The Importance of a Digital Strategy: The International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility as a Case Study

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Abstract. This paper aims to address the issue of creating a brand and the strategy for the implementation in the digital environment. This investigation aims to understand the evolution of design and its adaptation to the digital era, making it possible to substantiate the importance and the contribution of digital design in the graphic design field. As a case study, we present the development of the graphic brand and respective communication on digital social media, for the International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility. The presented work is part of the study that is being developed to obtain the master’s degree in digital design, within the scope of the curricular internship at designlab4u.

Keywords: Brand mark · Digital · Communication · International conference

1 Introduction

Design is a way of communication, whose goals are to improve the visual environment, increase quality of life, transmit information and disseminate causes and cultures of civic and collective interest (Costa 2011). The designer has the responsibility to create a visual representation with the ability to draw attention and create memory (Rijo 2013). To do so, the design must be objective, with clearly defined goals and measurable results, and the designer must respond to the client’s needs and desires first, which can sometimes mean making decisions that do not align with his own (Hembree 2006).

According to the authors Grácio e Rijo (2018), in a design project the designer has to think about the project as a whole - and not only the final product - he has to be aware of all the process. This means that, in a methodological process, it is up to the designer to research and define his entire path. For this, the designer has to project and reflect on the whole universe and final understanding of the product when creating it. In this process, the designer has to think about a whole system and management, in which the final product will be integrated, a system that, in turn, is part of a service, and it is the business structure, where this service is inserted, which establishes a relationship between the brand and/or company, and the final consumer. One of the...
branches of design is identity design, which Villas-Boas (2007) claims to be a visual identity system for companies, public institutions and other organizations that is responsible for creating the graphic elements and their applications. For Budelmann et al. (2010) the purpose of the graphic identity is to characterize and enhance brand identity, analyzing the behavior, choices and future of the organization. Ambrose and Harris (2009) refer to the term identity as a set of attributes that determine the level of services of an organization. Kapferer (2008) ends by stating that the vision, trust and values of the brand are its identity. Finally, Wheeler (2019) defines identity as an appeal to the senses, something that can be seen, touched and heard.

When it comes to creating an identity, other steps are involved (Brandão et al. 2012). First, it is essential to understand the brand, what it represents, what it offers, who the customers are, the differences compared to the competition and what the competitive advantage is. Then it is necessary to review the entire research, recognize the essential applications, what is the best representation for the brand identity, the brand architecture, the color, the typography, the visual language of the brand and its resources and, finally, the graphic representation of the brand (Wheeler 2019). Through the combination of these steps, a designer seeks to incorporate meaning and multiple attributes into the brand in order to provoke emotions in the observer. When the chosen particularities capture the essence of the organization, the identity is successful and manages to generate a strong impression on the values and function of the organization (Ambrose and Harris 2009). Simply put, the development of a unique identity is the goal of an efficient approach. (Budelmann et al. 2010). Meanwhile, new technologies have emerged, creating a synchronized cultural environment, where the impulsiveness and diversity of the era, which was a benefit for design, created an environment where a vast global dialogue coexists with national perspectives (Meggs and Purvis 2006).

Identity design has evolved together with new digital technologies, which has developed new opportunities for new design styles. With smartphones and social networks, new avenues for online identity are emerging, yet the basic principles of design remain unchanged (Budelmann et al. 2010). However, the way in which most users, through one click, have access to virtually all the information they’re looking for, whether it’s through a smartphone, a tablet or a computer, should be valued, because although it may seem simple for the user, it has an extremely complex production process behind it (Reed 2019).

One of the meanings of design is to construct a plan and give order to chaos and it can be exposed in various graphic forms, on a screen or in audiovisual, static or dynamic, in arrangements of images and words (Rúbio 2009). Producing design for electronic media is a delicate matter because there is no tradition, the principles are still being determined and many of those that are, are not user centered (Frascara 2004). Knowledge considered traditional, such as color theory, editorial design, typography and the technical and practical knowledge of the various printing processes, has remained in the transition from paper to screen (Rúbio 2009). But new visual languages and rules were developed to explain the possible paths to follow in virtual environments and how to structure websites, allowing the interaction between the visual languages of print and electronic media (Frascara 2004). As a consequence, the profession of graphic designer needs to be readjusted. As well, schools with training in design and visual arts have also adapted, adding the use of digital tools to the study plans (Rúbio 2009).
In order to create future opportunities and to anticipate a position, it is necessary to understand the principles that are driving change (Heller and Womack 2008). Heller and Womack (2008), define these principles in five parts: perceiving the “language” of the computer, action and reaction (basic concepts of using technology), visualizing information, creating design for growth (digital systems have the ability to expand and grow, and the designer must facilitate this growth) and creating design for various devices.

