useful to teachers of visual rhetoric and professional communication. Using a set of visual techniques presented by Donis A. Dondis (1973), I analyzed each sample's elements to look for patterns, trends, or even absences in the use of typical visual design techniques.

Data Analysis

During each interview I recorded the conversations and took handwritten field notes. Following each interview I transcribed both the recording and the notes; the recordings were then deleted from my computer. (See sample interview questions in Appendix B.) Table 1 summarizes the data collected during the course of this project.

Table 1: Summary of data collected from participants.

	START-UP ENTREPRENEURS				GRAPHIC DESIGNERS		ESTABLISHED ORGANIZATIONS		
	Emily	Sarah	Susan	Scott	Adam	Zoe	Angelina	Sebastien	Lola
Hours of Interviews	1.5	2.5	2	2	1.15	1	1.25	1	1
Pages of Transcripts	13	20	18	14	12	11	9	10	10
Sample Documents	8	8	5	8	3	2	2	4	4

Field notes and interview transcripts were coded for themes, key ideas, and practices or procedures using Atlas.ti 5.2 qualitative research software and analyzed using narrative research techniques. Approximately fifty codes emerged during my analysis which I divided into four categories or “families” based upon topic: research questions, participant experiences and actions, elements of corporate visual identity, and visual design techniques. The full list of codes is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Analysis codes developed from interviews with the nine participants.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES	CVI ELEMENTS	VISUAL TECHNIQUES
Role of CVI in ethos How to Create CVI Use of visual techniques in development & implementation of CVI	Role of CVI in business Audience Cost Need for consistency Experience or education Assistance Inspiration and influences Software Materials in use Alternatives to materials Company age Description of the CVI Difficulties creating Disliked about creating Liked about creating Lifespan Participant's role Research Time to produce	Animation Color palettes Containing shapes Imagery & graphics Logo & variations Sound Taglines & copy Typography	Accuracy/distortion Activeness/stasis Balance/instability Consistency/variation Economy/intricacy Flatness/depth Neutrality/accent Predictability/spontaneity Regularity/irregularity Repetition/episodicity Sequentiality/randomness Sharpness/diffusion Simplicity/complexity Singularity/juxtaposition Transparency/opacity Understatement/exaggeration Unity/fragmentation

For the document analysis I created an evaluation instrument based upon nineteen visual techniques identified by Donis A. Dondis (1973). Rather than creating sketches and designs haphazardly, Dondis explains, “the visual communicator is engaged...in a highly complex process of selection and rejection” (107). She presents the visual techniques as a series of polarities, such as symmetry/asymmetry or understatement/exaggeration, that allow visual communicators to employ the basic elements of design (dot, line, shape, direction, texture, dimension, scale, and movement) into limitless possibilities. To use these polarities as an evaluation tool I created a scale with three points. A score of 1 indicated the dominance of the first polarity of the technique. In my judgment this group generally consists of conservative methods of employing the techniques. A score of 3 indicated dominance of the opposite polarity, which might be described as more aggressive or radical forms of the techniques. Instances that showed a hybrid of the polarities was indicated by a score of 2. A zero score indicated that the technique was not used at all in the document. (See Table 3 for a copy of the evaluation instrument featuring a complete list of the techniques and their polarities.)

In the following chapters I report the results of this analysis. Chapter 4 describes the experiences, actions, and opinions of the nine participants regarding the development of corporate visual identity. It begins with the voices of the experienced participants: the graphic designers Adam and Zoe, the marketing specialists Angelina and Sebastien, and veteran entrepreneur Lola as they discuss the importance of creating visual identities to establish corporate ethos and then offer advice to novices who might choose to design their own identities. From there the voices of the novices enter to share their own perceptions of the audience and purpose of visual identity and to describe their methods, motivations, and experience. They also offer a glimpse into the unique challenges start-ups face about cost, needing outside assistance, and lack of design experience, software, and technical skill. Chapter 5 then focuses on several specific issues involved in the design and implementation of the visual identities. It begins with a review of the typical visual identity elements and presents examples of each from the start-up participants. Next, using examples of promotional documents created by the start-ups, I demonstrate how the techniques work alone and together within the designs created by the novices.

Table 3 The continua of visual techniques used to evaluate sample documents. These techniques are illustrated in *Visual Literacy* by Donis A. Dondis; the descriptions are based upon her descriptions and examples.

VISUAL TECHNIQUES			
Elements stable, balanced on page or screen	Balance	Instability	Image seems off-center
Falls equally along a center line	Symmetry	Asymmetry	Does not fall equally along a center line
Organized according to an obvious plan	Regularity	Irregularity	Organization isn't immediately clear
Single focal point, few elements	Simplicity	Complexity	Multiple focal points, many elements
Unified elements into single form	Unity	Fragmentation	Elements remain separate and individual
Minimum number of units involved	Economy	Intricacy	Detailed union of multiple elements
Whitespace, simple, proportionate use of elements	Understatement	Exaggeration	Lack of whitespace or proportion
Underlying order; evident plan or grid	Predictability	Spontaneity	Order not evident; implies lack of planning
Motion expressed or implied	Activeness	Stasis	Stillness expressed or implied
Subtle distinction between elements	Subtlety	Boldness	Bold distinctions between elements
No element stands out more than the rest	Neutrality	Accent	One element stands out more than the rest
Some objects show through others	Transparency	Opacity	Some elements conceal parts of others
Design unified by a single theme	Consistency	Variation	Design shows diversity or multiple themes
Images seem real and accurate	Accuracy	Distortion	Images have been manipulated
Images seem flat and without dimension	Flatness	Depth	Images show perspective or dimension
Single theme; nothing out of place or unexpected	Singularity	Juxtaposition	Contrasting elements or themes; unexpected layout or elements
Elements have a logical order or rhythm	Sequentiality	Randomness	Placement seems unorganized, accidental
Image features hard edges	Sharpness	Diffusion	Image features soft edges
Elements repeat and seem connected	Repetition	Episodicity	Elements seem disconnected or individual

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS

HOW ORGANIZATIONS CREATE CORPORATE VISUAL IDENTITY

He slipped a card across the table. There was his name and a slogan that read Alarm Technology of the Future, a message that was somewhat at odds with his trademark—a small drawing of a parrot on a perch squawking “*Au voleur!*”

– Peter Mayle, *Toujours Provence*

In this chapter I explore the ways that start-up companies create their visual identities. This chapter focuses on the role of visual identity in establishing corporate ethos and on the opinions, experiences and actions of the participants to create their identities. This discussion focuses on several themes that dominated the interviews: the perceptions of audience and purpose for the visual identity, the cost of development and implementation of promotional materials, the experience or education of the participants regarding visual identity and visual communication in general, and the methods the participants use to develop the visual identity.

I begin by sharing the attitudes and experiences of several professionals who specialize in corporate visual identity: Adam and Zoe, two graphic designers who are themselves entrepreneurs; Sebastien and Angelina, two marketing specialists who oversee the branding of two universities in the Midwest; and Lola, an entrepreneur whose visual identity has grown with her and her business over the past twelve years. These “experienced” participants describe the role that visual identity plays in building corporate ethos—an important tool, but just one part of a larger communication strategy. In explaining the process of developing a visual identity, these participants emphasize the importance of researching the audience in order to create a design that will resonate with readers and implementing that design “consistently, relentlessly” in promotional materials. Their conversation concludes with advice for start-ups who choose to create a visual identity on their own.

I then compare the information and advice from the experienced participants with the voices of the start-ups: Emily, the owner of a pet services company; Sarah, a ventriloquist; Susan, an alpaca rancher; and Scott, the owner of a sports training facility. I begin this section with the start-ups’ perceptions of the role of visual identity in establishing their corporate ethos. Next, I investigate the decisions they made in creating their visual identities. First, I focus upon three critical issues involved in designing the visual identity: identifying the audience and purpose of

the visual identity, factoring the direct and indirect costs of developing and using the visual identity, and implementing the visual identity consistently in promotional documents. Next, I introduce four issues that posed constraints for the start-ups: a lack of experience in visual communication, a need for assistance from others, the sources of inspiration for their designs, and the software the start-ups used to create them. Finally, I conclude the chapter with by considering what the responses from the participants reveal about corporate visual identity design and use.

Voices of Experience

To begin to understand how corporate visual identity is created and used, I consulted individuals with expertise and experience on the topic. In this section I present their opinions about the importance of corporate visual identity. Next I describe their experiences developing and implementing the identity. I begin, as they did, by discussing the research behind their work. From there I turn to the implementation of their work in corporate documents in what Sebastien would describe as the “consistent, relentless application” of the visual identity elements as a tool for communicating with an audience. Finally, I present some advice that the experienced participants offered to individuals who choose to work on their own.

The Role of Corporate Visual Identity: A Part of a Larger Communication Strategy

The role of a visual identity is to garner attention from an organization’s audience and imply information about the organization itself. Yet the visual identity is just one piece of a comprehensive corporate communication plan. Adam explains that

Branding is just that kind of *recognition*. Visual identity is part of it. You recognize the logo, you recognize the colors...And That is supposed to trigger a good feeling about the company. It’s almost touchy-feely in that way....[But] it’s not *just* the logo. It’s very much the whole package....Starting with a visual identity system is a great way to start, but it’s just a start. It’s by no means the end. It goes to your website, the people who work for you, all of that.

Angelina echoes this opinion when she calls visual identity a “tactic” and not the focus of the communication, calling the university’s visual identity a tool in her toolbox that would help her and other university administrators “figure out what it was going to take to get us to the next level and be looked at in a different way.” The visual identity elements, when chosen purposefully and used consistently, reinforce the intangible image that the organization wants to

promote. Angelina explains that her university's visual identity was developed to help increase awareness by potential students and to develop a reputation that the university is "bold, aggressive, [yet] still traditional." But while the visual identity may be only one element of a larger process of corporate branding, it does help the organization's ethos by increasing its visibility. This "identity creep" is an important part of an organization's visual communication because it makes the product or service more easily recognized and remembered. As Adam explains, when the visual identity is used repeatedly as part of branding, the logo, colors, and other elements can "trigger certain thoughts in your head" that influence whether to search out or avoid the product. But he warns that an engaging visual identity is not enough. "A brand is not going to fly unless it's good quality."

Research for the Visual Identity Design

A first step in designing a visual identity is research. Angelina and Sebastien, both marketing administrators at public universities in the Midwest, agree that extensive research focusing upon the intended audience is crucial to creating a message that will be remembered and that will project the image that the organization wants to use. Nearly twenty years ago Angelina's university updated its identity as part of its effort to change its image from an agricultural college to a major research institution. As Angelina explains, "We undertook a massive amount of research. We researched students, prospective students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, donors, legislators...to help us learn what the university's image was, what the university wanted it to be, and how those things matched." Sebastien concurs, explaining that a good visual identity is carefully chosen based upon the audience's perception of the organization. "It's not a whim, what you think or I think about icons. It's what our target market says appeals to them." Since his arrival at his university three years ago he has regularly engaged in focus groups and surveys to evaluate the appeal of its branding campaign in the target market.

On the design side research is equally thorough. Adam, a graphic designer, describes three main forms of data collection: the creative brief followed by interviews with key players in the client's organization and review of competitors' information and designs. "The most important thing to start with is the creative brief," explains Adam, "where I'm getting information directly from the client to these very important questions, sort of fleshing it out in

their head and getting them to think more than just ‘We need a logo.’” He describes the brief as a set of questions that focus upon the audience for the promotional materials as well as the image the client wants to create. Zoe describes the same process, which is not surprising for professionals with similar education. In addition to the creative brief, she also appreciates when clients share their own sources of inspiration. “I love it when people give me examples of what they like, pieces they think are effective, and maybe a competitor’s piece.” In fact, she says, the more information the client can provide the better. “If they can say ‘I want it to be a brochure that will go in an envelope or a self-mailer’ That is helpful too. If they can give me their copy, That is great.” Both graphic designers also admit to checking out the competition. After the data collection, the designer gets to work. But “work” does not mean immediately picking up a pen or turning on a computer. “I stew a lot. I try to let things just simmer for a while, let the information sit and ask questions afterward. I do not just throw anything out,” explains Zoe.

Implementation of the Visual Identity

Once the visual identity elements are in place, advises Sebastien, the next step is to use them “consistently, relentlessly.” Both universities have moved toward monolithic identities which feature a single look (name, typeface, color palettes, etc.) for all units in the organization rather than a branded look in which each unit develops its own identity (Olins 1989). A large part of each decision to use a monolithic identity was the need to increase visibility within their target markets. After all, to potential students, who are usually the focus of university promotional materials, the individual academic units are indistinct. The students think in terms of the institution as a whole, its reputation for excellence and the quality of life they will experience if they attend the school. As Angelina pointed out, her university is competitive, but its individual units do not have the recognition of powerhouses like the Wharton School of Business. Thus the “product lines” are not the focus of the university’s marketing efforts. Sebastien has been in charge of his university’s marketing only since 2005; prior to his arrival there was no single person responsible for the university’s branding efforts. As a result, he explains, “There was no look. There was just cacophony, both in print and on the web....The standards were barely that, if at all.” He goes on to explain that “If branding becomes a series of choices, then it’s just not branding. How will they remember you if you are *inconsistent* in projecting the brand?”

In fact, Sebastien found himself in the same position Angelina had been in nearly two decades ago: each unit was promoting itself with chaotic and inconsistent results. Sebastien's design audit (Olins 1989) showed that designers merely focused upon the "correct" placement of the logo. "In old pieces you could barely tell what our school colors were....The brand was logo focused. Basically, if you treated the logo right, you were OK and could do your thing." Angelina explains that her audit of the materials in use when she began her work on unifying the identity revealed that some units did not even emphasize the university's name but merely included it as part of a return address. Both marketers now oversee plans designed to raise the profile of their respective universities and develop a consistent look in print, on the web, on billboards and in television commercials, and even on merchandise like coffee cups and water bottles.

Both Sebastien and Angelina direct the carefully designed and polished visual identities of their universities with an eye toward controlling the visual message. By contrast Zoe, the owner of a successful yoga studio, has a more easy-going attitude toward her visual identity in keeping with the service her company offers. She cites a local coffee shop as inspiration for her visual identity. The "clumsy" design of the coffee shop ads was in keeping with its clientele, a somewhat edgy, alternative crowd who eschew corporate America. She realized that her clientele was similar in a way. Many of her clients work for the local university; they are highly educated, open-minded people who are largely liberal in their politics. Lola explains that she adopted the free spirit of the coffee shop ads to create her own alternative ethos with her clients.

The slick-looking corporate ad, That is not my customer. They do not want that. They want something roughly hewn. Home grown. Homemade. Handmade. So if it looks like the ad was put together by someone with an Exacto knife, that's OK. Our client is alternative in a way.

Lola believes that the unsophisticated aesthetic builds her credibility with her audience. "They're looking for a non-corporate experience, a non-pre-packaged experience. They don't want a McYoga, so I've tried to keep my ads that way too." Lola's current visual identity is the product of twelve years of refinement. The visual identity in use now features her second logo (or third, depending upon whether she counts the one that is "just used on stationery"). In her own early years as a start-up she traded services with a yoga student; today she works with a graphic designer but relies heavily on her own background in journalism and keen artistic eye. She continues to use earlier versions of her logo and color palettes on "vintage" merchandise as

well as on a flag that flies outside her building. While she acknowledges that changing a visual identity might cause confusion or signal to the audience that the business is growing haphazardly, Lola points out that a lack of competition and her own visibility in the community and network of friends and clients have given her a freedom to experiment with her visual identity without harming the business.

Advice for DIY Visual Identity

Both the graphic designers and the experienced organizations warned that entrepreneurs should remember the importance of differentiation in their visual identities. Lola bemoaned the “generic and very boring” designs that result from popular, pre-packaged, “design it yourself” (DIY) sites like Vistaprint.com. In fact, Adam explained that differentiation is one of the key selling points for using his services rather than a DIY site. Pointing to a brochure for women’s primary care at a Boston-based medical facility, he explained that the stock image used on the cover was also used in an HIV advertisement. “The argument I would make is ‘Who else is using this look?’...You do not know where stuff like that is going to be used. It’s not unique.”

