

# Communicating Better with Color



Did you hear the one a few years back about the intern who faxed some charts to a team of reviewers in advance of a meeting—with a cover note directing their attention to the figures in green? Quite a faux pas in the days before color faxes. But it's no joke: Color can be one of the most powerful tools at an organization's disposal when it comes to organizing information, increasing understanding, and making people and operations more productive and efficient. And today, the technology for color printing to help achieve these ends is more advanced, accessible and affordable than ever.

"If you want to understand how color impacts us, next time you get in the car, take note of how you stop at red and go on green. Color plays a big role in persuasion. We should understand its value."

—Bryan Eisenberg, "The Color of Money,"  
ClickZ Network



## In living color

When was the last time you watched television on a black-and-white set? Or perused a black-and-white Website? There's no getting around it: We live in a color world, and color has a tremendous impact on the way we think and feel about almost every aspect of our lives. This paper will explore what makes color such an important component of communication, why more and more organizations are increasingly incorporating color output into their everyday operations, and how color can dramatically improve the effectiveness of communications—from seemingly minor memos to major sales presentations—in virtually any organization.

## The power of color

Consider just a few examples of the powerful impact of color in everyday life.

> When you're driving on a highway and you see a large orange sign with black lettering on the roadside ahead, what does that tell you? Even if you're too far away to read the text, you know to be on the alert for construction and related road hazards. That's just one example of the ways in which color can be used to communicate important practical information to entire societies.

- > Think green. What does it mean? Nature? Money? Growth? Envy? Ireland? Like other strong colors, green has all these associations and more, making it a powerful tool for quickly communicating complex realities or evoking strong emotions.
- > What do you think of when you see a financial statement with some of the numbers in red? You know immediately without further explanation that those numbers represent losses or negative values.
- > What comes to your mind when someone refers to “red states and blue states?” If you live in the U.S., you almost certainly think of voting patterns or results that reflect the Republican and Democratic parties respectively. Clearly, the power of color can derive not only from longstanding traditional associations but also from circumstantial contemporary meanings that it can take on.

These are just a few examples of what the renowned color expert Faber Birren called “functional color,” or uses of color in which “beauty or appearance are secondary to more practical purposes.”<sup>1</sup> This paper is concerned with functional color in the service of one very specific practical purpose: creating more impactful communications.

## The impact of color on formal communications

Author Don Jones has compiled a number of compelling statistics about the use of color in formal communications such as those used in business, government and education. According to Jones’ research, “Color communications can improve comprehension by 75 percent over black-and-white communications. Readership of color documents can be 40 percent higher. Training materials printed in color can accelerate learning from a rate of 55

percent to a rate of 75 percent.”<sup>2</sup> Let’s look at some of the ways in which color can have such dramatic effects on communications.

### Color commands attention and improves understanding

According to researchers, color visuals can actually increase the willingness to read something by up to 80 percent.<sup>3</sup> As 3M has pointed out, why do you think over 700 million color highlighter pens are sold each year?<sup>4</sup> Adding color can help draw attention to important information, which in turn can make the information quicker and easier to perceive and understand. The following example illustrates how adding color to even a simple chart can have this effect.

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## Say It With Color

Color	Objective Realities Represented	Emotional Shorthand for	Other Common Associations	Cultural Meanings
Red	Heat, Blood	Passion	Medical emergencies	China: Luck and prosperity
Blue	Water	Calm	Directional signs to public facilities	Various international: Immortality
Yellow	Sunshine	Cowardice	Caution in traffic	Some Asian countries: Sacredness
Green	Nature, Money	Envy, Growth	Environmentalism, Ecotourism	Ireland: National identity
Orange	Fire, Autumn	Passion	Road hazards	U.S.: Halloween

The chart above presents just a few randomly chosen examples of the ways in which different colors instantly communicate complex ideas, emotions and realities.



As a tool for attracting attention and facilitating understanding, color can be invaluable in a variety of communication settings. If someone is conducting a sales presentation, it can help to close the sale faster, for example. Or if an organization's internal team is undergoing training, it can speed the learning process and make the training more productive.

### Color makes people more efficient and productive

The principle is simple. The more readily and quickly people understand information, the sooner they can use it productively. Consider the old joke at the start of this paper: How much time would have been saved at that meeting if the attendees could have seen the material that was supposed to be in green, quickly grasped its meaning, and acted upon it accordingly? Or take a look at the following example.

MEMO

TO: All Employees

FROM: Juan Smith

RE: Sales Incentives

The following incentives will be put in place effective February 1 for all teams responsible for washer/dryer sales to appliance retailers.

Double commission. Monthly sales above \$25,000 during the months of February, March and April will earn twice the commission normally received.

Caribbean cruise. Sales representatives who have total sales exceeding \$250,000 as of July 1 will be awarded a Caribbean cruise for two, with cruise line and available travel dates TBA.

Special year-end bonus. An additional bonus of 20% of total sales for the year will be awarded to anyone who meets the above goals and earns the associated incentives.

Thank you and good luck in your sales efforts.

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Juan

The version with color conveys important—and highly motivating—information to the recipient much more quickly and efficiently than the one without it. And the sooner that information is imparted, the sooner the recipient will act on it.