2 DesignLab4u

The project presented here was developed within the scope of the Master’s Curricular Internship in DesignLab. In November 2016, this design laboratory was founded at the Escola Superior de Educação de Lisboa (ESELx), belonging to the Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa (IPL). This laboratory is characterized by being a research space applied to the practice and teaching of design in a real context, recreating the real working environment of an agency, contributing to the training of students as professionals in the area. A gap in education is the lack of internship experience, the opportunity to experience and interact with the labor market, which is a legitimate way to enter the real context and to be better prepared at the end of academic training (Rijo et al. 2018).

DesignLab4U is a space where students from ESELx and other institutions can benefit from a curricular internship in the area of design and its different spheres. At an academic, scientific and social level, through the association of theoretical and practical knowledge, this laboratory seeks to stimulate opportunities to approach design issues. At a professional level, the aim is to create conditions conducive to the realization of projects in real contexts, quality in the implementation of projects and the development of skills for the creation of self-employment, having the added value of teaching support and student collaboration.

According to Rijo (2018) DesignLab4U appears with this objective and, simultaneously, intends to explore methodologies focused on and conducted by practical action supported by collaborative processes, one of the major objectives of research at ESELx. This laboratory aims to develop analytical, critical and expressive capacity, to base and apply theoretical foundations and practical activities to act in the methodological phases of graphic products design. It is intended that students understand the various phases that a design project encompasses, from the reception of a briefing by a client to its production and implementation in the market, as well as the added value of interdisciplinary action developed in a real context, under the tutelage of teachers specialized in the area. The Designlab plan is to provide students with skills capable of complementing their strengths, behaviors and work methodologies. The objective is to prepare qualified professionals in the area of design, capable of executing projects in different genres and formats, with an intervening posture at the level of new communication technologies, in response to emerging needs, within the sector of creative and technological industries, commerce and communication, through the implementation of viable projects for real problems.
3 International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility

3.1 Briefing

The Lisbon Higher Institute of Accounting and Administration, belonging to the IPL, in collaboration with the Global Corporate Governance Institute organized the seventh edition of the international conference on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Sustainability, Ethics & Governance in 2020. After the event was successful in London, Cologne (Germany), Nanjing (China), Perth (Australia) and Santander (Spain) the event will take place in Lisbon, Portugal. The event is one of the largest international conferences with a focus on responsible business, where the latest research and the respective practical assumptions for business, society, academia and politics are presented. For the CSR conference, the creation of a graphic language and the respective materials for the seventh edition were requested, the only indication of the type of language desired by the client was provided through the link on the conference website, and no further requirements were specified.

3.2 Project Development

Design practice is a very well established process, where the methodologies are well defined, i.e., it is assumed that there is always a prior in-depth research of the contexts of the problems presented to the designer, where the research and exploration are always present, as well as a continuous exploration of the improvement in the approach to the problems that arise in the course of the design process, in order to reduce, to a minimum, the chances of error (Grácio and Rijo 2018).

With this process in mind, and in order to respond to the briefing, initial research was carried out, which allowed for the acquisition of a notion of the visual languages created for conferences, which led to the conclusion that most conferences use patterns and geometric shapes as graphic language. Thus, several proposals were developed with the elements provided through the website as a basis, the typography and colors, and by varying the application of patterns (Fig. 1).

Within the various proposals made, one of the options was chosen to give continuity, only an adjustment in the choice of color scale was requested, to have a greater focus on dark blue tones. After the presentation of this proposal, the client requested the integration of a tram, which would become the main element of the composition (Fig. 2). This occurrence can be considered as a constraint, since, as previously mentioned, no specific indication was given regarding the visual language and it was only during the development of the same that the client communicated the intention of the integration of this element, which led to the need to reformulate the graphic image proposal.
However, with the outbreak of Covid-19, the conference was postponed to 2021 and the client did not proceed with the project for this year, but the development of the project continued so that it could be implemented at next year’s conference. The development of the project was therefore guided by the DesignLab4U coordinator, Professor Cátia Rijo, who approved the graphic language and the respective materials of the CSR conference (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1. Graphic proposal for the CSR international conference. Author’s image (Color figure online)

Fig. 2. Graphic solution with the tram. Author’s image (Color figure online)
3.3 Digital Strategy

The process of developing a digital strategy began with an overview of the CSR conference, where it was noted that the international conference covers the areas of corporate social responsibility, sustainability, ethics and management. The purpose of the conference is to solicit and collect publications, within the aforementioned themes, so that they can be shared in a united environment. The target audience includes Ph.D. candidates, academia and industry experts and researchers in the areas of corporate social responsibility, sustainability, ethics and administration. Within the area of corporate social responsibility there are several events, such as: the international conference “Trends in Multidisciplinary Business & Economic Research”, the international conference on business, economics, management, humanities and social sciences, and the symposium on ethics and social responsibility research.