Lola expressed the same concern about DIY sites and templates. She admits to freely changing elements of her visual identity over time and to giving her graphic designer free rein to change anything when it feels appropriate, including the company’s logo. “It’s a longer, harder, more circuitous route to not take a package,” she explained. “But you get a product that expresses who you are and where you’ve been. It’s OK if people look at your marketing materials over the past five years and see that they’ve changed because it shows growth.” Lola believes that change is a good idea as long as it improves the identity. To ensure that the changes are positive, she routinely consults her clients, many of whom have studied yoga with her for years, about designs and promotional materials.

Yet Zoe concedes that the demands upon a start-up’s time and funding often make the visual identity a secondary concern. She even admits to feeling the pressure herself:

A lot of small businesses do whatever it takes to get by and stay running. Anything above that will take extra time and money. It’s a struggle. I do that too. I’ve used this logo [pointing to her business card] for five years now. I want to redesign that. It’s literally something that I threw together one day because I had to order business cards. I look at it and say “Ugh.” But when I printed new cards a couple of weeks ago...I told the printer to just use the old logo. I just wanted to be done.

Sebastien's advice to entrepreneurs is to be both bold and simple via the use of color and white space; in fact, he advocates using bold color *as* white space, citing Target as a source of personal inspiration. He explains that many businesses are "stingy" with white space because they do not feel that they get value from it. In fact, several of the start-up participants expressed this very reservation, explaining that they feel the need to make the most of the space they have available. Yet Sebastien insists that his data show that people pay attention to materials with lots of whitespace, turning their focus to the foreground element(s) in a manner that does not happen when the document is cluttered with text or images.

Zoe echoes Sebastien's advice with her own thoughts on the value of simplicity in design. She explains that she usually creates three variations to show clients, and the client usually picks the one she hates, the one that is more complicated than the rest. Ironically, they often choose the design she spent the least amount of time creating. People who design their own logos go wrong, she says, when they try to create really complicated designs without thinking about how they will appear at various sizes, on different media, or when copied repeatedly. Her preference is for designs that are simple and streamlined. "Maybe I'm boring that way, but if you're paying me to help you communicate then I do not think my role is to make it so sexy that it loses your message."

Finally, Sebastien offers a simple piece of advice about what makes the larger process of branding work and why so many companies fail: "Branding is successful when you have modest pressure relentlessly applied. It's the *relentlessly* part That is generally jettisoned."

Voices of the Novices

So far we have heard from experienced marketers, professionals who either create visual identities or use one created by a graphic designer to promote their business. These individuals value a corporate visual identity as an important part of an organization's communication with prospective customers and with the communities that support the business. In this section I turn to a group of novices, owners and operators of start-up businesses who have discovered that developing a visual identity is an important yet difficult step in establishing their companies. When possible I compare the responses of the start-ups to those of the more experienced participants to consider how the decisions of the start-ups might emulate the practices or opinions of the more experienced practitioners.

None of the start-up business owners has any formal education or experience in graphic design or professional communication. Each of them has developed a corporate visual identity largely through intuition, personal preference, and trial and error. They have relied upon assistance from others in varying degrees ranging from logo design by relatives to alterations made by employees of local printing facilities. In this section I describe several common concerns and experiences from my sample of start-up entrepreneurs. First, I focus on development issues such as how their knowledge of their audiences and the purpose they envision for their visual identity has influenced, or might influence, visual identity elements like copy, logo, colors, etc. The cost of development, both in terms of the money required for materials and development as well as the time it takes to develop the visual identity, is another factor that influences the visual identity, creating constraints on what they develop and how they use it. Next, I reflect upon their common aspiration for consistency, or as Sebastien called it, relentless application. They describe their intent in using the visual identity in corporate documents as serving an ethical function of establishing their reputations with their audience; consistency seems to be one way they feel they can accomplish that.

Finally, I introduce several issues or concerns that are unique to the start-ups. First, as a group they chose to design their visual identities on their own rather than hire a graphic designer for assistance in spite of their own lack of expertise with visual communication. When they needed help with specialized tasks or when their own technical skill failed them, they turned to friends and family for help. But for the most part they relied on their own intuition, on a sense of what others in their field have done, and upon the software they have at their fingertips, even if the software they have is not necessarily the best one for the job.

Perceiving the Role of Visual Identity in Establishing Corporate Ethos

The visual identity helps a company build its ethos by meeting the expectations of its audience: more and more customers expect to see elements like logos and taglines, and they expect to find them on conventional documents like business cards, brochures, and websites. Although they may not have used the word ethos, each of the participants expressed the hope that their visual identity would help them communicate with their audiences and build a positive reputation. Emily, for instance, hopes that her visual identity projects a sense of professionalism to her audience. She wants readers to understand that her pet services company, and the

materials promoting it, was not “thrown together helter skelter.” Instead, she explains, she wants potential clients to see her promotional materials and realize that her pet services company is “not somebody in a little corner place trying to start a business. That it’s a legitimate business and there’s a reason for them to bring their pets to me.”

But the responses from the start-ups also suggest that the corporate visual identity serves an informational purpose, too. For example, Sarah faces a unique problem: not everyone knows what a ventriloquist is, and those that do often think of the old-fashioned wooden puppets a la *Howdy Doody*. Sarah uses photos of her puppets on her materials to show them exactly what her company offers. “I’ve heard...people say I’ve got nice puppets. The types of puppets I have—of course that does not mean I do it well—but it indicates I’ve invested in this.”

Scott, on the other hand, faces a problem of differentiation. Although he has no direct competition within sixty miles, when people read his company’s name they often think his sports training company is really physical therapy. To counteract this confusion he has changed his tagline and shortened his company’s name; his plan, he says, is to use the visual identity to brand the company and gain instant recognition with his audience and community.

As a fellow small business owner, Lola understands the need for her audience of yoga students to believe in her and her company’s ability to offer a quality service. Even though she is capitalizing upon a “home made, home grown” design aesthetic, she warns that “There’s always a chance that you’ll be misread.” Lola hasn’t worried about changes in her visual identity causing confusion or hurting her reputation because she’s so well known in her community that “Lola” and “yoga” are nearly synonymous. But she has more than a decade of interactions with the public to draw upon. She acknowledges that start-ups may have a more difficult time building their ethos.

Designing the Visual Identity

For the start-up participants, identifying the rhetorical situation of their visual identity was clear: The purpose of their visual identity is to attract the attention of their potential audiences and to make them appear to be credible, reliable businesses. Yet the time, attention, and money needed to create a visual identity and ensure its consistent use across a variety of documents comes at a cost because those are resources that could be used on the company’s core product or service instead.

Identifying the Audience & Purpose of Visual Identity. The participants seem to agree that the purpose of their corporate visual identity is largely to attract attention from their target markets. However, of the four start-up participants only Scott (sports training) seemed to be able to clearly explain who his audience is; presumably, his background as a management and entrepreneurship professor helps him stay focused on his customers. In fact, Scott made two important discoveries after a year of promoting his sports training business: his target audience is younger than he originally thought and, therefore, traditional advertising is not very effective for his business. Rather than teaching students the fundamentals of popular sports, Scott's sports training business helps students develop their skills, speed, and agility so that they can be more competitive athletes. Initially he assumed that local high school students would become his clients; he soon learned that the athletic coaches already have programs in place for those students. Therefore Scott and his team turned their focus to middle school students with an eye on helping them develop the skills to be selected for varsity teams in the future. Yet Scott has discovered that communicating with his audience is "unbelievably hard....Who do you advertise to? We're still struggling with that. Do we keep plugging to the kids or the parents?" His solution has been to design a visual identity with elements that are attractive to teenagers but to place his materials where parents will find them.

Sarah, the ventriloquist, is in a similar situation. She has two distinct audiences: the people who attend her shows and the people who decide to hire her. She admits that developing materials that will interest both groups is challenging: children are often the primary audience for her shows, particularly in the summer months, but they are not the ones to whom she is really selling her services. She says

I'm hoping people will look at this and say "We've never had a ventriloquist before. This looks like a lot of fun. Something different and exciting." But I also want it to be appealing to all audiences, not just children and not just adults, and That is a difficult thing to come up with. I'm hoping that the logo shows that it's not just a kiddie thing.

Susan has a good idea of her audience because she works in a relatively small sphere of alpaca ranchers in the Midwest. In fact, Susan jokingly referred to the sixty alpaca ranchers in her state as a cult because of their passion for the animals and their tight-knit community. Her visual identity and promotional materials are designed to emphasize the quality of her two products: the animals and their fiber. She is the only participant to actively use a tagline on all her

materials, but she feels the tagline is essential because it emphasizes her focus on quality. In one of her first competitions her male alpaca won his category, so the emphasis seems justified.

Because Susan shows her alpacas in competition, she is in a unique position to get to know both her competitors and potential customers personally and develop relationships that might further her business. Before each show she prints out flyers with photographs and lineage information of her alpacas to distribute to attendees. (See Chapter 5 for examples of these documents.) But Susan also sees her documents as serving an educational purpose because outside of her industry many people do not know what an alpaca is. After all, alpaca farming might be one of South America's oldest and largest industries, but it is still fairly new to the United States. She sees part of her job as educating people about the animal to help develop the North American market for the products made from their fiber. Therefore her documents, and the visual identity that unites them, are created for both experts within her field as well as lay persons that she meets around town or at competitions.

Emily's pet services company is the newest business in the sample and she is still refining her definition of audience. An early draft of her business plan broadly describes her audience as "pet owners who need assistance with their pet care needs," but conversations reveal that she is actually focused on owners of mainly dogs and cats with specific needs and in a small geographic area. Like the other start-up participants, Emily faces an audience of potential clients who are unfamiliar with who she is and what she does. Yet as the youngest company in my sample, it is especially important for Emily's pet services company to quickly establish a positive reputation because she faces the most direct and indirect competition for the services she offers and thus has a greater risk of confusion or being overlooked. Her documents need to help her build her client base, which she hopes will then multiply through referrals.

Factoring the Costs of Developing a Visual Identity. The work involved in graphic design is more than just intuition. It is the result of both education and experience (Frascara 2007). Yet outsiders—that is to say most clients—do not necessarily understand or value the work involved in creating designs, explain both Adam and Zoe. New clients often ask how much a project will cost, as if graphic design were something one could order off a menu.

While revenue and expenses are a concern for every business, the cost of creating a visual identity and promotional materials featuring the identity are especially important to start-ups who are walking a fine line between revenues and expenses. Each participant mentioned

cost as a crucial factor in the decisions about designing and employing their visual identities. Scott (sports training) admitted that his choices for his visual identity were inspired in part by cost. “I’m always conscious that too many colors make the cost of printing go up. By staying with blue and gray you can always do things in grayscale.” Susan is also acutely conscious of expenses, explaining that most of her money goes into her animals, not her promotional materials:

I’ve hesitated about making a lot of things. I’ve invested a little in business cards but we truly are nickel and diming it. Paying vet bills, buying hay...there are other expenses so without being able to have any of it professionally done I’ve just made as many business cards as I need. When we go to shows I do things like this [pointing to flyer created in Word and photocopied at OfficeMax]. I haven’t even made a tri-fold...

An additional audience factor mentioned by each of the start-ups was the effect of the recent economic downturn on their sales. All four participants mentioned that they working harder to convince their audiences to purchase their products or services because they are essentially competing with a variety of other businesses for increasingly smaller disposable incomes.

Implementing the Visual Identity Consistently. One of the most frequently repeated themes in the interviews was the need for consistency in the application of the visual identity elements to corporate documents. As Robin Williams (2008) explains, repetition of elements provides a sense of consistency across documents. She suggests that users repeat fonts, rules, colors, graphics, even page formats to provide cohesiveness and unity (51). “The great thing about repetition is that it makes items look like they belong together, even if they are not exactly the same,” writes Williams (59), a technique she calls “unity with variety” (61). Sebastien (university) feels that repetition is so important that he focuses most of his attention (and money) on three elements: use of the university colors, use of the name, and employment of the flame icon. Billboards in his target markets usually feature only these three elements with no additional text or imagery. While such a spare design may seem boring or simplistic to many viewers, he is getting compliments from experts. A representative of Clear Channel Outdoor, a major outdoor advertising company, praised Sebastien recently saying “What [your university] has done is consistently apply a very clear message through color and image across time,” a plan that most billboard clients do not follow.

All of the start-up participants seemed concerned that their promotional materials portray a consistent look and feel, and a look at sample materials reveals that they are achieving their goal via repetition of elements and layouts. (The sample documents are included and discussed in more detail in the following chapter.) Scott has created a series of handouts for his sports training services that exemplify unity with variety. All are black and white, the front of each features a photo representing a sport, and the back of each contains information about both the general services his company offers and the ones specific to that sport. The elements of repetition—color scheme, use of logo and tagline, layout and styles of the text—turn a set of individual documents into a cohesive collection that packs a visual punch.

On the other hand, Sarah (ventriloquist) has not achieved the consistency that she believes she needs. “I’m not consistent in my use of fonts and stuff like that. Even this [combination of typeface and color] isn’t consistent in materials I’m sending out to people.” Until recently the only truly consistent element of her visual identity was the color green, although a decorative typeface (Comic Sans) and a photo of herself with some of her puppets were also used frequently. Yet she still seems to feel that her identity is inconsistent and perhaps a bit unfinished. “This is all new to me,” she explains. She hopes that her new logo, acquired in the summer of 2008, will help tie her materials together and provide the consistency that she feels is missing from her visual identity.

As Emily (pet services) explains, being consistent is important but a bit frustrating as well. “There are so many choices out there. The hardest part was narrowing it down. If I had my way I would have a different logo on everything because there are so many to choose from. And so many colors and timesteps, too.” As Emily develops additional promotional materials for her pet services company, she may be losing focus on her initial decisions about visual identity in favor of items she can afford. In an early meeting with an entrepreneurial expert she expressed an interest in painting her car to look like an American flag. He helped her see that the flag might not be a particularly useful way to differentiate herself or establish her business, yet four months later she has purchased an order of promotional pens that do not fit into her visual identity at all. “They did not have animals and I couldn’t choose the timestep, so I went with the flag. It’s patriotic. They had stars and moons, but none of it had anything to do with my business, so I thought that flags would be more neutral. You can really do any business with those.” A second promotional giveaway, key chains, is available in the paw print she uses on all

of her materials, but rather than sticking to her color palette of cream or white and burgundy, she has chosen to purchase blue ones. Perhaps the choice was economic—her colors may not have been available in that style—but she explains the choice quite simply: “Blue is my favorite color, so they’re going to be blue.” Will the inconsistency create a problem for her company? It is too soon to tell with her company only a year old. But it seems that Lola’s advice to experiment with visual identity certainly has a fan in Emily.

Design and Implementation Constraints for the Start-Ups

Much like the experienced participants, the start-up participants devised a visual identity by thinking about their potential audience, identifying the purpose of visual identity as a way of attracting attention, communicating information about their businesses, and then selecting visual identity elements to meet those needs. They knew that they should be consistent in their use of visual identity elements in order to build recognition and develop an ethos with their audience. But from here the experiences of the start-ups and the experienced participants diverged. In this section I outline three themes from the interviews that were unique to the start ups: a lack of expertise in visual communication, the need for assistance from family and friends, and the inspirations and resources that influenced their designs.

Lack of Expertise in Visual Communication. As stated previously, none of the start-up participants has any formal education or experience in advertising, graphic design, or visual communication. They have created companies based upon their areas of expertise or interests; their focus now is on finding clients and providing quality products or services. Creating a visual identity and using it on marketing materials to communicate with the clients was largely an afterthought: a necessary part of their business but not part of their daily operations.

Susan and Scott are both in a somewhat stronger position than Emily and Sarah. Susan explained that she has worked in personal sales and marketing in the past. In addition to her alpaca farm she is currently a career services specialist at a two-year college, a job that entails teaching students how to sell themselves to potential employers. She even keeps a file of documents and designs that she likes and uses them for inspiration in her own work both on the ranch and at the college. Scott not only runs his sports training business but also is a management professor at a Midwestern university. His education in business has introduced him

to the concepts of marketing, professional communication, branding, and corporate identity even though it is not his area of expertise.

