

Can Graphic Design Save a Life?

What does it mean to save someone? “If you save someone or something, you help them to avoid harm or to escape from a dangerous or unpleasant situation,” (Collins Dictionary, 2022) and in terms of saving a life, this may apply to an action or event that put’s the person’s life at risk. Graphic Design can help illustrate ‘life-saving’ facts and instructions from packaging to advertisements, even a combination of both. One sector of graphic design that particularly stands out to me in relation to contributing towards saving lives, would be the health sector. Graphic Design in the health industry is used to advertise statistics and facts to keep you safe, whether it be helpful hygiene guidance, or facts to deter you from behaving a certain way or performing certain actions. A perfect example is the non-smoking advertisement posters, what it can do to pregnant women and young people. Take the two posters below as examples.



(Smoking During Pregnancy, 2019) (When you smoke, your baby smokes, 2012)

“Although colours are commonly referred to as symbols, they only become symbols when a link between the sign and its object is established; in some countries, for example, mourning is conveyed by black and in some other countries by white, “ (Kauppinen-Räsänen & Jauffret, 2018) this is exclaiming the fact that not only are the white and black used together to make the most contrast possible within a design, but they are also used to symbolise both sin and mourning, in relation what would happen to the child if the person continued smoking, making it a very serious piece of design, aiming to deter people from doing this. This effect is used in both images above, whereas the second image uses a slightly serious tone as it is a lot less busy as the text is blackened out, with a more serious image of a foetus being shaped with cigarette smoke. A powerful image such as this acts as a much more alarming deterrent to the audience. While the first has the same effect, but the foetus scan is there to alert the audience those babies are living things, and you are ending a life by smoking whilst pregnant. To support this, there are many other ways that graphic design has been used to deter people from smoking, for example simply on cigarette packaging.



(BBC, 2017)

Just like the above, it is now law for cigarettes to have plain packaging just like this, with an image of the worst-case scenario consequences of smoking, and a bold fact about what smoking can do to your body. The packaging is ever so cleverly designed, as it has an uncommon and not particularly appealing dominant colour, and of course the surrounding imagery and text. Very minimal so you have time to look and notice everything that the packaging contains, all adding up to the design solution to reduce people buying cigarettes – making it unappealing. The more unappealing the packaging looks the less likely people will be attracted to it and the less it will stand out, making shoppers walk past it, or the packaging leading to an overall lack of intrigue to the product so they don't look twice at them. "In Australia,

market researchers tested various Pantone colour palettes for packaging to find out which were the biggest turn-offs. It turned out to be the murky Pantone 448, which evokes tar and pollution.” (News Scientist, 2017).

A major review suggested that when the law was brought into place “Plain cigarette packaging could lead to 300,000 fewer smokers in the UK over the next year,” (BBC, 2017). In fact the overall numbers of cigarettes sold did indeed fall, as “Prof Anna Gilmore, director of the Tobacco Control Research Group (TCRG), said: “The underlying rate of decline in tobacco sales almost doubled after these policies were implemented.” The number of cigarettes sold in the UK was falling by about 12m a month before the measures were introduced in May 2017, according to the TCRG, which is based at the University of Bath. After the legislation took effect, sales began dropping off much more steeply. Monthly sales were almost 3.29bn individual cigarettes in May 2015 but fell to 3.16bn in April 2018” (The Guardian, 2020).

Another life-saving initiative taken to packaging design would be devices like EpiPens, an emergency injection for diabetics used all around the world. As the person in need of the emergency injection will not be able enough to use it, a set of simple, easy to read, so anyone literate is able to read is able to follow these instructions and use the EpiPen to ‘save a life.’ Clever use of the colour green is also used within the packaging design seen below to support the mentality that it is the correct thing to be doing, as green can be associated with ticks, completion, success going ahead with something (e.g. traffic lights) etc., which can help the person be

reassured that they are doing the right thing, making them calm and composed when using the device.



(EpiPen, 2021)

In relation to packaging, it is law now that you must list all ingredients and possible allergens on the packaging on any item you have to consume, making it lifesaving to the individuals who are allergic to some things as they can check the packaging for these items to ensure it is safe to consume. The effects of a severe allergic reaction could be majorly threatening and worrying for the potential patient, and allergic reactions are fairly common, as the number of adult patients (in the UK) admitted to hospital because of allergies has more than doubled since 2013, reaching a record high of 27,172 in 2019/2020 (Anaphylaxis Campaign, 2020) again proving why this was an essential piece of design implementation. The same technique is also used when the public defibrillator stations were installed, as the instructions must be as simple to follow as possible in as few steps as possible in order for the person to understand and be able to use it properly to potentially save someone's life, especially when anyone may have to use the machine, including but not limited to; dyslexics – so the writing must be visually comfortable to be read and understood on literacy appropriate colours, people with learning difficulties – meaning the instructions have to be broken down and explained clearly whilst being presented in a friendly manner, and not to mention children – who may not understand long or complex words and who are susceptible to getting distracted easily in particular with imagery, so this would have to be avoided when possible.