The problems that the CSR conference demonstrated were then identified. First, until this issue, the conference did not have a definite visual identity, presenting a lack of coherence and, consequently, a greater difficulty in identifying the conference and its continuity. In other words, without a defined visual identity, the public had difficulty in recognizing the conference and its future editions. Thus, the target audience of the conference was not reached as widely as would have been expected, and the lack of connection between the event and the audience was evident. Finally, the absence of strong and lasting relationships with the desired community causes a weak transmission of the event and, as a result, a lower presence. That said, the CSR conference needed renewal and to adapt its approach in order to proceed and consolidate a level with more visibility and reach.
The following goals were defined: the definition of a unique and clear visual identity, distinguishing itself from the other events in the area and allowing the target audience an instant recognition of the conference; the growth of the attraction and connection with the intended audience and the strengthening of relations with frequent participants; the capture of the audience’s attention, increasing the value of the brand; the drive and orientation of traffic to the website and the increase of the event’s publicity, reaching more people (Fig. 4).

The goals were achieved through the creation and implementation of various actions. To begin with, an improvement was made to the website, which received a design update in accordance with the new graphic image, which had a restructuring and expansion of content such as the addition of a blog with testimonials from participants and multimedia elements and the availability of publications previously chosen for presentation at conferences (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4. Website and Instagram post develop for the conference. Author’s image

Fig. 5. Facebook page created and the newsletter of the CSR conference. Author’s image
The definition of keywords of the themes that the conference addresses through search engine marketing or SEM, a method of marketing in paid search engines, helped to increase traffic on the website. This could be an action to return and re-evaluate in the sense that more keywords can be added if there are insufficient numbers or there is a new goal of increasing traffic. Next, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter social network accounts were created (Fig. 6). In social networks the publications are daily, with multimedia content appealing to the target audience and suitable for the social network, as in the case of YouTube, which only allows the publication of videos. On the Facebook and Instagram platforms, ads were acquired for better dissemination of the pages and the conference, helping to increase traffic on them. Finally, a newsletter was created in order to reach users, possibly more absent in the new digital media, through email. According to the results, if progress is positive, an account in Google Adwords may be created in the future to use the pay-per-click function, which will allow more traffic to the website and social networks.

Fig. 6. Twitter post created for the CSR conference. Author’s image

In the commitment to achieve the defined goals, the use of Google Analytics will allow the observation and the analysis of the numbers achieved with the actions mentioned above. This tool will allow the adjustment of the strategy according to the attitudes and answers of the audience, that is, the perception that a certain multimedia content obtained more likes, shares and comments will indicate the path to follow for future publications. The use of metrics such as conversion rate, customer retention rate and return on investment (ROI) will also help to measure results and guide future decisions. Evaluation of implemented actions is a key factor in understanding how the digital strategy should be directed and adjusted in accordance with the defined objectives, highlighting the fact that it is a continuous and non-linear process.
4 Conclusion

Nowadays all events need a graphic image that identifies them and distinguishes them from each other. When creating a brand, it is necessary to take into account the identity of the event itself, and it is essential to be aware of its specificity and target audience. In the case of the CSR international conference, the previous editions did not have any graphic image that would identify it and create recognition of it.

The development of the graphic image and respective communication supports for CRS for 2020, was based on an image of a tram in Lisbon, this image was placed on the website with disclosure of the event without having yet started the project of building its brand. This led to a constraint in the development of the graphic image, because the graphic image created could not be very different from the communication that had already been made. With the concern of creating a graphic image for the conference that had a link with what was already being disseminated, we opted to use the tram image.

Analyzing the graphic image developed for the conference, what is noticeable is the great adaptive communicative capacity in the different media, printed and digital, communicating astutely and adapting to different media and audiences, standing out among the others.

If in the past there was already a great concern about adapting the graphic image of the conferences to the digital media, today, due to the current situation, the ability of the graphic image to communicate digitally has become essential. All conferences (national and international) that were planned had to adjust in accordance with the limitations imposed, the impossibility of gathering a large number of people and the reality that this type of events could not be held in person. Many of the conferences had to convert to digital events, carrying them out through virtual systems, appropriating communications to mobile devices, computers and social networks.

The CSR Conference, although postponed until 2021, is scheduled to take place digitally next year. This will give rise to concerns about how the brand mark will fit and communicate only through digital media and create the hypothesis of a development of the brand as a digital priority.

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The Importance of a Digital Strategy

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