Sarah and Emily, on the other hand, have no business or marketing background. They admit that a lot of their work has been created through experimentation and trial and error. Sarah shared an early draft of her company's tri-fold brochure, a document filled with photos of her puppets but one that she does not like and has not used very often. She has ideas for improving the brochure into a second draft but has not yet found time to do so. Emily explains that her only previous design work was when she would "doodle a lot" in the margins of her notebooks. Her logo and promotional materials are all the result of "trial and error." Her first brochure was designed in about one week, although the content inside was soon revised to reflect new services for pet owners.

Of course, trial and error is a natural part of the design process, as even Adam and Zoe, the graphic designers, can attest. "Creativity comes from experience. It comes from trial and error. It comes from education. It comes from all these things that you can't really spell out to anybody," explains Adam. And even the professionals sometimes err. Zoe described an experience in which the document she designed simply did not meet the customer's needs. "Maybe I was having a bad week or something...But it made me realize that I need to listen a lot more and take a lot more time up front rather than just throwing out ideas."

Using Assistance from Outsiders. Sebastien and Angelina are fortunate that their universities have dedicated marketing budgets and access to professional graphic designers and marketing/advertising specialists to help them design and employ their visual identities on promotional materials. Although her business is much smaller, Lola also benefits from the expertise of a professional graphic designer. She works closely with Zoe to develop marketing materials for her successful yoga studio. After working together for nearly a decade the two women have a comfortable and trusting working relationship. They respect each other's talents and contribute their respective strengths to the design process: Lola provides copy and storyboards of potential layouts, colors, and elements; Zoe uses that information and her own expertise to create the final design. Lola gives Zoe complete control over the visual identity, even giving her permission to change the logo or other identity elements if she feels it will make the best impact in the design.

The start-up participants received assistance in designing and applying their visual identities, too, but on a smaller scale and often for free. Each of the start-up participants received assistance to some degree from friends, family, and others in the community. Susan's alpaca logo, for example, is a photo of her weathervane taken by a neighbor who is a professional photographer. A clerk at the Office Max copy shop made a minor alteration to the weathervane icon to rotate the alpaca figure. Susan's mentor even suggested the tagline that Susan uses on all of her materials to emphasize her focus on quality animals and fiber.

Sarah (ventriloquist) received significant help from her brother-in-law who used his experience designing signs and vehicle advertising wraps to design a custom logo featuring Sarah's company's name and an image of her primary puppet. At the recommendation of a local entrepreneurship consultant, Sarah also hired a local marketing consultant to help her design a postcard and a website, but she was not entirely happy with the results of the professional assistance. When the marketing specialist moved out of state recently, Sarah decided to end their professional relationship and focus more on developing the business materials on her own.

Scott asked an employee at his sports training company to develop gift certificates to sell in his facility and to give away at athletic events. He also purchased a CD-ROM with 15,000 images of stock photography to use in his promotional materials. In each of the instances described, the assistance was necessary to fill a gap in the entrepreneur's own knowledge or abilities.

On the other hand, Emily likes her independence and chose to work alone in her pet services business. The few times she has reached out for help seem to have been more frustrating than anything else. "I like being the one to make the decisions. I do not want a partner to collaborate with. I want to be able to add something to [the design] without having to haggle with someone else," she explains. On the advice of an entrepreneurship consultant, Emily received minor assistance from a local college student to create her website as his class project, but she was disappointed with the result. She is hoping that the consultant will help her find someone to improve and finish the site. She also sought outside assistance in developing a new icon to supplement her two main icons of a dog-walker and a paw print. The woman who was going to help her knows Illustrator, a software program that Emily has not used before. Unfortunately, the resulting design was unsatisfactory. "Not even my typestyle, not even close to

what I had. I was not at all happy with that. She just was not listening.” Ultimately, Emily decided to continue with her existing CVI elements and forgo the outside help.

Seeking Inspiration for Visual Identity Elements. Before they start working on a design, graphic designers Adam and Zoe seek inspiration from industry journals, information about competitors, even fine art. And of course they also rely on their own thoughts and experiences. Zoe goes for walks with her dog to “stew” about a project; Adam reads information from the client to learn details that might guide his design. “But I learned in school that you do not start at the computer,” says Zoe.

Like Adam and Zoe, Susan sought inspiration from the materials that surround her. A photograph of the alpaca-shaped weathervane on her barn became her logo; the colors of her barn became her color palette. She keeps an “ideas file” with advertisements from other breeders or documents that she gets in the mail that have design elements that appeal to her. Both Scott and Sarah also sought inspiration from existing documents. Although Scott’s blue and black palette was chosen to keep printing costs low, he explains that black is also widely used by similar sports training companies around the country. Sarah was inspired by her mentor, a ventriloquist in Texas who is nationally known and whose materials are “fantastic.” Like him, she features photographs of her puppets in all of her documents and inserts them into a simple green pocket folder when distributing them to potential clients.

Using Software at Their Disposal. While Adam and Zoe use specialized desktop publishing software to design the visual identity elements and to make the documents that they send to professional printers, the start-ups work with significantly lower-tech resources. Most of the documents in my sample, as well as others described by the start-up participants, were created using software that is not necessarily suitable for the task of creating a visual identity or promotional materials. Each start-up entrepreneur mentioned using Microsoft Word to create documents ranging from invoices to flyers and tri-fold brochures. Although Word is capable of creating these documents, it does not offer the range of features available in desktop publishing software, nor does it allow a novice user as much control or flexibility over all of the design decisions involved in creating these types of documents.

It seems that participants understand the limitations of their software and the advantages of using the right tool for the job. Emily created most of her materials using Adobe InDesign software; Sarah created her documents using Microsoft Publisher. However, they also

mentioned limitations in their knowledge of the full range of features in desktop publishing software. “I have [Photoshop],” said Emily, “but I can’t put one person’s face on another person’s body. I can crop and That is about it.” Instead, she edited clip art to create her dog-walker logo using Paint, a simple drawing software that is standard in Microsoft Windows operating systems. Scott started creating his sports training documents using InDesign as well but switched to Word when he received a new PC and continued using it to facilitate file sharing with his employees.

By contrast, Susan relies upon Microsoft Word, Excel, or PowerPoint for all of her alpaca-related documents. Those programs are what she knows how to use, she explains, and she is not sure she wants to learn any others. To create her logo she tried using PictureIt, a discontinued photo editing application. She also expressed an interest in buying a license for software that would allow her to design postcards on her computer. The service would allow her to submit designs to be printed and mailed remotely, saving both time and money.

What the Interviews Reveal About Creating Corporate Visual Identity

The participants in this study represent a breadth of experience and expertise in creating corporate visual identities. Adam and Zoe, professional graphic designers, each have more than a decade of experience in addition to education in art and graphic design. Sebastien and Angelina may not create visual identities, but they use their education and experience in marketing to help them apply the visual identities to the university branding campaigns and to explain to internal users why maintaining a consistent look and feel to documents is an important part of communications with their stakeholders. Lola uses her background in journalism, a decade of experience as small business owner, and the assistance of a graphic designer to create and execute her visual identity and corporate documents. Furthermore, the experienced participants also use research regarding their audiences and their competition to guide their decisions. The start-up participants, on the other hand, relied mainly upon educated guesses and personal experience to describe their audiences. None conducted any formal audience analysis prior to developing their visual identities or implementing the visual identity in promotional materials.

The start-ups agreed with the experienced participants that the purpose of their visual identity was to raise their visibility with their audiences. The start-ups had an additional purpose though: they wanted their visual identities to help them look professional and established, like a

“legitimate business.” Although each recognized the value of hiring a professional, the start-ups all indicated that in these early years they need to focus more of their scarce resources—time, attention, and money—on the day-to-day expenses of running their business. Unfortunately, this view of the visual identity as an expense rather than as an asset could be short-sighted. In the year since this project was started, the American economy has entered a recession, and disposable incomes have shrunk swiftly; each start-up must acknowledge their products or services are not necessities, so being visible to potential clients is more important than ever.

In choosing to forgo professional assistance and without formal training in visual communication, the start-ups relied instead on intuition, experimentation, and personal preference to make their designs. They also relied upon the tools already at their disposal to implement the visual identities in their professional documents, including clip art, stock photography, personal digital photos, and the small business productivity software. But in spite of their best efforts, their visual identities were often constrained by their access or ability to use the most appropriate technology to create their designs. Most of the software mentioned by the start-ups—Word, Paint, PictureIt—are not intended for complex design tasks. Even Publisher, the Microsoft desktop publishing application that Sarah used, is limited in higher-end features such as text on paths or image editing. The Microsoft.com website describes Publisher as a tool for creating a small business brand identity via color, fonts and logo, but it also emphasizes the use of templates to create documents to create that identity. Therein lies a tradeoff that many novice designers face: Starting from scratch may be the most creative outlet, but using the wrong software may limit the ability to execute that creativity or may lead to inconsistency in implementation. On the other hand, using a template is certainly easier than starting from scratch. However, even with moderate customization the documents tend to be boring, cookie-cutter designs that fail to attract the attention that start-ups so desperately need. Furthermore, none of the software currently used by the start-up participants includes the specialized features like color separation that would be needed by professional printers. In fact, the start-ups may be surprised to learn that even basic elements like fonts or graphics may pose problems for printers if the elements are not embedded within the document, a task that is not difficult but not routine either. The corporate visual identities of the start-ups were all quite original, but the participants did express frustration about trying to ensure consistent implementation in their promotional materials.

Getting help from family and friends is not always the best solution either. Projects sometimes take longer to complete when one is not a paying client, as Sarah learned with the creation of her logo. And even if someone is ready and willing to help, he or she might not do a thorough job, as Susan learned with the editing of her logo. Relying upon students often seems like a mutually beneficial endeavor, but student projects involve a risk of working with someone who is more interested in earning a grade than creating something good, as Emily learned with her website.

Finally, the confluence of several decisions on the part of the start-up participants—to forgo audience research and analysis, to design from intuition, and to work alone or with only minimal assistance—could prove to be an impediment to establishing the professional ethos they all yearn for. After all, ethos is created by each interaction of a speaker/author and her audience. As the experienced participants suggest, researching one's audience is the best way to identify the characteristics and values that they will find appealing and persuasive. A visual identity created in a vacuum runs the risk of creating a design that fails to please or persuade anyone other than its creator.

This chapter has explored the ways that start-up entrepreneurs create their corporate visual identities. To better understand the tasks and decisions that the start-ups face, I compared the thoughts and advice of several experienced marketing and graphic design professionals to the responses of the start-up participants. The start-up entrepreneurs recognize that a corporate visual identity is a standard part of typical business communication, a visual method of communicating information about their company and corporate identity that also provides a consistent look and feel to corporate documents. They also recognize that their corporate visual identity has the potential to affect their ethos with their audience of potential clients. In their current financial situations and with limited experience in design, the start-up participants make do with what they have, but their experiences show that even DIY has a cost.

In the following chapter I delve more deeply into the corporate visual identities of the start-up participants. In order to understand how theories of visual rhetoric presented in rhetoric and professional communication literature inform the practice of developing CVI, I use a framework suggested by Dondis (1973) to analyze the design techniques that are evident in several sample documents provided by the start-ups. My objective is to identify patterns in the techniques the start-ups use. After all, they have admitted that they are developing their materials

through trial and error with no education or experience in visual communication. As I argue in Chapter 6, knowing which techniques seem to be used more or less often by novices can inform the teaching of visual rhetoric in professional communication by suggesting ways to experiment with elements. Such experimentation helps students to reflect upon their design decisions and increase their visual literacy.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS OF DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

THE METHODS AND TECHNIQUES BEHIND CORPORATE VISUAL IDENTITY

Visual intelligence is no different than general intelligence and the control of the elements of visual media presents the same problems as the mastery of any skill. To accomplish it, you must know what you are working with and how to proceed.

Donis A. Dondis, *Visual Literacy*

In Chapter 4 I explored the ways that start-up entrepreneurs create their corporate visual identities. I now turn my focus to the sample documents that the participants provided. Each document features one or more of six elements of corporate visual identity: logos, color palettes, typography, graphics and imagery, copy and taglines, and animations (Adams, Morioka, and Stone 2004). Data from the participants revealed that none is currently using the containing shape element in their identity. An additional element, sound signatures, does not fit into the scope of this project. I begin by describing how the start-ups have developed their own version of each element for their visual identities. Then I analyze the elements of the visual identities and the sample documents provided by the start-ups within the framework of nineteen visual techniques suggested by Donis A. Dondis (1973) and listed in Chapter 3. Dondis claims that these visual techniques (along with the basic technique of contrast) allow users to manipulate the basic elements of dot, line, shape, direction, texture, dimension, scale, and movement into designs. I believe that identifying how novices use these techniques may help instructors teach students to read and create their own visual documents.

The Elements of a Corporate Visual Identity

Corporate Logos

A logo is “a distinctive symbol of a company, object, publication, person, service, or idea” (Adams, Morioka, and Stone 2004, 16). A logo may consist of the organization’s name (logotype), a symbol (icon), or a combination of the two. Robert C. Parker (2006, 47) calls logos a “visual shorthand” for an organization that creates consistency across documents and easy recognition for readers. He offers this advice to novices who are creating logos: “The best logos

reflect the nature of the business they symbolize yet are simple enough to retain their legibility over a wide variety of reproductions” and must also be scalable from business cards to full-page newspaper advertisements (46). While Parker’s description of a good logo may seem straightforward, Adam, the graphic designer, explains that It is not always easy to follow through. While working with several small towns in Iowa, he found that the communities had difficulty identifying the nature of the business they wanted to promote. “One thing that all three of these cities *did not* want was to emphasize farming or agriculture,” he explains. “There are abstract things they want to show. Progression, whatever that means, or being on the cutting edge.” Furthermore, the communities often had little to offer to differentiate themselves, further complicating the development of unique symbols or icons.

To Sebastien, icons are central to a successful visual identity. His university uses two: a metaphoric icon of a flame and a logotype featuring the university’s name (Adams, Morioka, and Stone 2004). “There are words there but it’s really an icon....I do not consider our name to be words. They’re not copy.” While the nameplate is obviously unique, Sebastien’s flame

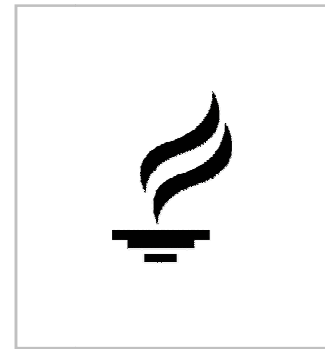


Figure 1 The flame icon used by Sebastien’s university, featuring the requisite whitespace.

(figure 1) is an example of appropriating a simple element and using it consistently to represent one’s brand. Flame icons are often used to symbolize both eternity and knowledge, giving the choice of a flame for the primary icon potential for dilution or confusion. Yet by incorporating a stylized flame of custom design and using it consistently with the other elements of the visual identity, Sebastien’s university has effectively satisfied both conditions of Parker’s definition: the flame represents knowledge the university offers to students and is imminently scalable and reproducible.

Unlike Sebastien’s university or even the municipal clients of Adam’s graphic design firm, the start-up participants in this study have fairly concrete products or services to promote: pet sitting, alpacas and alpaca products, ventriloquism, and sports training services. Adam suggests that logos are generally abstract, allowing the audience to interpret the design in a variety of ways, but the participants in this study use symbolic images, diagrammatic icons (Adams, Morioka, and Stone 2004) that are fairly concrete representations of their companies, and a logotype.

Emily uses two icons in her pet services visual identity: a custom-made graphic of a girl walking a dog (figure 2) as well as a simple paw print (figure 3). A former job in the printing industry gave her experience using InDesign, making Emily the most design savvy of the group. Yet she created a fairly complex graphic for her materials using only clip art and Microsoft Paint, the free image editing software that is available with the Windows operating system. Emily explains that her logo of a girl walking a dog on a leash was created in the following manner:

I took the dog [from clip art.] The girl was actually a guy so I put it in Paint and turned the shorts into a skirt and added the ponytail and a line for the leash. It was a really thick line along the legs so I just made the legs a little thinner and added a chest on her. And the guy had a grimace on his face and there was no way I was going to be able to make a girl's face on that so I just took out the facial expression altogether.