Within the health care sector, within hospitals it is fairly common practice for there to be lines across the floors of different levels within the building. These prevent accidents such as misuse of equipment and can direct people to certain areas such as X-Ray etc. and can also direct people within the building where to walk to allow

the flow of the hospital to be efficient so patients can be effectively treated, whether it be moving equipment or even patients themselves via a trolley or simply staff walking to treat someone. More significantly however, in most NHS hospitals, you will find that all signs are branded to NHS blue, in which itself is a great example about how colour semiotics are used in a healthcare environment as it isn't alerting and can reassure you when you're in the healthcare environment. As for example if the colour red was used for the branding, it would be quite alerting, and getting an email from the NHS and seeing a red logo being the first thing you see may put you on edge. Therefore, the only places you'll see red in hospitals would be in anything relating to blood to point out the obvious. More significantly though, hospital directional signs are all blue, except the emergency room sign, which is red so it stands out above the rest and this is very important and clearly designed, as if someone is in a rush about a medical emergency they can easily find their way around via the signs if the signs are designed as such.



(Smart Art Signs, 2017)

As of more recent times, protection against COVID-19 posters have been put up in almost every non-residential building in the United Kingdom. These are so common that they almost act as a permanent reminder of not only the rules regarding COVID-19 but the instructions on how to contain the spread of the virus, making it almost habit and the norm to abide by these rules and instructions, furthermore, helping to potentially save a lot of people from getting infected whom could be susceptible to ill health/bad effects from COVID-19. In addition to the use of colour to deter people from disobeying the rules, the harsh and outstanding red crosses. The cross shape is commonly associated with trespassing, do not enter signs etc. But, danger, and being incorrect are the most common first thoughts when encountering the colour red especially when it is in use within signs. During the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa, Liberian designer Stephen Doe painted walls red to show danger and used

simple iconography to convey the disease's symptoms to a population among whom more than 30 languages were spoken – and few people could read or write (News Scientist, 2017).



(Doe, 2013)

Red can be alarming to the audience which helps them pay attention to the instructions, in this case the red was used to draw attention to the illustrations and iconography which was then used to convey the information aimed. On top of this, when placed in circles, circles connote endlessness, warmth, and protection as they are more self-contained (Dondis, 1973) which helps the user believe that what they are seeing will keep them safe and will protect them against the virus when they obey the rules, this then leading to a slower rate of infection. The use of iconography is also important with COVID-19 posters too, as the government logo is used. This then sending the message to the audience that these instructions come from the

highest authority and leads them to believe that they could be punished for not abiding by the instructions, in some cases leading feelings of guilt to which acts as a further deterrent. If the words 'HM Government' were written on the posters it would be much less effective than the logo as the logo provides instant recognition, allowing the audience to take in information much faster. These posters and 'adverts' are also designed to be read by anyone literate as they take children into account when designing. This is evident as they don't use complex or too long words in places where children could be needing to understand/read them, and they are minimally designed in addition to this, children don't get too put off by the amount of information making them more attractive to read and look at. Commonly in environments where children are present also, the designs are altered to have a more child friendly colour background. So instead of the common white background and black text, they would change the posters to blues, a neutral friendly colour. In addition to this in hospitals, unfortunately violence in hospitals is awfully too common, or at least it was. "In 2010, the UK's Department of Health and the Design Council asked for ideas on how to reduce levels of violence in accident and emergency departments. The winning brief was a signage system that filled the information gaps driving patients to lose their cool. It explained, for instance, the triage system so those waiting knew why someone else might get seen before them. After a year-long trial, violence in A&Es dropped by 50 per cent." (News Scientist, 2017).

Much like the techniques used to alter the behaviour of people around COVID-19, the semiotics of road traffic signs, the repetitiveness of road and traffic signs

engrains them in the head, so when they see them on the road, they instantly recognise what they are and what exactly they mean. Not to mention how they are all designed to be obvious and instantly recognisable as they are all minimal and simple to look at. This is because drivers simply will not have enough time to look at the information on the sign because they are busy driving, and if they do pay too much attention to the sign then it could result in a lack of concentration to which could further result in a road traffic accident, possibly injuring themselves and/or others, or simply because they are going. The most common road sign is the speed limit of 30 sign, and these are often enforced with speed cameras which are on signs that are bright yellow, making them very obvious to the human eye to see. It's unlikely that the road user would be inclined to slow down if the colours were less alarming and if the colours used were as common on other road signs. Why does this save lives you ask? There are many facts and figures to suggest that even slowing down the slightest touch can help a pedestrian escape a catastrophic injury by a landslide. If you hit a pedestrian they have a much greater chance of surviving if your speed is lower. If you hit a pedestrian: at 40 mph there is a 90 percent chance they will be killed. at 35 mph there is a 50 percent chance they will be killed. At 30mph there is a 20 percent chance they will be killed. At 20mph there is a 2.5 percent chance they will be killed," (Road Wise, 2015).

Also in relation to roads is the design of traffic lights and pedestrian crossings. For one, traffic lights are extremely big and obvious to the road user, and the colours are self-explanatory even the youngest of children could understand what they could mean. Green often being associated with granting, success and completion, and red

of course being associated with danger and stop signs. Amber, being associated with warning signs, even the same colour as warning lights on the dashboard of your car, instructing the driver to proceed but stay alert/with caution.

Overall, yes I strongly believe that the right graphic design has the power to save lives. Through strong use of semiotics and the principles of design in particular visual hierarchy, making sure the important information is being noticed first and is most noticed. For example as mentioned previously with regards to emergency room hospital signs being red to stand out. I believe all of us mostly learn visually, and graphic design is the most powerful force on the planet in terms of visual education, each design solution intended to give the audience information in the designed order. In fact, not just all of us mostly learn visually, anyone can, as demonstrated by Liberian artist Stephen Doe (Doe, 2013). As famously said by graphic designer Lucienne Roberts, "We don't just sell things, we do things."

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