Maintaining the integrity of your digital collateral

There’s no doubt that the digital explosion has radically altered the way we approach business and marketing today.

On the one hand, you have a dramatically lowered barrier to entry for marketing collateral, with just about anyone with basic PC skills able to produce essential pieces.

On the other hand, you have greatly reduced production costs, and the benefit of knowing that an error in creation no longer means you have to fork out a small fortune for a reprint.

So, just how long is your digital collateral valid, and what are the things you should be looking out for to ensure you’re always represented at your best?

# Software Version Releases

From browsers to office admin programs and email clients, it seems that every time you turn around, one of the companies has just released a new version of some piece of software.

Usually we pay these releases very little mind – unless of course we’re one of the lucky ones to get our hands on the latest version of whatever the software program is. But while we may not notice, our digital collateral does.

Your first rule of thumb then, would be to update your collateral pieces as often as new versions of the programs are released, or at least get hold of someone who has a copy and check how well the piece displays. In fact, don’t stop at one – find everyone you know with the latest software and check all your pieces’ rendering.

Another great way to pre-empt possible hiccoughs is to download the beta versions of the software as they’re released.

Usually made available to the public about six to twelve months prior to the actual go-live date, these free beta versions are pretty close replicas of what the final product will be – and are a cost-effective way for you to stay ahead of the update curve.

## Web browsers & standards

Web standards are continuously changing, and because the updates are free, it’s something you can expect people to adopt quickly – which means that even your recently-built, two-month-old website is at risk of going awry.

One of the key benefits of CMS website platforms like Joomla is that this process is pretty much managed for you, with Joomla releasing regular updates and fixes that cover aspects such as browser standards and site security – usually at the click of a button.

Likewise, many of the reputable template and component providers also offer regular updates, many of which will notify you in the back-end admin panel, and also offer a ‘one-click’ update.

## Email Rendering Engines

So, you had a fabulous piece of email marketing or newsletter template designed and built for you a couple of years back, and so far it’s working great. Or is it?

One of the things any good agency will do for you is test your email template to as many different machines and rendering engines as they can lay their hands on – are you still doing the same with every send?

Like web browsers, new email clients are released quite regularly, and as if this isn’t bad enough, many of them get updates on an almost daily basis, which means that you have update variations to deal with too.

### Sadly, it doesn’t end here though: when last did you look at or update your email signatures?

Subject to the same rendering rules as emailers and templates, and often built to the same standards, e-signatures can easily be impacted by new email clients - and since their distribution frequency is so much higher, they are definitely an aspect that needs to be revised regularly.

# Brand Guidelines

Almost always relegated to the bottom of the pile until a new agency comes along and redoes the entire corporate identity, your brand guidelines can date easily in a digital world.

For one thing, web design trends are continuously evolving, and most websites built 2-3 years ago don’t have the necessary web 2.0 feel that people are coming expect – and so look old and dated.

## Another big reason is the constant improvements in technology – and especially in device displays.

One of the interesting things you’ll notice when working with digital collateral over an extended period of time is how much difference screen resolution actually makes.

For one thing, the same size font can appear to be a completely different size when compared on a screen of a differing resolution. And the bigger screens get, the bigger your typeface needs to be – or your copy won’t be legible at all.

The same rules apply to sizing of logos and headings, as well as spacing around logos, with your very elegant, discreet top-right-hand-corner logo disappearing into the ether on large display, simply because it’s just too small.

On the flipside, you’ll have a recipient with a large screen who views the document at 150 or 200 percent, and all your carefully planned and costly imagery is reduced to nothing but a pixelated mess.

What I’ve also seen a lot of is older websites, designed for the most common resolutions a couple of years back, looking dated and way too small for comfort.

Most – if not all – new websites are scalable and adjustable, while older websites tend to have a fixed width that makes them look too small on larger screens, and yet they’re too big for mobile (with too-small text!).

A really good rule of thumb here is to design for big screens, and oversize your text a bit. This way it will look good at large resolutions, and will still be easily readable on any mobile device.

# A common mistake

A common mistake that many people make is assuming that because it looks good on your machine, it will also look good everywhere else. This is a fallacy.

A digital document is never the item you see in front of you – a digital document is code: a set of instructions that tells the recipient’s device how to recreate the document you originally created, with the twist of matching it to the recipient’s software and choice of device.

Effectively, this means that digital is fluid: its design and development should be structured in a way that allows it the space it needs to expand an unlimited amount, in whichever direction it needs to.

## This is especially critical for mobile devices.

Recent stats bandy about figures like 2 to 3 mobile devices per person in SA, and that 60 to 70% of Internet access is undertaken through a mobile device. Did you know that each mobile device has its own email client and browser? So, how many different mobile devices have you tested your collateral on?

From a cost-efficiency point of view, digital collateral is clearly a winner, but it requires regular checking and updates to ensure that you are always presented with the same flash and bling that you had when the pieces were first created.

And even though what you see may look totally the same, the necessary technical changes cannot be pushed aside, or your expensive branding process can still leave you looking like the proverbial mom-and-pop-shop.

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**A note to the editor:**

Chemory Gunko is the managing director and creative director of Dsignhaus, a B2B marketing services agency with in-depth and specialist knowledge in the field of digital marketing. Contact Chemory on chemory@dsignhaus.co.za, visit [www.dsignhaus.co.za](http://www.dsignhaus.co.za" \t "_blank), follow [@dsignhaus](http://www.twitter.com/dsignhaus%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) on Twitter or join the [Facebook page](http://www.facebook.com/Dsignhaus%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) on www.facebook.com/Dsignhaus.

**Submission & Enquiries**

Chemory Gunko

MD & Creative Director

Dsignhaus (Pty) Ltd

Tel: 011 025 4165

Cell: 082 224 2357

Email: chemory@dsignhaus.co.za

Web: [www.dsignhaus.co.za](http://www.dsignhaus.co.za)

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