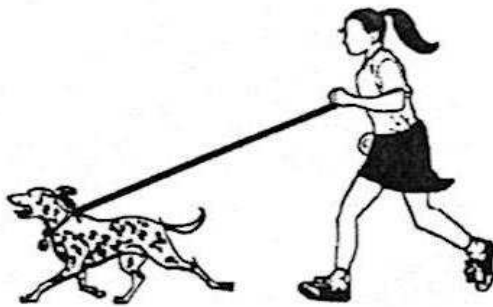


Figure 2 Emily's pet services logo



Figure 3 Emily's secondary icon.

In addition to the girl and dog, Emily also uses a clip art paw print in newspaper advertisements and on documents such as a business card holder, a brochure listing her services, frequent customer coupons, and receipts. The dog-walker graphic was originally a concrete icon of the service Emily provides, but in recent months she has added new services, including pet taxi and photography, making the icon a bit more symbolic than before.

Sarah, the ventriloquist, has also moved away from a concrete logo in favor of a more symbolic one. In the summer of 2008 Sarah began using a logo that was created by her brother-in-law. The new logo features her main puppet, Bubba the alligator, peeking over the company name (figure 4). For the first five years of operation, however, she used a photo of herself surrounded by her most popular puppets as an ersatz logo (figure 5).



Figure 4 Sarah's new logo featuring her main puppet. (The name of her company has been obscured to protect her identity.)



Figure 5 The photograph that functioned as Sarah's former logo.

Sarah's former logo was a very concrete representation of her business. She received positive feedback from her audience; many people were impressed that she uses such high quality puppets. The new logo is still somewhat concrete but only if the audience is aware that the alligator in the logo is a puppet. The name of Sarah's company does not refer to her ventriloquism, and the alligator is an illustration rather than a photo of the actual puppet (although, as the two images reveal, it is a very accurate representation of the real thing). Thus Sarah will likely have to provide other textual or visual cues to indicate the service her company provides.

Susan's alpaca (figure 6) may be the most concrete diagrammatic icon of the start-ups. Susan's husband forged the alpaca and welded it to a standard weathervane. Later a friend took photographs of her barn and the photo of the weathervane caught Susan's eye. She scanned the photo, cropped it using Microsoft PictureIt, and inserted the image into her documents as a logo. The concrete image appeals to Susan because it provides an instantly recognizable image of an animal that many people may be unfamiliar with. Combined with the name of her ranch, she hopes that her readers will think, "Oh, That is what an alpaca looks like."

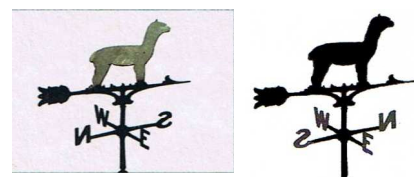


Figure 6 Two versions of Susan's logo. The original (left) is cropped from a photograph. The alpaca faces south although the ranch is named after the north wind. In the revised logo (right) the N and S have been moved but are still backwards to the reader.

Susan's method of creating a logo presents a glimpse at some of the technical difficulties novice designers face. Although she did not notice this at the time, Susan's photograph was

taken from behind the weathervane on a day when the wind was blowing toward the south. Normally this might not present a problem but Susan's ranch name and tagline include the words "north wind." When Susan brought her logo to Office Max to print some business cards the clerk noticed that the alpaca topper was facing the wrong direction and offered to correct the image by scanning the image, cutting the letters, and exchanging them so that the animal appears to face the north wind. Yet the letters *N* and *S* remain backward, much to Susan's chagrin (and perhaps a bit of amusement too).

The exception to the use of diagrammatic logos is Scott's sports training company.

Rather than using a symbol, Scott has chosen to use a logotype of the company's full name with an eye toward eventually changing to a monogram of the initial letters in the company's name. As a prelude to the transition, his logotype features enlarged letters and tight kerning; he



Figure 7 An imitation of Scott's logotype. The name has been changed to protect his identity but the typeface, kerning, and colors are representative of his logo.

hopes that he can eventually drop the rest of the name, leaving only the middle letters. (Because of privacy concerns I have imitated Scott's logotype in figure 7 rather than identify his company by including the actual logotype.) While Scott's monogram may be inexpensive to reproduce and offers a variety of options for use, it also risks obscurity and will require greater effort on his part to ensure recognition. "Initials woven together have very little meaning. Most monogrammatic logos depend upon large-scale audience contact and repeated viewing for recognition" (Adams, Morioka, and Stone 2004, 17).

In spite of the difficulties involved in creating associations between their icons and their businesses, the abstract designs are probably a good thing. Although the temptation to use a concrete logos is strong, giving in may prove limiting in the future as the company matures or if the core product or service changes.

Color Palettes

Color palettes play a role in portraying the personality of an organization by capitalizing upon characteristics that the colors connote for readers. However, the implications made by

color palette may be quite difficult to manage because the connotations attached to colors are both personal and cultural. For example, white represents purity in many Western countries but death or mourning in China. Even within the same culture a color may represent many different, even contradictory, meanings. In the United States the color orange usually represents warning or caution and is closely associated with the holiday Halloween, although it may also be associated with excitement and creativity (Cortes 2003). In designing a visual identity, the choice of color palette may quietly influence readers into making inferences about an organization's reputation or behavior. For instance, the use of green can be a positive choice for organizations wishing to emphasize their sensitivity to environmental issues.

Like many universities in the United States, the universities that Angelina and Sebastien work for have chosen pairs of colors that are used on athletic uniforms, promotional merchandise, and official university publications. Yet Angelina points out that the color palette in her university's visual identity extends far beyond the school's "official" two-color scheme of red and gold. "We did a color palette that was based on agriculture and nature, some of the founding principles of what this place is." Sebastien's university, on the other hand, is more conservative in its variety of color. Market research and secondary research in psychology showed that his university's scheme of purple and gold has mainly positive connotations, especially since it coincides with a popular professional sports team nearby. Sebastien has made a special effort to emphasize the school colors in its materials and on its website, saying "Color is critical." A color palette may even be chosen by the graphic designer creating the visual identity. Adam points out that professional designers are often influenced by fads in colors that are often endorsed by industry journals like *Communication Arts*. "A couple of years ago it was chartreuse. It seemed like it was everywhere."

The start-up participants in this study, on the other hand, seemed unaware of trends and largely uninfluenced by audience or psychology. For the most part, they have chosen color palettes that appeal to them personally or that are cost effective. Emily's color palette of cream and burgundy, for example, was selected to support her identity of "feminine but not frilly." Susan's choice of black and tan (or white) with accents of brick red was inspired by the colors on the barn that houses her alpacas.

Scott's identity features three colors—white, blue, and grey—that are widely used in sports, that are popular with his teenage audience, and that have "impact." Unlike the other

participants, however, Scott also factored in economics into his color palette. Everything Scott designs can also be reproduced in grayscale without affecting its legibility or emphasis. His intention is to keep his promotional costs low and allow him to channel as much money as he can back into the business.

Sarah, on the other hand, uses a rainbow assortment of colors to appeal to children and to project an image of youth and fun. The dominant color in her documents is a deep green, a color inspired by her alligator puppet. She has learned the hard way, however, that using too many colors, particularly in a rainbow effect, can reduce legibility. One of her postcards, for example, features rainbow letters on a green background. Unfortunately, the blue letters are difficult to discern because of low contrast. A similar problem occurred on a flyer with yellow letters printed on a white background. Although she wisely avoids using the natural complement of green (red, which would lend the documents a Christmas connotation), she might benefit from trying a secondary triad matching green with orange and purple or a monochromatic combination of analogous colors by pairing true green with aqua and lime (Williams 2008). Yet with either choice she must ensure sufficient contrast between her text and background to make the document legible.

Typography Selection

Typography can play an equally important role in establishing the personality and reputation of an organization. A popular attitude by Modernist designers was to view typography as a “crystal goblet,” meaning that the typeface should be neutral and the meaning of the communication should be conveyed solely by the content of the message (Warde and Jacob 1956). Many contemporary typographers and graphic designers take a more individualistic view, however. Type designer Tobias Frere-Jones compares selecting typography to being a casting director in films:

I think even if they're not consciously aware of the typeface that they're reading they'll certainly be affected by it the same way that an actor That is miscast in a role will affect someone's experience of a movie or play that they're watching. They'll still follow the plot but, you know, be less convinced or excited or affected .(in Hustwit 2007)

Both Sebastien's and Angelina's universities have selected specific typefaces for use in their copy and promotional materials and make these typefaces available to users for a small fee

to cover licensing costs. The nameplates also feature particular typefaces to maintain a consistent look. Sebastien’s university uses the Trajan typeface while Angelina’s institution further differentiates itself from others via a custom typeface that is not available except in files containing the entire nameplate. Lola juxtaposes both her professional and whimsical sides in the nameplate for her company, which features an elegant serif typeface interrupted by a hand-drawn sun-and-moon icon standing in for the O in “yoga.”

The entrepreneurs, of course, are more limited in their typographic decisions in terms of both cost and availability. Each chose to use typefaces that are available within their software rather than searching out alternatives from web-based font houses or from CD-ROMs. Scott’s original logotype used the **Impact** font, a choice inspired perhaps by Scott’s vision of his sports training business. After all, he described his color scheme as having impact too. The current logotype was revised slightly with the help from its web site developer but still uses a strong, simple sans serif typeface in italic and upright forms.

Prior to receiving her new logo, Sarah typically used the decorative **Comic Sans** typeface for her company name. The rounded, almost cartoonish letterforms coincide nicely with the nature of her ventriloquism business and probably appeal to the children who attend most of her shows. Several of her sample documents show that she extends the use of the font into body text as well. Although extended use of decorative typefaces is often discouraged, the choice of Comic Sans for her promotional materials creates text that is still legible and readable. Her newly acquired official logo, on the other hand, features a modern, hard-edged sans serif that angles to the right as if in italics. Sarah’s hope is that the new logo with its angular letters will convey that her business is not just for children.

Emily, working alternately with Word at home and InDesign at work, chose a decorative typeface in Word (***French Script***) and its near-twin in InDesign (Typo Upright) to reinforce her “feminine but not frilly” image as the female owner of a pet services company. Aware of legibility issues, she uses the decorative font only for her company’s name. For body text she uses **Georgia**, a graceful serif with good legibility. In advertising she has occasionally replaced her decorative typeface with **Cooper**, a bold serif typeface, to make the company name stand out more effectively on a page full of similar-sized ads.

Susan, on the other hand, keeps her choice of typography simple in the promotional materials for her alpacas. She uses **Times New Roman** for her company name and for all other text in her documents. Susan's choice was based on practicality as well as on legibility. She believes that her choice of Times New Roman will work to her advantage given the widespread use of Microsoft Word. She also seems to have considered the issue of reproducibility of her typeface, pointing out that her choice prints well consistently, unlike some typefaces with a strong contrast between thick and thin strokes. Yet there was also a symbolic element to her decision as well. "It's [the typeface] got that gothic feel like old fashioned weathervanes," she explains. Ironically, however, she has chosen a typeface so ubiquitous that it is nearly transparent.⁶

Taglines & Copy

A tagline is a short phrase that appears next to a company's logo. The text represents a distilled form of the company's mission or its promise to customers. Of the four start-ups, only Susan and Scott use text that would be considered traditional taglines. Susan's simple statement "Quality strong as the north wind" ties together her weathervane logo, the name of her ranch (which features the Japanese words for "north breeze"), and her desire to develop a reputation for quality animals and alpaca fiber. She incorporates the tagline, along with her logo and name, on as many materials as she can in order to reinforce her message. The copy she uses in her flyers is concise and focused on her animals: name, pedigree, and breeding or sale information. Although she wants to set herself apart from her competition with service after the sale via mentorship as well as the on-site store that will open each winter, her sample materials do not reflect this information.

Scott currently incorporates a tagline directly below his logotype but indicated that he wants to move away from the tagline and simplify his copy in order to make his sports training business seem less technical. As he explains, the original text includes phrases such as "a scientific approach through biomechanics, neuromuscular coordination, anaerobic conditioning and muscle physiology to achieve higher levels of performance." Text like this might accurately describe his sports training business, but it does not resonate with his target audience of

⁶ Thanks to the ubiquity of Microsoft Office, Times New Roman may have achieved what Beatrice Warde described in *The Crystal Goblet*: invisible typography that functions like a window through which the reader may "look out at the landscape of an author's words" (1956, 13).

teenagers and their parents. In the last year he has moved more toward a copy theme⁷ of “Fun, Faster, Stronger.” While the copy theme expresses simplicity and clarity, it also imitates the concise mottos of the Olympic Games (“Citius, Altius, Fortius” or “Swifter, Higher, Stronger”) and both the aviation industry and the early NASA space missions (“Higher, Faster, Farther”).

Sarah’s tagline is not used on all of her materials nor does it provide a concrete message about the ventriloquism service she provides. The phrase “Let us impact your life” was suggested by a marketing consultant, and Sarah has incorporated it on a few documents, including the postcard and website the consultant designed. She admits, however, that she is unsure whether she really wants to use the phrase as a tagline (meaning on every document she uses) or as a theme for her select programs and sales materials.

By contrast, Sebastien, the marketing director at a mid-sized university, thinks that taglines are a bad idea altogether.

We’ve intentionally avoided a tagline because it detracts from the name. The message *is* our name,” he explains. “My take on market research is that the number of effective taglines is very small. The danger of doing a tagline that is not corny, or that does not sound like somebody else, or that is not remembered because it is too complex...marketing is limited with that. It’s also a distraction from the name. You want the name.

Therefore Sebastien’s organization focuses on using only its name, color palette, and icon in promotional materials. He uses copy themes to repeat key ideas from the university mission in his text but allows himself the flexibility to change those themes as necessary.

Imagery

Imagery used in visual identity may consist of photographs, illustrations, and symbols beyond the corporate logo. Most of the participants in this study include photographs as imagery in their visual identities. The photographs vary from personal to professional to stock images, but the participants who use them feel that the realism of photographs is an important part of communicating with their audiences.

The core visual identity of Sebastien’s university is small—icon, name, colors—but the latest branding campaign features plenty of photos, too. The participants of his focus groups

⁷ Sebastien explained that a tagline appears every time the organization’s logo appears. A copy theme, on the other hand, unifies the organization’s message across multiple documents but is not required every time the logo is used, offering greater flexibility to use the logo in different contexts.

indicate that they appreciate realistic photos of students and campus events rather than “pretty pictures.” On the university’s website photos also have the advantage of becoming links to additional information and drawing the reader into the site in addition to promoting the brand.

Scott chose to avoid graphics in his logo, yet he uses imagery in nearly all of the materials for his sports training business. His images range from photos he has taken of his clients using his equipment (figure 8) to stock photography available in a book and on a CD. The benefit of his personal photos, Scott explains, is that readers can see the company’s logo and color palette on the walls and floors in the facility as well as get a realistic idea of the equipment in use. The stock photos, on the other hand, lend an air of expense to his flyers (Kumpf 2000). However, Scott should also be wary of the potential for others to use the same images and dilute the impact of his materials. As Adam pointed out, stock photography is not unique and may result in conflicting or confusing messages (see Chapter 4). Readers may bring unwanted connotations to their reading of his message if they see the same image promoting different companies, products, or services.

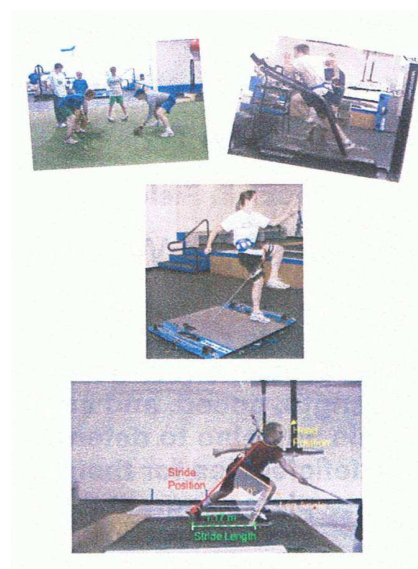


Figure 8 Photos of Scott's facility featuring actual clients. He uses these photos on his brochure.