### The effect of color at work in the real world

As the previous examples suggest, color can be an effective tool for organizations not just in high-end printed materials such as marketing brochures, but also in everyday materials that are produced on general office products or multifunction products (MFPs). Here are some

of the specific applications in which color can be used to increase understanding, efficiency and productivity.

### Color is compelling in day-to-day printing

From internal workgroup memos and employee newsletters to letters and meeting reports prepared for external audiences, many everyday communications can be made more effective through the use of color. Keep in mind that even though many of these types of materials are now distributed electronically, they are very likely to be printed by the recipients to review at a convenient time. If color printing is available, the increased impact from color will extend to the printed page as well as the onscreen version.



## The case for the value of color

If color has such a great impact on understanding, efficiency and productivity, why isn't everyone printing everything in color these days? For one thing, it isn't always appropriate. How compelling would this paper be to you if all the type were hot pink, for example? Color is at its most powerful when used strategically—even sparingly—to affect audiences. There are also reasons that color isn't used more even when it is appropriate. These relate to perceptions about the value of color—perceptions that stem from longstanding beliefs about qualities such as cost of acquisition and operation, ease of use, and manageability of color printers.

According to CAP Ventures, for example, printers haven't been traditionally marketed for everyday workgroup use because they've been perceived as too expensive and complex and not functional enough to be of value there. While this may have been true at one time, recent technology developments affecting the affordability, speed, reliability and manageability of color printers suggest that its use may be of far greater value in everyday environments than previously believed.<sup>5</sup>

### Color is affordable

As the cost of color printing decreases, its value to an organization increases. You may not be willing to invest \$100,000 in color printing to make people ten percent more productive, but you might consider investing \$30,000. Color today has become more affordable than ever in the wake of technology developments that can help to lower both the initial equipment costs and the ongoing cost per copy.

### Color is fast, reliable and functional

In addition to bringing the cost of color printing down, new technology is also enabling higher speeds and more consistent quality than in the past. There are color printers now that print just as fast in color as they do in black-and-white. In fact, Hewlett-Packard today makes several models that print comparable pages per minute in color and in black-and-white. Today's color printers have more features and functions than in the past, too, including capabilities such as stapling and other finishing options.

### Color adds power to presentations

When you print out Microsoft® PowerPoint slides to hand out to participants after a training session or sales presentation, they won't be as powerful if they're in black-and-white instead of the original color that you used in the presentation. Printing presentation slides in color so that they match the actual presentation ensures that the participants get the same intense effect from the materials they take away with them that they got during the session itself.

### Color makes proposals more compelling

Proposals, whether aimed at an external audience for potential sales or at an internal audience to propose operational changes, are by nature long and detailed documents. Using color to break them up into more manageable, understandable bites can increase the odds that the intended audience will read and understand all the specific bits of information contained in them to make more informed decisions or take more informed action.

## New Technology: Cost and Performance Improvements

	Old Technology	New Technology <small>(examples: tandem drum technology, chemical toner and multi-function features such as finishing options)</small>
Capital Investment	\$106,000	\$ 30,000
Speed (pages per minute)	30 ppm	35 ppm
Operating Cost (per page)	\$ .14	\$ .09

This chart illustrates how new technology has decreased the cost for color printing while increasing performance.

Based on information from CAP Ventures *CAP Stats*, May 2003

### Color is easy to manage

Color printers have not traditionally been associated with management features. But in comparing the manageability of today's color printers with that of color printers in the past, Don Jones points out that printers now offer "centralized management, administration security, centralized monitoring and alerting, and all the additional features that network administrators expect."<sup>6</sup>

### Conclusion: The trend toward color

"Color is showing explosive growth for both printers and MFPs," according to IDC, which is projecting growth in color hardcopy devices through 2008 that is 10 times higher than that for black-and-white devices—20 percent vs. 2 percent growth.<sup>7</sup> And apparently, the word is out about color affordability. According to Lyra Research, color laser printers priced under \$1,000 will account for 56 percent of total color laser printer shipments worldwide by 2008.<sup>8</sup> Considering the advantages of color, its affordability and the improvements in color printing capabilities, it should come as no surprise that more and more organizations are now investing in color—or that the trend is expected to continue in the years to come.

### Want to know more?

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Faber Birren, *The Power of Color* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1997), 242.
- <sup>2</sup> Don Jones, *The Definitive Guide to Office Color Printing* (realtimepublishers.com, 2004), 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Ronald E. Green, "The Persuasive Properties of Color," *Marketing Communications*, October 1989.
- <sup>4</sup> 3M, citing sales data from the Writing Instrument Manufacturers Association, [www.3m.com/meetingnetwork/readingroom/meetingguide\\_power\\_color.html](http://www.3m.com/meetingnetwork/readingroom/meetingguide_power_color.html).
- <sup>5</sup> "Workgroup Color: The Next Frontier," CAP Ventures *CAP Stats*, 13 May 2003.
- <sup>6</sup> Jones, 13.
- <sup>7</sup> Keith Kmetz, IDC Insight, November 2004.
- <sup>8</sup> "Color Laser Printers: Worldwide Market Forecast and Analysis," Lyra Research, August 2004.

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