Perhaps Sarah uses photographs most often in her materials. For the first five years of operation a photograph featuring Sarah and several of her puppets (see figure 5) was a de facto logo that she used on her business card, flyers, and postcards. Although she now has an official logo consisting of a graphic and logotype, she plans to continue using photos in her materials. She explains that her new photo (figure 9) is an



Figure 9 Sarah's new photo. She uses this image on most of her publicity materials and plans to include it on business cards in the future.

important selling point for her services because it explains what she does and illustrates the quality of her puppets. “I’ve heard people say ‘Oh, That is what a ventriloquist does? I’ve also heard people say I’ve got nice puppets. The types of puppets I have—of course that does not mean I do it well—but it indicates I’ve invested in this....they’re not raggedy puppets.”

Like Sarah, Susan also relies upon photos in her promotional and sales materials. She breeds the animals, shows them in regional competitions, and sells their fiber. In fact, the quality of an animal’s fiber is a strong selling point, making the quality of her photos particularly important. Yet other than a handful of photos taken by a friend, Susan is her own photographer, a job that is harder than it may appear. She has to consider backgrounds and shadows as well as the movements of the animal. “They do not just pose!” she laughed, pointing to an ad in a glossy industry magazine. Taking professional-quality photographs requires more time and expertise than she has and therefore the photographs may not be as nice as she would like. Yet the quality of the photos is a tradeoff she is prepared to make at this point as she juggles the responsibilities of running a farm with an outside job that subsidizes her ranch.

To promote both her company and a healthy lifestyle, Lola uses photographs of herself, her employees, and nature. She believes that her photos are a crucial part of her visual identity. She too takes the photos with a digital camera—or asks friends to take them—but the personal photos are part of her strategy rather than a decision brought on by necessity. “We are proud that we use absolutely no stock photos. We do not download photos from online. If there are pictures they are yoga students, the studio, or photos of town.” In addition to the photos of teachers in various poses as well as socializing with each other and the students, Lola also includes a nature photograph, such as a flower, in every document. She believes that images of nature are calming and restorative and has read studies that support her belief.

One successful ad featured one of Lola’s instructors seated in lotus position with a television on her head, accompanied by the copy theme “Too much television is bad for your head. Try yoga at [company] instead.” But Lola is aware of the need to adapt her message to different audiences, so she ran that photo only in the local university student newspaper. “She’s got her stomach exposed. She’s got a pierced belly button, a lot of flesh with just a cami bra, a long beautiful body with lots of skin. I wouldn’t put that into the city paper. That is too much flesh and too perfect of a body to market anywhere other than the college.”

Emily was the sole participant to rely completely upon clip art in her visual identity imagery, which is ironic since she is also a photographer. Her images are based upon free clip art, although she was able to modify a few to create custom icons such as her dog-walker logo (see figure 2) and her pet taxi graphic (figure 10). Both graphics and photographs serve an important role in portraying a



Figure 10 Emily's pet taxi graphic. She added the dog and her company's name (in the black circle on the door) to an existing taxi clip art.

company's message to potential customers. Yet photographs offer realism that drawn graphics cannot; they are considered more factual and therefore appeal to *logos* (Faigley and Selzer 2005, 89) in a way that Emily's clip art may not be able to do.

Animation

A thorough identity package includes considering whether the identity elements will be used in motion within broadcast or web environments. For example, designers should ask themselves: Will the logo move or react with other elements? If so, how will it move and under what conditions (Adams, Morioka, and Stone 2004)? Of the participants in this study only Sebastien's logo is also used in animations. In a recent rollout of the university's new website design the flame logo shimmers via Flash animation. The university also plans to make the flame shimmer on a new electronic billboard. Sebastien admits that one advantage of his icon is a natural fit with animation in a way that many other popular logos are not, including that of his own visual identity inspiration, Target Corp.

On the other hand, several of the participants use videos featuring their visual identities in their advertising. Angelina's university has engaged an advertising firm to film a series of commercials featuring prospective students humorously exploring various majors, tying in with the admissions theme of adventure. Sebastien's university, with a much smaller marketing and advertising budget, has developed a commercial that features still photographs of the university, students, and professors and a "Google Fly-in."⁸ Lola does not have the budget for television advertising, but she has worked with a local videographer to film special presentations at her

⁸ Google Earth (<http://earth.google.com>) offers free satellite imagery and a "Swoop" feature that allows the user to fly from space to the ground via a series of still images.

yoga studio. She even has her own low-budget series on a local public broadcasting station, courtesy of area high school students who needed a program for their school television station.

To date, the only start-up to use animation in the visual identity materials is Scott. His sports training company uses a service that allows trainers to create video analyses of athletes by recording athletes in action and then annotating the video with comments and notes about the athlete's posture or movement. Scott has also recorded videos of athletes using the company's equipment, particularly an exclusive hockey treadmill, and posted them on web sites like YouTube. Both the video analysis and YouTube videos are branded with the company's logo. Susan also thinks that video might be an asset in her materials, particularly videos showing her animals in motion during competitions. Unfortunately she does not have the time, money, or expertise to pursue animation at this point.

Creating logos and imagery, selecting typefaces and color palettes, and producing animations or video are all important steps in creating a corporate visual identity that can boost an organization's visibility and contribute to its ethos. But putting those elements together in promotional documents can be trying for users with little or no experience in visual communication. In outlining a theory of visual literacy, Dondis (1973) identified a series of basic design techniques that are used to create everything from abstract art to concert programs and even posters. In the following section I analyze a sample of documents from the start-up participants using those techniques to investigate patterns that may occur in the work created by this group of design novices.

Use of Typical Design Techniques in the Corporate Visual Identities

Dondis (1973) explains that "Properly developed and composed, a visual message is channeled directly to our brain to be understood without conscious decoding, translating, or delay" (106). Using her list of nineteen visual techniques (see Table 3), I hoped to discover how the techniques were most commonly used by the entrepreneurs. Given their lack of education or professional experience in graphic design or other forms of visual communication, the patterns that emerged could indicate techniques that could be introduced into discussions of visual rhetoric. For instance, a technique that appears to be underused or ignored could provide instructors with an opportunity to consider effective examples of those techniques in existing

visual materials or to help students experiment with techniques that may seem risky, difficult, or even uncomfortable.

In order to consider the “highly complex process of selection and rejection” (Dondis 1973, 107) used by the participants, sample documents from each start-up participant were evaluated against the nineteen visual techniques. Yet several of these techniques have only subtle differences. Furthermore, nineteen elements is an unwieldy number of items to recall, therefore I have grouped the techniques, expressed as polarities, are into five categories (see Table 4). These categories are *organization*, *arrangement*, *elaborateness*, *attention*, and *detail*. The category of organization refers to an underlying structure of the document, such as a template, grid, or master layout. Arrangement, on the other hand, refers to the placement of elements on that structure. Elaborateness describes the number and cohesiveness of the elements which create focal points in the document. Attention refers to the use of elements to stand out or blend in with the rest. Finally, detail describes how images may have been manipulated within the design.

Table 4 A categorization of the visual techniques described by Dondis (1973). These groupings, based upon similar characteristics or effects, may make the techniques easier to remember.

Category	Design Techniques Expressed as Polarities	
Organization	Predictability Regularity Sequentiality Consistency Singularity	Spontaneity Irregularity Randomness Variation Juxtaposition
Arrangement	Balance Symmetry	Instability Asymmetry
Elaborateness	Simplicity Unity Economy Understatement Repetition	Complexity Fragmentation Intricacy Exaggeration Episodicity
Attention	Subtlety Neutrality Transparency	Boldness Accent Opacity
Detail	Accuracy Flatness Sharpness Activeness	Distortion Depth Diffusion Stasis

Using Dondis's descriptions of these techniques as a guide for my analysis, the twenty-three documents in my sample indicate that the start-up entrepreneurs tend to use the following techniques most frequently. Follow-up interviews with the participants supported my assessments.

Organization: Regularity, Predictability, Sequentiality, Singularity

Because they all describe an underlying plan that guides a design, I have grouped the techniques of regularity/irregularity, predictability/spontaneity, and sequentiality/randomness into a category called *organization*. Frankly, Dondis' explanations of these techniques are quite similar, making this series potentially difficult to describe to novices or students. Upon closer inspection, however, the difference seems to be one of scaffolding the techniques: *predictability* refers to an underlying grid or master layout; *regularity* organizes elements on that layout, and *sequentiality* places the elements into a logical order. By following the grid or master layout the user can then use the technique of *singularity* to ensure that nothing is out of place or unexpected. By contrast, the techniques of *irregularity*, *spontaneity*, and *randomness* imply a lack of planning or organization, although Dondis suggests that sophisticated designs may create documents with a plan that is simply not obvious to the casual reader. *Juxtaposition* places items within the layout in an unexpected way or creates contrast with other elements.

The back of Scott's sports-specific flyers demonstrates how the organization techniques create uniformity in the layout of design elements and provide an element of consistency to the series. Each flyer is a single column with four rows or sections. From the top, the rows consist of the logotype, the body text, a shaded box with pricing information, and a call to action. When viewed together as in figure 11, the documents reveal *predictability* in layout of the grid, *regularity* in the contents of the grid, *sequentiality* in the organization of the information provided in the text. Together these techniques help reinforce the *singularity* of the design in which everything seems to be in its proper place.



Figure 11 The back of Scott's sports-specific flyers demonstrate *predictability*, *regularity*, *sequentiality*,

Perhaps as a consequence of their desire for consistency across documents, those created by the start-ups were obviously designed with a plan in mind. Another factor that might contribute to a sense of order in the sample is the software that the start-ups used to create their documents. As anyone who has used Microsoft Word can attest, drawing objects and placing or moving graphics within a document can be problematic.

Arrangement: Balance and Symmetry

Many of the start-up participants seemed to prefer the techniques of balance and symmetry to their binaries of instability and asymmetry. To understand these techniques, imagine a line that runs down the center of a document. If the items on the page fall evenly on either side, the document has *symmetry*; if more of the items fall on one side than the other, the document is *asymmetrical*. *Balance* occurs when similar items are evenly distributed on a page or when items of different sizes are arranged to create clusters of similar size or weight. A design exhibits *instability* if one item or cluster is larger than the rest, dominating the page and making the design appear off-center. I have grouped these techniques together into a category I call *arrangement* to emphasize their relationship to the location of elements on the page.

Sarah confesses to preferring symmetry in all of her materials. As her business card (see figure 16) and service order (figure 12) demonstrate, she carefully arranges the elements along a center line and in similar sizes and weights to achieve balance as well. Yet symmetry is boring, argues Williams (2008), because it is predictable. She urges users to introduce some variety by experimenting with asymmetry, such as placing text or headings flush with the page's right margin. If users gravitate toward symmetry, one explanation may be that it is a fairly easy technique, particularly if the user is creating documents in a word processor. Furthermore, while balance of multiple objects may be somewhat difficult to achieve on its own, it often occurs naturally as a by-product of symmetry.

Figure 12 An example of **balance and symmetry** in the header of Sarah's service order.

Elaborateness: Complexity, Fragmentation, Intricacy, and Understatement/Exaggeration

The techniques of economy/intricacy, complexity/simplicity, and fragmentation/unity have a common theme of the number of elements included in a document. *Economical*

documents feature only a few elements. *Simple* documents use a small number of elements and direct the eye to a single focal point. Even if a document has multiple elements, it may exhibit *unity* by arranging them into a single form such as business cards. (See the following section for more information about the techniques used in the participants' business cards.)

Many of the documents in my sample featured multiple, separate elements. For that reason I have grouped these techniques into a category called *elaborateness*, meaning complicated or full of detail. Sarah's sales flyer for her summer 2008 program (figure 13) was perhaps the most elaborate document with thirteen discrete objects on a gradient green background. The sheer quantity of elements placed on this 8.5 x 11 inch page fulfills the description of *intricacy*. Each element remains separate and independent from the others, creating *fragmentation*. Furthermore, the elements create multiple focal points that compete for the reader's attention, a characteristic of *complexity*.

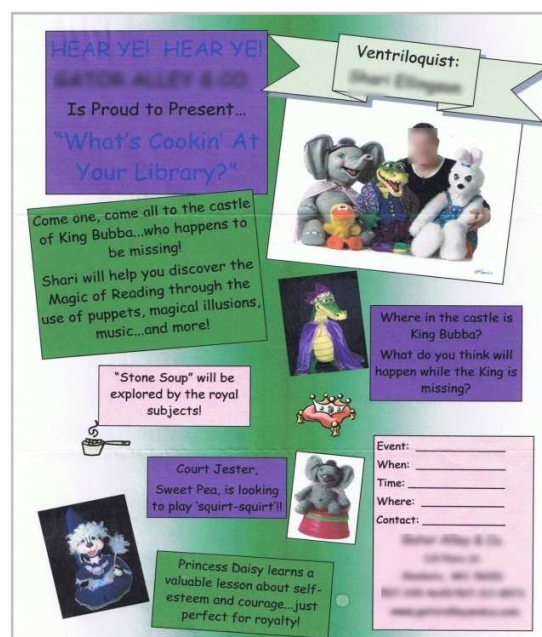


Figure 13 The text boxes in Sarah's sales flyer illustrate the techniques of *complexity*, *fragmentation*, and *intricacy*.

In the case of understatement/exaggeration, few designs showed signs of either polarity. Instead the entrepreneurs tended to produce designs with elements of both in what I call a hybrid of the techniques. *Understatement* is a minimalist technique that often features generous use of white space; its polarity *exaggeration* features a lack of whitespace or a lack of proportion between the elements. Both are concepts that are quite dramatic in their intention. Perhaps this is the reason why the start-ups avoided either polarity of the technique: the entrepreneurs wanted to make the most of the "real estate" at their disposal without diluting the message or making it difficult to read.

A possible explanation for the tendency of the start-ups to create elaborate documents may be their concerns about cost. Whitespace may seem like wasted space, particularly in documents that serve both informational and persuasive purposes. Sarah mentioned that she

wants to provide as much information as she can for her readers to help them make the decision to hire her rather than just “piquing their interest.” She admits that her design might have the opposite effect of what she intends, saying “I try to make it easy for them but at the same time maybe I’m making it hard.”

Attention: Boldness, Accent, and Opacity

The techniques of subtlety/boldness, neutrality/accent, and transparency/opacity describe a relationship between elements. I categorize these techniques as *attention* because they offer the ability to guide the reader’s eye to points of interest within the document. If one uses *neutrality* then no one element stands out more than the others whereas *accent* makes one item stand out clearly from the rest. Similarly *subtlety* means that there are modest distinctions between elements; its binary, *boldness*, makes strong distinctions. For example, imagine a paint chip from a home improvement store. There are subtle differences between adjacent color samples, but there are bold differences between the lightest and darkest colors on the chip.

Each of the start-ups used boldness and accent to make elements of their documents stand out. Susan’s breeding sales flyer (figure 14) demonstrates how the attention techniques can function even with text. She uses varying type sizes, boldface, and italics to introduce *boldness* that will create a hierarchy within the information. Within the animal-specific information (ancestry, fiber description, and price) she demonstrates *neutrality* through the subtle changes in type size. The burgundy text near the bottom of the page creates *accent* to draw the reader’s eye from the photo of the animal to the special sales promotion.

In contrast to the other techniques described here, neither polarity of the technique *transparency/opacity* was widely used. Only a few documents featured overlapping elements, mainly in the form of opaque text over a graphic. (See Emily’s business card in figure 17 for an example.) Otherwise, elements were largely organized as

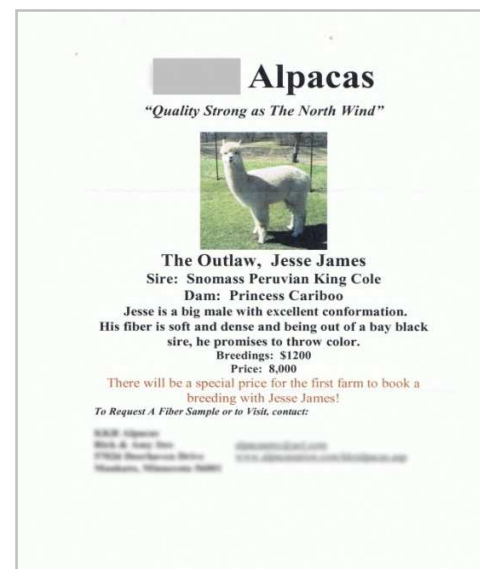


Figure 14 Susan's breeding and sales flyer. The changes in color, size, and italics demonstrate subtle use of *boldness*, *neutrality*, and *accent*.

discrete chunks on the page. Layering elements can be a difficult technique, particularly in software that is not designed for desktop publishing. Grouping and ordering multiple elements and adjusting the formatting of an object to make it transparent are fairly sophisticated features that may be unfamiliar to novice users. Furthermore, obscuring part of an image might seem dangerous if the image is crucial to explaining what the company does, as with Sarah's puppets (see Figures 5 and 10). In Susan's documents, for example, the photograph of the alpaca is evidence of her claims about breeding and quality. Obscuring that photo by layering other items on top might affect her ability to persuade her audience to inspect her animal or buy its fiber.

Detail: Accuracy and Sharpness

The analysis of the sample documents indicates that the start-ups prefer accuracy and sharpness to their polarities of distortion and diffusion. Yet this result is skewed by the overwhelming number of photographs in the start-ups' documents. The *accuracy* of the images is important to the participants because they are still trying to establish themselves in their communities and identify their products or services to potential audiences. A side effect is *sharpness* or hard edges created by the use of photographs. Emily's logo and imagery were outliers in this category because she was able to include imagery with softer edges while maintaining a certain level of abstraction in her choice of clip art.

Combinations: Flatness & Depth, Activeness & Stasis, Consistency & Variation

In contrast to the techniques described above that usually favored one polarity over the other, three techniques appeared widely in both polarities. The sample documents indicate that the start-up participants use both flatness and depth, activeness and stasis, and consistency and variation in their designs. For example, while the icons and graphics usually appeared flat on the page, the widespread use of photographs created instances of depth via perspective, light, and shadow. Although the text and some of the imagery in the sample (such as Sarah's alpaca photograph in figure 15) could be described as static, Emily's dog-walker (figure 2), the italicized text in Scott's logotype (figure 7) and Sarah's new logo (figure 4), and the photos in Scott's sports flyers (see figure 24 below) provided examples of activeness in the designs.

Ironically, although the start-up participants indicated in the interviews that they wanted to ensure consistency in the designs and uses of their visual identities, the technique of variation was used just as often in the sample of corporate materials. For the start-ups consistency means

using their visual identity elements (logos, typefaces, color schemes, taglines, imagery) on as many of their documents as possible. While Dondis proposes the techniques as polarities, the sample documents used in this study indicate that the techniques can co-exist quite effectively. When used together the polarities of consistency and variation create a single design theme that dominates the collection while still offering flexibility in creating documents with different purposes. For example, in Susan's documents her logo, tagline, and typeface provide consistency. Within the sample flyer, however, she changes type size, color, and emphasis, creating variation within the document in spite of the consistent use of her typeface. In Emily's sample documents consistency is created by the repetition of her logo, nameplate, and typography choices even though the documents (a business card, some customer cards, a newspaper ad, and the cover of her brochure) vary. Scott's one-third sheet flyers are dominated by photos illustrating different sports but are consistent in their layout, text, and theme creating a visual relationship among the elements even if the corporate logo were missing.

Perhaps the greatest variation is in the sample of Sarah's documents. Her flyer, postcards, brochure, business card, and letter to potential clients vary in their layout, use of typography, and imagery. In spite of her changes, however, consistency is evident in the use of her photo logo, the signature green color, and the repetition of the Comic Sans typeface on several (but not all) of her documents.

Of course, the visual techniques do not function in a vacuum. As I have implied in my discussion of each category, the techniques actually work together, or sometimes against each other, to create designs that can be simultaneously attractive, informative, or persuasive.

Using the Visual Techniques in Concert

Whether the participants were aware of the visual techniques or not, they all employed several techniques simultaneously in their promotional materials. To take a closer look at how the entrepreneurs used the visual techniques in concert, I now turn to two typical business documents that feature the start-up participants' visual identities: business cards and promotional flyers and brochures. The discussion of each genre will address the visual techniques identified in Table 3. In addition to the works discussed previously in the review of literature, the analysis below also draws from two books written to instruct novices in document design: *Looking Good in Print* (2006) by Robert C. Parker and *The Non-Designer's Design and Type*

Book (2008) by Robin Williams. These two books are well known and easily available from traditional and online bookstores. Either book might reasonably be used by start-ups searching for advice in basic design, although none of the participants mentioned having read them.

Business cards

Business cards are a genre of business documents with a strongly conventional nature. Typical business cards in the U.S. are three-and-a-half inches wide by two inches tall (figure 15). Although vertical orientation is not unheard of, most cards are designed with a horizontal orientation; anecdotal advice suggests that horizontal cards are easier to store and read in wallet organizers and Rolodex holders. As for the content of the card,

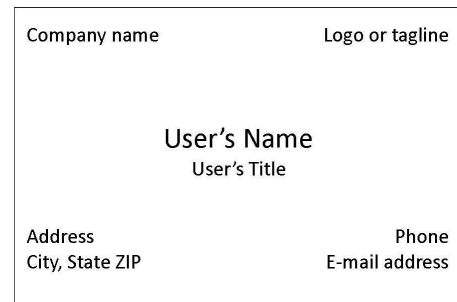


Figure 15: The typical "quadrant" business card layout.

Parker (2006) suggests that it is quite *predictable* and *singular*: the user's name and job title take precedence, followed by the company name and logo, phone number, and physical and electronic addresses. Parker goes on to explain that, given the small size of the card, information is often divided into quadrants with the user's name and position in the center of the card (*symmetry, accent*) and the rest of the information separated into the four corners (*balance, sequentiality, episodicity*). Parker suggests several alternatives to the quadrant layout that reduce wasted space and place more emphasis on the company logo. Williams (2008) also recommends avoiding the quadrant layout, suggesting instead that each piece of information should be aligned with similar elements rather than placed in the corners or along a line of symmetry. Finally, Williams reminds users that the design on business cards should match that of letterhead and envelopes, creating a package with a consistent look and message. Both Parker and Williams warn readers about the costs associated with incorporating color into business cards.

In addition to the characteristics discussed above, the sample of business cards provided by the participants showed eight common characteristics: *complexity* or multiple focal points, separation of text and images that is both *fragmented* and *episodic*, *bold* distinctions between elements, imagery that is both *sharp* and *accurate*, and *singular* layouts in which elements are placed

according to convention. Three of the four start-ups used traditional designs that relied largely upon *symmetry* and *accent* to draw attention to the company names.

For example, Emily designed a card (figure 16) that closely resembles the quadrant layout in Figure 16 in part because of her fondness for *symmetry*. By relegating information to the four corners, however, she makes the text *episodic* and, when combined with her icons, leaves little whitespace or *understatement*. Because she was using InDesign, a desktop publishing software application, she was able to layer objects so that the name of her company partially obscures the logo of the dog-walker, creating one of the few instances of both *unity* and *opacity* in the sample documents.

The layout of Susan's card (figure 17) is more like a triangle than a square. She uses three distinct areas: the company name and description, the logo, and the contact information. Like Emily, this layout introduces *fragmentation* and *episodicity* and leaves little whitespace. The blackness of her logo introduces *accent* and *simplicity* via the document's main focal point.

Scott too uses *accent* on his card (figure 18) in the form of text that is both larger and bolder for his name on the left than the contact information on the right. The effect of this technique, combined with the whitespace that blocks off his name *balances* the text block.

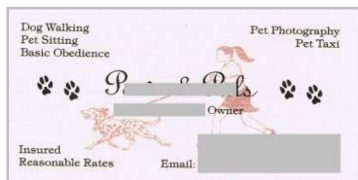


Figure 16 Emily's business card featuring *symmetry*, *unity*, and *opacity* in the layering of her logo and nameplate.



Figure 17 Susan's business card demonstrates how to create a focal point through *accent* and *simplicity*.



Figure 18 Scott's business card uses boldface and size differences to *accent* his name and to *balance* with the block of contact information.

The exception to many of the conventions of business cards was Sarah, who designed a card which still fulfills Parker's suggestion that the document serve both informational and sales functions. Sarah's business card is two-sided (figure 19). The front of the card uses the traditional horizontal layout, but rather than featuring text and a corporate logo, the card is dominated by a full-color photo of Sarah with several puppets. While photos are not unheard of on business cards, particularly in sales, Sarah's photo consumes more than half of the card and is framed on the top by her company name and along the right by her phone number. Together this arrangement of elements indicates the techniques of *instability*, *asymmetry*, *spontaneity*,

irregularity, and *randomness* (although the combination was certainly not unplanned). The large color image, together with the limited information presented on the front, offers *depth* and suggests *simplicity* in the design that is unusual in the sample.

The back of the card, which changes to a vertical layout (*juxtaposition*), consists of text that describes her ventriloquism services and lists her contact information. The text is centered on the card (*symmetry*) and uses variations in size to create emphasis (*accent*) on the name of the company at the top as well as her name and the phone number at the bottom. In a somewhat unusual move, Sarah chose to leave her address off of the card and lists only her phone number and e-mail address. Although some readers have questioned the missing information, she defends her decision as a matter of privacy: she operates the business out of the home she shares with her husband and children and does not want strangers dropping in on her family.

Actually, the business card described above is Sarah's second version. The difference between her first version (figure 20) and the current one is startling. This early card, delineating the document into two discrete sections, is a typical, *predictable* layout for cards with photos. The first version features a photo of Sarah and her main puppet *balanced* by a single column of centered text with the company name, copy, and contact information on the right. In the current version the image clearly dominates, and she has reduced the text to only what she considers essential for readers. She confided that she often uses the new card as a souvenir for children who attend her shows, hoping that they will bring the card home and show it to their parents.

Sales Documents

Documents like brochures and flyers usually fulfill a sales function for an organization by presenting information about the company with the objective of convincing the reader to learn

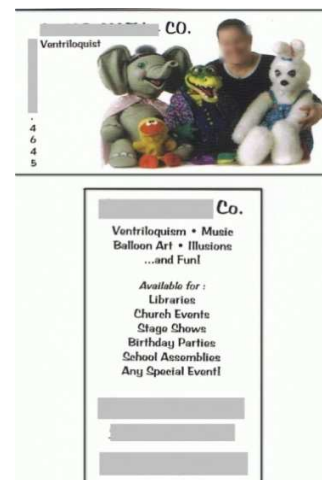


Figure 19 The front (top) and back of Sarah's business card illustrate *spontaneity, irregularity, and juxtaposition*.



Figure 20 Sarah's first business card, a typical layout for cards with photos of the user, demonstrates techniques such as *balance* and *predictability*.

more about, or even try, the product or service. Unlike advertisements, which are created for a general audience, sales materials are targeted to a prospective audience, one that may already be interested in the information presented (Parker 2006, 182). Each of the participants realized the necessity of sales documents and has created at least one. In fact, Scott created six separate documents as part of a series to explain the various sports services his company offers. The sales documents showed remarkable

consistency in the use of most of the design techniques.

Emily created a brochure to identify the services she offers and their prices (figure 21). The interior of the brochure is dominated by a table describing her services and prices, the use of this grid demonstrating the organizing techniques of *predictability*, *regularity*, and *sequentiality*. By using a table she has grouped the information into a single unit (*unity*), but the tight spacing, minimal leading, and gridlines create a design with little whitespace (*exaggeration*). The result is that each cell appears to be an individual unit (*fragmentation* and *episodicity*) and the document fails to achieve a focal point within the text listing prices and services (*complexity*). Instead, the focal point becomes a graphic at the bottom of the central panel representing her pet taxi, only one of many services she offers.

Sarah's sales documents include a brochure, some sales letters, some flyers, and a postcard (figure 22). The purpose of the postcard was to introduce herself as a local entertainer and ventriloquist, a unique service in her mid-sized Minnesota town. The postcard has a whimsical feel derived from the colors and the choice of Comic Sans typeface. The font creates softness (*diffusion*) in the document,

RATES		SERVICES OFFERED:
Initial Consultation: FREE	Overnight Visits: (not available during holidays) 12 hour overnight visit: \$75/visit 24-hour temporary live-in: \$150/visit	Dog walking: The dog walking service consists of the basic dog walking and helping to teach the dog basic dog walking skills and manners. This will consist of working on the "heel" command and the "sit" command periodically during the walk. Please let Paws & Pals know if you would not like this service provided during the walk.
Dog Walking (up to 3 dogs): \$10/dog for 30 minute walk \$15/dog for 45 minute walk \$20/dog for 60 minute walk	Key Program: \$15 one-time fee for maintaining the house or garage keys. \$10 fee if the key is to be returned after each visit other than leaving it at the residence	Pet Sitting: This service involves the pet sitter coming to your home when you are away, whether you're at work or a vacation, to take care of your pet(s). The pet sitting charges include feeding and watering your pet(s), watering any plants you may have, bringing in the mail and/or newspaper, turning your lights on or off and opening or closing the blinds. This will give your home a lived-in look while you're away to help deter potential thieves. If any of these services are not wanted, please notify Paws & Pals at time of reservations. If there are several animal(s) of different species, you may contact Paws & Pals for a free custom pet-sitting quote.
Dog Walk W/ Less Than 24 Hr Notice (up to 3 dogs): \$13/dog for 30 minute walk \$18/dog for 45 minute walk \$23/dog for 60 minute walk	Medication: \$3 medication administration charge for each pet each time medicine is given	Overnight Visits: This service is only available as time allows for the Pet Sitter. The services provided for these visits will be determined on a case-by-case basis.
Park Time (up to 3 dogs): \$15/dog for 30 minutes at the dog park \$20/dog for 45 minutes at the dog park \$25/dog for 60 minutes at the dog park	After Hours: \$5 additional charge for services provided between 8pm and 7am (not including Overnight Visits)	Key Program: The key program enables Paws & Pals to hold onto a house/ garage key for the handler to have access to the pet(s) for any pet sitting or other services requested by the owner. In the event the owner does not want Paws & Pals to keep a copy of their key(s), there may be a fee if Paws & Pals needs to return the key other than leaving it at the residence.
Pet Taxi: \$10 one-way to the vet/groomer/etc... \$25/hour if driver is needed to wait until the dog(s) is finished	Holiday Fee: (not available for Overnight Visits) \$20 additional charge over and above regular charge	Most Important: This is all about your pet(s) and providing them with the love, exercise, and care they need when you aren't available!
Pet Sitting (Cats, other small animals): \$20 for a 30-40 minute visit <i>Service includes:</i> Feeding/watering the animal(s) Brushing the animal(s) as needed Walking the dog/playtime with the dog(s) Watering plants as needed Bringing in the mail or newspaper Turning lights on/off to give your home that lived-in look	Cancellations: Less than 24 hour notice of cancellation will be billed \$30 Cancellation Fee	
Pet Sitting (Cats, other small animals): \$15 for a 20-30 minute visit <i>Service includes:</i> Feeding/watering the animal(s) Playtime with the animal(s) Brushing the animal(s) as needed Watering plants as needed Bringing in the mail or newspaper Turning lights on/off to give your home that lived-in look	Discounts: Call for information on referral and loyal customer discounts!	

Figure 21 The interior of Emily's brochure. She outlines the services she offers and their corresponding rates to answer as many potential questions as she can. The table illustrates techniques such as *predictability*, *regularity*, *fragmentation*, *episodicity*, and *complexity*.

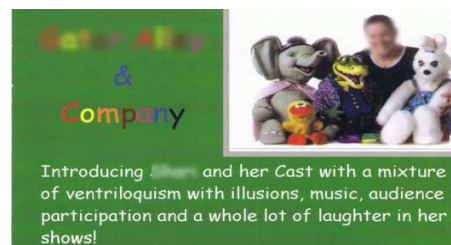


Figure 22 Sarah's promotional postcard, designed by a small business marketing consultant. It features both *sharpness* and *diffusion* as well as *economy*, *spontaneity* and *accent*.

offsetting the *sharpness* created by the hard lines of the square photo and the detail in the image. Furthermore, the rainbow effect she used for the letters in her company's name adds a bit of *spontaneity* to an otherwise rather ordinary sales document. In contrast to the sales flyer's intricacy (see figure 13), the postcard demonstrates *economy* by containing only three elements: the company name, her photo, and a sentence that explains what her company does. The design is arranged to be *symmetrical*. Yet while it seems that the designer (a small business marketing consultant) was trying to achieve *balance* in the layout between the company name and the photo, the expanse of white background in the photo dominates the card and actually introduces *instability* even as it accomplishes the techniques of *boldness* and *accent*. Furthermore, the rainbow effect in the company name is clearly an attempt to garner attention, but the choice of colors actually has the opposite effect: much of the company name fails to contrast with the rich green background. Rather than accomplishing *accent*, the company name actually demonstrates *neutrality* in which the letters have only a subtle distinction from one another and from the background. (The exception is the *accent* created by the natural contrast of yellow letters on the green background).

Scott also created a brochure as well as a series of "three up" flyers that stand out by their use of *asymmetry*, *exaggeration*, and *consistency* (Figure 23). Each of the six flyers focuses on a sport that his sports training company specializes in. A seventh flyer provides an overview of all the sports. Five of the documents feature a photo of a ball used in a sport while the sixth, which addresses running, uses a diffused photo of three runners at a finish line. The logotype and tagline accompany each image, yet the photo dominates both the card and the accompanying text, using *simplicity* to make the ball the focal point of the document. Most of the images use the techniques of *sharpness* and *stasis*. An exception is the baseball photo which uses *diffusion* to imply *activeness*. In each document the photo itself displays *accuracy*, but its exaggerated size relevant to the text indicates that Scott felt *distortion* was useful. Furthermore, each image requires an *asymmetrical* placement of text to

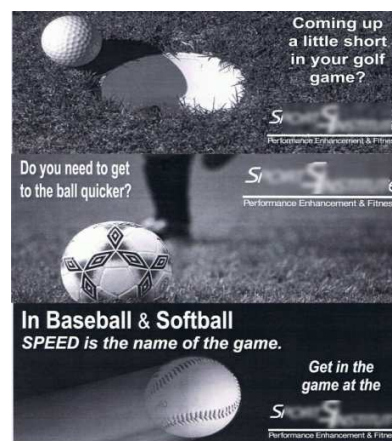


Figure 23 The front of Scott's sports-specific flyers. The images (from top: golf, soccer, and baseball) demonstrate *accuracy*, *asymmetry*, *exaggeration*, and even *diffusion* while the series demonstrates *consistency*.

either the left or right edges of the card.

Although the layout on the front changes based upon the photo, the overall effect is one of *consistent* design. Turning the flyers over reveals an even more consistent design of copy on the back (see figure 12). The company logo is repeated at the top, followed by a paragraph about the company, a paragraph about the sport, and a two-and-a-half inch square gray block explaining the relevant pricing structure. Each card ends with a call to action, the phone number, and a URL. Together these elements demonstrate the impact of *repetition*.

Susan does not yet have a brochure, although she hopes to design one in the future. Her sales documents are single page flyers that she creates with Microsoft Word and prints at a local office supply store. With the text and imagery centered on her page, it is clear that she favors *symmetry* and *balance*, although the change in photo orientation in figure 24 introduces a bit of unwanted *instability*. The symmetry also implies *predictability*, *regularity*, and *sequentiality*, for although she does not use a grid it is clear that she is following a loosely planned layout to organize the material.

Accuracy is important in Susan's photos because potential buyers may not inspect an animal personally until just before a purchase. The color photos are intended to be the focal point but, unlike the single animal breeding flyer in figure 15, the document demonstrates *complexity* as the four photos compete for the reader's attention. Yet Susan contrasts the cluster of imagery with ample whitespace, an element related to the technique of *understatement*. Her plan for this flyer as with all of her documents is to be simple and present a clear message.

This discussion demonstrates that even without any professional design experience or advanced desktop publishing and graphics editing software, the start-up participants employ the visual techniques described by Dondis. In fact, they often use the techniques with success. The documents may not appear as sophisticated as ones produced by graphic designers, but each of

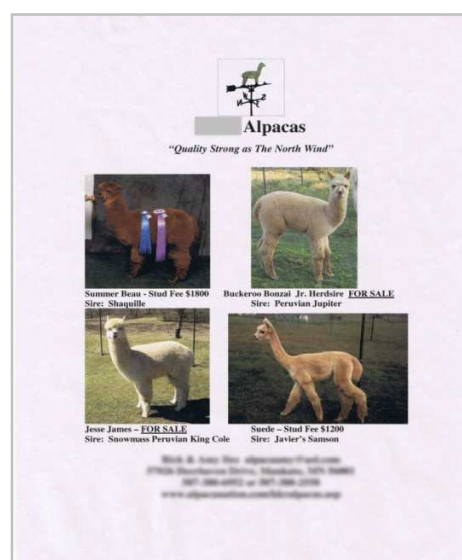


Figure 24 A sales flyer to promote animal sales and breedings at an alpaca competition features techniques such as *symmetry*, *instability*, *predictability*, *complexity*, *accuracy*, *understatement*.

the participants reports that the documents largely accomplish their objectives: to promote the businesses and inform audiences about their products or services.

What the Techniques Imply About the Novice Designers

Based upon the analysis outlined above, I now summarize the polarities of techniques that appeared most often in the sample of documents provided by the start-up participants. The patterns that appeared in the sample document may provide insight into polarities of techniques that other design novices may use and suggest other polarities that novices should be encouraged to try. The patterns also suggest opportunities to introduce a discussion of design into professional communication courses and perhaps suggest ways to demonstrate how technology can assist users in executing the visual techniques.

The Start-ups Want to Project Order

More than 70% of the documents featured *symmetry*, *balance*, *predictability*, *regularity*, *sequentiality* and *singularity*. These polarities of the organization and arrangement techniques emphasize order. The reason for this pattern could be that following a pattern such as a grid or adhering to conventions is easy to implement and maintain whereas the opposite polarities on these continua (such as *asymmetry*, *instability*, and *spontaneity*) are more difficult to employ well as a novice, particularly in software that is not designed for desktop publishing. For example, inserting an image into a text document is fairly easy, but moving that image around the page, changing its size, or layering it with other elements requires the user to apply advanced formatting features that until recently were somewhat difficult to find in applications like Microsoft Word.

The start-ups also favored *sharpness* and *accuracy* in their designs, particularly in their imagery. This result is not unexpected since using elements of *distortion* or *randomness*, for example, could be perceived as interfering with their messages or harming the ethos they are trying to create. Taken together, however, the dominance of these technique polarities indicate that the start-up participants are cautious in their design choices or limited in their abilities to execute them.

The Start-ups Want to Attract Attention

Both *boldness* and *accent* were also used in more than 70% of the items in the sample. The methods used with these technique polarities ranged from boldface text to graphics to strategic use of color. Boldness, claims Dondis, is “an obvious visual technique” whose purpose is “to seek optimum visibility” (119). Likewise accent is “just one thing highlighted against a sameness of background” (120). Certainly these techniques help users create visual impact that will capture the reader’s attention. They are also the easiest techniques to execute in the software that the start-ups used. Their lack of experience with the software’s advanced features may have created some constraints in their designs as well. Although most of the sample documents featured both text and graphics that were unified by a single theme (*singularity*), it was rare to find a document that unified the two into a single image or idea. Emily provided one of only a handful of examples in her business card (see figure 16) and in a laminated bulletin board sign in which she superimposed the company name and list of services on top of her paw print icon. In most other documents the elements were largely organized as discrete chunks within the overall design.

Furthermore, many of the documents in the sample were complicated and busy. The techniques of *complexity*, *fragmentation*, and *intricacy* were quite common in the sample documents, polarities that focus upon the individual elements within the design. These visual techniques, combined with comments from the start-up participants, suggest that the participants do not understand the design principle “less is more.” They want their documents to do too much work, to answer all of the audience’s potential questions rather than piquing the audience’s interest and inviting them to contact the start-up for more information. To these participants, less is simply less. With limited funds and limited opportunities to reach their audiences, the participants want to create documents that explain everything at once without realizing that this approach is ultimately counter-productive. Rather than drawing readers into a document through careful placement of focal points, many of the documents in the sample contain elements that compete for attention and make the document difficult to read and remember.

In Chapter 4 I explored how start-up participants describe their process of creating corporate visual identity and the purpose they perceive for using the visual identity in their corporate documents. In this chapter I delved more deeply into the corporate visual identities of the start-up participants by examining both the individual elements such as logos and

typography choices and analyzing how these elements are applied to corporate materials using a collection of visual techniques. In the following chapter I argue that the results of this study can inform visual rhetoric pedagogy by identifying techniques that professional communication novices such as students or even laypersons may use or avoid. This information can suggest ways to experiment with elements and help students to reflect upon their design decisions and increase their visual literacy.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

VISUAL RHETORIC IN THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

...creativity, like intelligence, is distributed throughout the population. It is not an attribute only of "creative types" such as artists and writers.

- Michael J. Shannon, "Toward a Rationale for a Public Design Education"

This study was inspired by my family, friends, and students who aspire to be entrepreneurs as well as by my experience teaching visual rhetoric in business communication classes. In particular, there are three issues regarding corporate visual identity that inspired my research questions. First, good designs exhibit consistency, clarity, and flexibility. Effective visual identities contain elements that are consistent across documents, clear and scalable in different sizes, and flexible enough to appear on a variety of media. A second issue is that designing a visual identity often involves technology. Unfortunately, the technology often imposes limitations on the possibilities of the design. Finally, corporate visual identities are an opportunity to explore creativity and mold the audience's perception of the company's personality. In large or well-established companies the decisions about visual identity elements may be made by a graphic designer. But as the participants in this study indicated, start-up entrepreneurs often work on their own because their funds are needed far more in other aspects of their business. Based upon these issues I identified three research questions in Chapter 1:

1. In what ways do start-up entrepreneurs perceive a link between their corporate visual identity and their corporate ethos?
2. How do start-up entrepreneurs create their visual identities?
3. What design techniques do start-up entrepreneurs use in their corporate visual identities and other professional documents?

In this conclusion of the dissertation I summarize key findings of my research study and their implications for visual rhetoric and professional communication pedagogy. I argue that visual rhetoric is a key element of modern professional communication and therefore visual literacy deserves a greater emphasis in our professional communication classrooms. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for future study.

The Link Between Ethos and Visual Identity

Each of the entrepreneurs perceives corporate visual identity as a means of establishing ethos with an audience. Credible, reputable, legitimate...all of these words were used by the start-up participants to describe the image they hoped to project with their visual identities. The common purpose for their visual identities is to be both informative and persuasive. If ethos is more persuasive than logos in situations when the audience lacks information (Braet 1992; Hauser 2002) then that purpose is appropriate. After all, the start-ups in this study were all in their first five years of operation at the time of the interviews. They were still struggling to establish themselves within their communities and to communicate their products and services to their audiences.

All of the participants understand that corporate visual identity goes beyond decorating corporate documents to informing readers about the corporate image or personality, but the start-ups learned that developing and implementing a visual identity is harder than it looks. None conducted any formal audience analysis. They simply do not have the experience of developing creative briefs that Adam and Zoe typically use, the resources to conduct focus groups and interviews that Sebastien and Angelina have used, nor do they have the well-established client base that Lola relies upon for feedback. Ultimately the start-ups were able, with varying degrees of specificity, to describe their audiences and the types of information that those audiences might want or need to decide whether to engage their services based upon their personal experience and informal research. Susan has perhaps the most accurate idea of her audience since her audience is a fairly small discourse community of fellow alpaca ranchers. Emily knows the general characteristics of her audience but, at the time of this study, was still searching for the best way to reach them. Both Scott and Sarah found themselves in the tenuous position of providing services for children but communicating with adults; their visual identity elements must bridge the gap between these groups without alienating either one.

Working without audience analysis or research is understandable given the financial and other constraints the start-ups face, but the decision to do so is risky. Ethos is not an inherent characteristic but rather the product of an exchange between speaker and audience. Without any input from the audience, whether through formal market research or informal audience analysis, the message of a visual identity may run contrary to the informational and persuasive intentions of the documents that feature it.

A common theme in the responses from the start-up participants was a desire for consistency in the implementation of their visual identity elements into their corporate documents. Consistency (Kumpf 2000), which is also sometimes called alignment (Hassett 1996) and repetition (Williams 2008), results in a series of documents that adhere to conventions of business documents while maintaining a look and feel that is easily identifiable with a specific company. For the most part the participants were successful in maintaining consistency via repetition of elements and layouts, although some measure of variety was also evident either by design (as in Scott's flyers) or by accident. While using a different typeface on a new run of business cards or in a newspaper ad may not be noticed by most readers, such inconsistencies are likely to increase as more people become involved in creating corporate documents or as the entrepreneur has less time to devote to the task. Perhaps formalizing the visual identity into a plan or reference guide should be the next step in the design process to help the start-ups maintain the consistency they want so badly to achieve.

A serious concern is that their focus upon consistency may prevent the start-ups from envisioning alternatives or altering their designs as their companies mature. None of the start-ups plan any modifications to their visual identities in the near future, but perhaps they should reconsider. After all, as Lola suggested, organizations often change as they grow. What are the chances that a design that was developed in the first year or two of operation will continue to be the best representation of that company's personality five years later?

Design Methods Used by Entrepreneurs

In spite of a universal recognition of the benefits of hiring an expert to design the visual identity, the start-up participants chose to work on their own or with the assistance of family and friends. Without formal training in visual communication, they relied on intuition and experimentation to make their choices and implement them in their professional documents. They relied upon readily available resources, including clip art, stock photography, personal digital photos, and the software at their disposal. Their decision to eschew professional assistance was largely one based upon necessity: in the early stages of operation each start-up felt that the best use of their meager funds was on expenses that have a more direct effect on their bottom line. Nor did any of them express any interest in hiring a graphic designer in the near future. Sarah expressed mixed feelings about the postcard a marketing consultant created for

her. Scott and Susan want to focus their funds on operating expenses, and Emily simply prefers to work on her own.

But the participants have also learned that there are consequences to taking a DIY approach to visual identity. In spite of their best efforts, they were limited by their access or ability to use the most appropriate technology to create their designs. Getting help from family and friends is not always the best solution either since unpaid projects are often a low priority. Even Adam and Zoe, the graphic designers, admit that projects that bring in revenue take precedence over their own visual identities. Is it any wonder that the start-ups feel the same? Yet their experiences show that even DIY has a cost.

Design Techniques in the Professional Documents

The elements of a visual identity include several inherent factors that affect a reader's perception of the document: first impression, convention, expense, and style (Kumpf 2000). Before reading a document, users make assumptions about its value based upon its "curb appeal" or initial visual interest, whether it resembles other documents in the same genre, whether the physical and aesthetic elements indicate its expense, and finally, whether the design choices set a tone that matches the content of the message. In each case, the design choices should match readers' expectations about both the product or service and the genre of the document. Without any special research the start-ups created visual identities comprised of conventional elements: logos, color palettes, typefaces, imagery, and taglines. They generally used concrete icons, imagery, and copy to describe their businesses, which is perhaps not surprising since they are all still struggling a bit to explain their designs and introduce themselves to their audiences.

The document analysis showed that the start-up participants implemented their visual identity elements using similar visual techniques. Although outliers existed for each of the techniques, most of the documents demonstrate a sense of order and control via the polarities of symmetry, balance, predictability, regularity, sequentiality and singularity. Their imagery and icons are concrete images, usually photographs, that feature sharpness and accuracy. These results suggest that the start-up participants prefer structure to guide them but that concept of structure is rather cautious. Rather than creating grids to govern their documents, they often rely upon convention, intuition, or personal preference. Another explanation may simply be that the

limiting factor is not the imagination of the participants but rather their technical skill or the available features in the software they are using to create their documents.

The sample documents also demonstrate a call for attention via the polarities of boldness and accent as well as complexity, fragmentation, and intricacy, polarities that focus upon the individual elements within the design. The analysis, combined with the interview data, suggests that the participants feel that whitespace is wasted space. The designer's mantra of "less is more" is a luxury they feel they cannot afford. Instead they see their documents as valuable real estate to showcase their products or services. They attempt to provide as much information as possible in the given space, resulting in documents that are, at times, complicated and hard to read.

The results of this analysis show that novices may be able to create the elements of a corporate visual identity but that their results may be limited by their understanding of audience, their limited technical skill, their unwillingness to experiment with visual techniques, and their lack of awareness of fundamental design concepts like whitespace and grids. In the following section I consider the implications of this project on the study of visual rhetoric and professional communication, with particular emphasis on pedagogy.

Implications for Visual Rhetoric & Professional Communication Pedagogy

Inexpensive computers and software have given professional communicators and students the ability to do work that formerly required teams of people with specialized skills (Allen 1996; Benson 1995; Rea and White 1999; Stroup 2000). The terms "cut, copy and paste" once described the actual tasks involved in creating documents for publication; today they refer to keyboard commands. More recently budget crunches have condensed many jobs into few and made professional communicators responsible for more than just writing words. At the same time readers are savvier about visuals and expect more sophisticated document design. After all, with the templates and style sheets built in to some of the most popular word processors, anyone can be a document designer.

These changes demand a renewed emphasis on visual rhetoric in professional communication classrooms. Rather than letting the software do the thinking, users need guidance in making design decisions involving technology (Benson 1985; Bonk 1999). Since professional communication courses are often the only communication courses students take beyond first year composition, it falls to instructors to teach students that visuals require just as

much rhetorical planning and intent as verbal communication (Allen 1996), otherwise we risk producing “visual technicians” who can create visual elements but not think or reflect critically about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and whether their documents are really meeting the needs of their readers (Brumberger 2007, 378).

Nancy Allen (1996) calls for visual rhetorics that professional communicators can use to understand when and how to make design decisions in their documents. There are several frameworks available to help instructors and professional communicators consider the rhetorical effects of their design choices (see Barton and Barton 1985; Kostelnick and Roberts 1998). Plenty of advice is available in professional communication literature to help students make decisions about typographic elements like typeface or leading (Baker 2001, 2006; Benson 1985; Brumberger 2003a, 2003b; Kumpf 2000; Kramer and Bernhardt 1996; Tebeaux 1988), layout (White 2005a), color (White 2005b), textual elements (Tebeaux 1998), and the synchronization of graphical elements (Stroupe 2000). Some of the popular professional communication textbooks also provide guidance for students who face design decisions in their documents such as identifying audience and purpose; using document design elements such as headings, color, and whitespace; or explaining the design principles of proximity, alignment, repetition, and contrast (Lannon 2009; Markel 2010; Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred 2008). Similar information is available in popular press books designed for novice users (Parker 2006, Williams 2008).

Yet the results of this study demonstrate that actual users, like the start-up participants in this study, make decisions about typography, layout, color, etc., in an informational void. Visual design is simply not a topic that receives much attention in American schools, a problem that some say has been exacerbated by a combination of decreased funding and the emphasis placed upon reading and math by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. At the university level, even if instructors have sufficient time to include a unit on visual rhetoric, many instructors find the topic difficult to teach. For one thing, many professional communication courses are located within English departments where instruction in visual communication or design principles is often lacking (George 2002; Hassett 1996; Matusitz 2005) because most English departments privilege verbal communication over visual (Williams 2001; Allen 1996). The inclusion of visual analysis assignments in “writing” classrooms is often tinged with distrust, but by avoiding or minimizing discussions of visual rhetoric, “composition instructors may inadvertently lead

students to assume that visual elements and design principles are irrelevant, ornamental, or at best subordinate to rhetorical considerations" (Graham, Hannigan, and Curran 2005, 25).

The results of this dissertation study suggest a series of techniques that professional communication teachers can use to help students analyze and execute visuals. The visual techniques used in Chapter 5 offer a "wide palette of means for the visual expression of content" (Dondis 1973, 110). This study identifies the polarities of visual techniques that are most often used by individuals with little or no training in design. Extrapolating this information to the classroom would indicate that students with little or no training in design might also gravitate toward these techniques. Thus the results of this study could provide a framework for users and instructors to analyze existing designs and plan potential ones.

On the other hand, the polarities of the techniques also offer opportunities for analysis, experimentation, and discussion. Table 5 lists the polarities that were used most often by the start-up participants in this study and offers suggestions for polarities that novices in similar situations might shy away from. For example, many students usually arrange text either flush left (as in a term paper) or centered (as in a wedding invitation) more out of custom than intent. But aligning text to the right margin can create excitement and interest (Williams 2008) while giving students an opportunity to experiment with the techniques of instability, asymmetry, and spontaneity.

Table 5 A suggestion for teaching students how to experiment with visual techniques based upon the results of this study.

Category	If novices gravitate toward	Teachers can encourage experimentation with
Organization	Predictability Regularity Sequentiality Consistency Singularity	Spontaneity Irregularity Randomness Variation Juxtaposition
Arrangement	Balance Symmetry	Instability Asymmetry
Elaborateness	Complexity Fragmentation Intricacy Understatement Episodicity	Simplicity Unity Economy Exaggeration Repetition

Table 5 (continued)

Attention	Boldness Accent Opacity	Subtlety Neutrality Transparency
Detail	Accuracy Flatness Sharpness Stasis	Distortion Depth Diffusion Activeness

A competency in visual literacy should demonstrate an understanding of visual design as both an organizational technique and an alternative to writing (Nagelhout 1999). Students should understand how visual design affects an audience and influences “how or why readers see what they see” (289) and that the choices made in a design “all act as rhetorical support for arguments and are all created for specific purposes, at particular moments, for particular people” (290). Furthermore, this research study offers a suggestion for ways to broaden our discussion of visual rhetoric in professional communication beyond the typical coverage of page layout, charts and illustrations, and websites. As Stephen Bernhardt (1986) suggests, we should look at “naturally-occurring discourse forms which have evolved outside the classroom” in order to develop our theories of visual rhetoric (77). By bringing samples of real documents into the classroom, such as the business cards and promotional documents studied here, instructors can help students study how and why texts work and learn to incorporate some of the successful visual design strategies in their own writing. Developing a sophisticated understanding of visual rhetoric makes students more competitive in the workplace by showing them how to communicate efficiently and effectively in more than one mode (Hassett and Lott 2000). This skill has become even more valuable in the information economy: with so much visual and verbal information to sort through, filter, and process, the audience’s attention is now a scarce resource (Lanham 2006).

Suggestions for Future Research

The study described here was quite small and was not intended to serve as a basis for generalizations about the ways that start-up entrepreneurs create and use corporate visual identity; rather, it was an exploration into an area that has not yet received attention in rhetoric, although the decisions that the start-ups make about audience, purpose, and ethos are all highly

rhetorical. The participants in this study represent a variety of industries but are not representative of the population as a whole. Perhaps the best way to continue this exploration simply would be to gather more voices. Continuing to study start-ups in different industries and in different geographic areas would enable us to achieve a more thorough understanding of the technical and rhetorical aspects of creating and implementing corporate visual identity.

This research study investigated the ways that rhetoric and professional communication theory and research intersect with the realities of professionals in the workplace regarding only one aspect of their corporate communications. A related avenue for research lies in exploring other professional communication practices of entrepreneurs. Research studies such as this one can reach out to people “between extremes” (Kalmbach 1988) of novice and professional, including the people who create documents in the workplace as part of their jobs but who may not be trained as professional writers. An additional benefit of research in this field is that it bolsters our own ethos in our field and in the community at large. As Gail Fann Thomas (2007) explains, researching organizations and collaborating with businesses allows us to share our specialized knowledge and increases our credibility within the classroom and the business community. Future study could also consider ways to embed visual communication in “authentic assignments” that increase student engagement and learning by reflecting a variety of communication tasks that students may encounter in the workplace (McCarthy and McCarthy 2003).

Finally, this study demonstrates that an opportunity exists for rhetoric and professional communication scholars to collaborate with other disciplines. As the literature reviewed in Chapters 1 and 2 suggests, many of the issues addressed in this dissertation are also addressed in both graphic design and marketing. A similar overlap occurs in areas such as professional documents like business plans, sales copy, proposals, advertising materials, and document design. We can enrich our own research by working more closely with our counterparts in business disciplines such as marketing, management, and entrepreneurship as well as those in art and graphic design. Such collaboration can provide a way to broaden our outlook, fill in gaps in visual rhetoric and professional communication theory, and further develop our own areas of expertise. It may also provide a way to tap into other funding sources or use our own resources more efficiently.

Conclusion

I admire the courage of Emily, Sarah, Susan, and Scott in starting their own businesses. As a teacher of rhetoric and professional communication, I appreciate the challenges they face in constructing the documents that establish, operate, and promote their companies. In particular I sympathize with the difficulty of creating visual documents given the emphasis on written and oral modes of communication in American schools. The design of a document is not mere decoration; it either supports or undermines the rhetorical purpose of the text, which in turn affects the document's success or failure in the workplace (Takayoshi 1996; Tebeaux 1988; Dubinsky 1993). To start-up companies that are busy building clientele and developing their products or services, creating and using corporate visual identity might seem like nothing more than a quaint custom that should be followed but that does not have a major impact on their bottom lines. Yet all of the participants in this study, both experienced and start-up, acknowledged that their visual identities also have the potential to educate and persuade audiences about the companies' personalities and the products or services they provide. In their own ways, the start-ups demonstrated creativity, ingenuity, and a simple awareness of their unique rhetorical situations as they analyzed their audiences, the purposes of their visual identities, and the ways to use those identity elements in their promotional documents.

In this conclusion I have argued that rhetoric and professional communication instructors and scholars must continue to advocate a "double voiced rhetoric" that encompasses both visual and verbal communication (Stroupe 2000, 609). The study of visual rhetoric encourages an understanding that visual elements are more than illustration: they communicate messages that can explain, reinforce, or even contradict the documents that contain them. By continuing to study instances of visual rhetoric in the workplace, particularly in workplaces on the margins such as the ones here, we can refine our understanding of its use by writers and of its impact on readers.

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APPENDIX A
PROSPECTING LETTER

January 9, 2008

Jill Klinger
 New Enterprise & Emerging Business Director
 Mankato Business Accelerator/Greater Mankato Growth
 1961 Premier Drive, Suite 100
 Mankato, MN 56001

Dear Ms. Klinger,

I am writing to ask for your help in identifying potential participants for my doctoral dissertation research study in Rhetoric & Professional Communication at Iowa State University.

My dissertation research investigates the use of visual communication as part of a start-up organization's strategic communication practices. You may have heard the phrase "Dress for the job you want." My project looks at the way that start-ups use corporate visual identity to do just that. A corporate visual identity is a package of elements consisting of **a name, a symbol and/or logo, typography, color, a slogan, and often additional graphic elements.** Effective designs are memorable and flexible, appearing on everything from letterhead and business cards to websites and promotional materials to employee uniforms and company cars. These designs, like written or oral messages, are carefully constructed to catch readers' attention and persuade them to use the organization's products or services. For well-established organizations a strong corporate visual identity makes a statement that viewers instantly recognize and associate with a host of qualities that the organization wishes to promote. For example, the Nike "Swoosh" is one of the most recognized logos in the world. Its appearance on a pair of shoes, a shirt, or other sports paraphernalia validates an expensive price tag by inspiring thoughts of serious athletes, specialized design, and quality workmanship.

Most of the existing research about corporate visual identity focuses on large, well-known organizations, designs created by professional designers, tested extensively with potential users, and protected fiercely against imitators. Very little is known about how start-up organizations and entrepreneurs think about and create corporate visual identities. The purpose of my dissertation research is to fill that gap: to identify and examine the way start-up organizations use corporate visual identity as a form of professional communication with customers, vendors, and the general public.

As the New Enterprise & Emerging Business Director for the area's economic development organization you are in a position to work with just the type of organizations and individuals that would I like to meet. I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to talk about my project and get your help identifying possible research participants. To help you learn a little more about what I plan to do, and to assure you that the project won't be a burden on the participants, I have included a copy of my research proposal. If you have any questions or comments or if you would like to meet to talk about the project in person, feel free to call or e-mail me using the contact information below.

This new and uncharted research area in professional communication could help organizations, students, and educators understand the role that visual communication plays in corporate strategy and communication. It can also help improve students' critical thinking skills by making them aware of the signs and symbols around them that communicate visually rather than textually.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you in the near future.

Jennifer R. Veltsos

To: Susan

From: veltsos@iastate.edu

Date: March 17, 2008

Hello Susan,

Jill Klinger at Greater Mankato Growth gave me your name and contact information. She suggested that you might be interested in participating in a research study that I am conducting about corporate visual identity in start-up companies.

To give you a bit more information about the project I have attached a PDF file with an overview of my project as well as a more detailed research proposal. In a nutshell, I would like to talk to you or a representative of your company about the decisions you made and the methods you used to create your visual identity. (A visual identity consists of the elements that are used in your marketing or branding materials, such as colors, typefaces, images, etc.)

If it is convenient for you I will call you on the morning of Wednesday, March 19 to discuss your participation and to schedule the first of two or three interviews. My schedule is pretty flexible; I am usually available on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9:00 to 4:00 and on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:00 to noon. I can meet you at your office or at a neutral location such as Dunn Bros. Coffee or the Hub, whichever location feels most comfortable for you. I look forward to talking with you on Monday.

Regards,

Jennifer

--

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"Start anywhere. Work to the edges."

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Sample Questions for Initial Interview

1. What does <company> do?
2. What is your role in the company? How many people work with/for you?
3. When did <company> start operations?
4. Does <company> have a corporate visual identity (CVI)?
 - a. If so, how would you describe the visual identity? What are you trying to say about yourself in your visual communication?
 - b. If not, why not?
5. What did/do you like about creating your CVI? What did/you dislike about creating it?
6. What inspired you or influenced you when you were designing your CVI? Where did you get your ideas?
7. What would you say has been the most difficult part about designing your CVI? The easiest? The most fun?
8. How long did it take you to design the CVI?
9. Was anyone else involved in the CVI design with you? What were their roles?
10. What type of background or experience do you have in visual communication, graphic design, or business communication?

Sample Questions for Follow-up Interviews

1. What do you hope the visual identity says about you? If people do not know you or your company, what do you think (or hope) they will think when they see your visual identity?
2. In what ways do you think the CVI supports your ethos, or credibility, as a viable business? In what ways do you wish the CVI would do a better job at supporting your ethos?
3. What do you think your audience (customers, suppliers, the community) wants or needs to know about your company in order to decide whether to use your services? Do you feel that your visual identity provides cues to this information? Why or why not?
4. What are some conventions (typical techniques or designs) that you followed?
5. Were there any times when you chose to go a different way and do something out of the ordinary or unique with your visual identity elements or the documents that use the visual identity?
6. Can you think of any cultural issues that might affect you (positively or negatively) when people view your materials and design?
7. What do you think are *typical* ways to use one's visual identity in promotional or professional materials? Do you employ any of these? Do you use any *unusual* documents or materials that feature your visual identity?

For each sample document, please answer the following:

1. Who is the intended audience of this document?
2. What is the basic message you are trying to communicate with this document?
3. What is the purpose of the document? What do you hope it will accomplish?
4. Where will readers typically encounter this document?
5. What similar messages have your readers encountered from other sources or competitors?
6. How does this document relate to your other documents?

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My dissertation committee, **Lee Honeycutt, Barbara Blakely, Margaret LaWare, and Debra Satterfield**, for their interest and support in my work.

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Rebecca Burnett for guiding me through my first three years at Iowa State, brainstorming ideas about research topics, and providing advice and suggestions about preparing for the dissertation and job hunting.

Marty Graham and **Dorothy Winsor**, my research teachers, who helped me develop my proficiency with qualitative research and influenced the design of my study.

Jill Klinger of Greater Mankato Growth and **Brian Stading** of the Riverbend Center for Entrepreneurial Facilitation for their assistance in locating my research participants.

My research participants for sharing their precious time with me to talk about visual identity, ethos, audience, and how they put it all together.

To my mother-in-law, **Elisabeth Veltsos** for her willingness to spend so much time away from her home and living in ours during my final year in residence at Iowa State.

My parents **Darryl and Gladys Romero** for encouraging me and my siblings to go to college, although I do not think they imagined I would be in college for nearly twenty years.

Finally, I must thank my husband **Chris** for his unending support and encouragement during this academic journey, for sacrificing his own time and career to keep our family together while I studied 200 miles away, and for his patience once I returned home to work on this dissertation.