

# Using a PHM-based Visual Brand Identity Management System to Manage Deterioration of Visual Brand Identities and Prolong Their Life Span

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**Abstract**—Visual brand identities often and rapidly deteriorate (degradation to failure) if not strenuously, time-consumingly and continuously managed/maintained.

There are several reasons for this and in this paper we identify the various visual brand identity processes and components, and the culprits/pitfalls (failure causes) that typically lead to a visual brand identity getting off track. In this paper, we also propose a PHM-based visual brand identity management system (VBIMS) to avoid or reduce such deterioration.

**Keywords-component; visual branding; visual identity; graphic design; brand longevity; brand deterioration; design management**

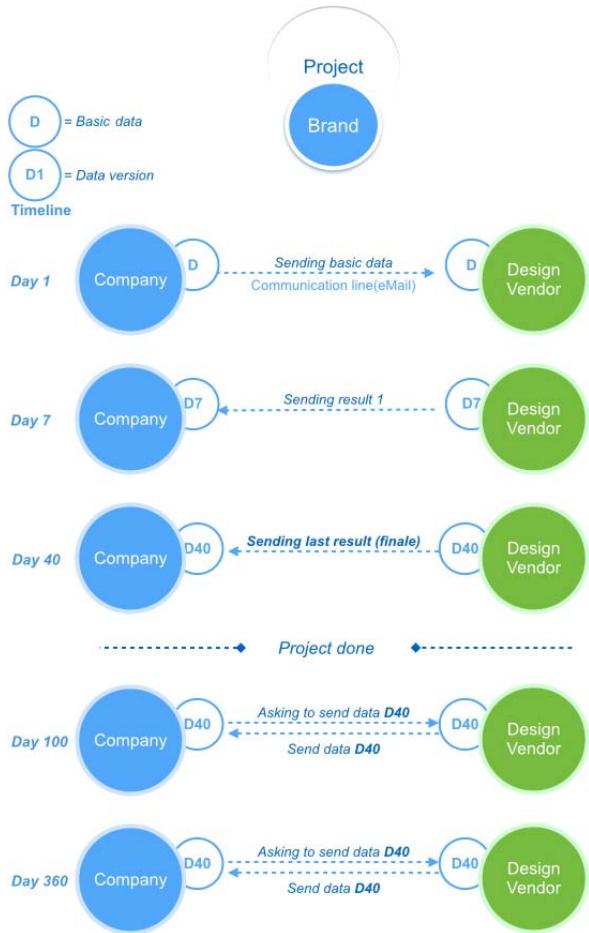
## I. INTRODUCTION

A company's or organization's visual brand identity components typically include logo(s), fonts, colours, imagery, composition and media (spanning from the paper used in print to the screen-based animations used on web/mobile units).

Reasons why the visual brand identity deteriorates can generally be defined by:

- Incorrect implementation by users due to lack of knowledge of and even hostility toward the brand components
- Lack of coherently defined/available files/standards/documentation
- Lack of flexibility (too rigid) both regarding timelessness (too trendy/old-fashioned based on the specific time it was developed) and ability to express various levels of communicative mind states (seriousness vs. casualness)
- Difficulty connecting online/offline components (typically fonts and colors)
- Lack of definition of the visual brand system/architecture
- Lack of a basic definition of the minimum requirements for maintaining the visual brand's basic identity (how much can be removed/changed while still remaining intact: How fragmented can the visual brand identity components appear?)

While currently not being an exhaustive list of components and pitfalls they nonetheless indicate the main problems that the PHM-based visual brand identity management system (VBIMS) is being developed to solve.



*Fig. 1. Typical example of repeated file distribution from design vendor to client of the same files - a frequent occurrence resulting in wasted time and increased risk of corruption of files*

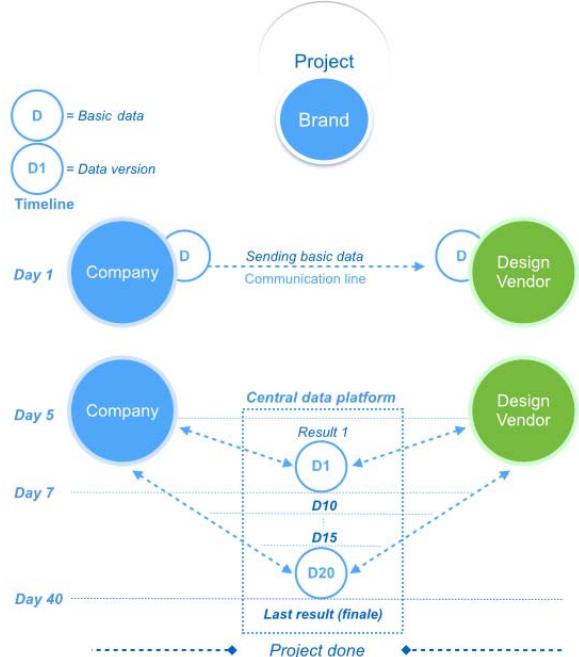
The VBIMS originates from an idea from 1989 (by authors of this paper), where a system for central digital development of visual brand identities connected with a decentralized sales/distribution network was conceptualized.

The problems at that time were, nonetheless, a lack of and costly bandwidth and limited digital file-formats that were readily available to everyone. Furthermore, the graphical user interfaces (GUIs) at that time did not really allow for a truly visual representation of files on-screen, so the idea was abandoned – but not forgotten. [1]

The internet changed this, and it was decided to build a system for storing and distributing design files – both within the client company and outside as sales promotions and for sharing with clients, sub-suppliers and press. The first version (developed by authors of this paper) was strictly HTML, the current version is now in the Drupal CMS and is under continuous development.

Most visual brand *identities* deteriorate over time. They can become obsolete and appear out-dated and old-fashioned, or they get derailed and off track and no longer represent the desired visual brand *image*.

This paper introduces on-going research which links academic and professional work and shows that it is, indeed, possible to implement measures to prolong the life of a visual brand identity and postpone – if not avoid – its deterioration either by obsolescence or derailment.



*Fig. 2. VBIMS model for improving the ongoing file distribution by one central yet readily available data platform*

## II. VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY DETERIORATION

The goal of designing a company/organization's visual brand identity is to establish a visual and graphical expression that links its activities to its desired image. As defined:

*"How a business wants a brand's name, communication style, logo and other visual elements to be perceived by consumers. The components of the brand are created by the business itself, making brand identity the way in which a business wants consumers to perceive its brands, not necessarily how it is actually perceived."*

*Brand identity is different from brand image, which is what consumers actually think. It is constructed by the business itself. A negative gap between brand identity and brand image means that a company is out of touch with market sentiment, which will make selling its products more difficult. The brand image held by consumers can reach a point at which a business or product has to rebrand itself or risk not bringing in sales."* [2]

### A. Visual brand identity obsolescence and derailment

Visual brand identity *obsolescence* happens when the common perception of "fashion" and as such also the

perception of a graphical expression's "modernity" change over time. Consequently, the more "fashionable" and "trendy" a visual brand identity has been designed, the quicker it will become obsolete. [3]

Visual brand identity *derailment* happens for a number of reasons, the most common being a lack of design management and coherence leading (sometimes very rapidly) to conflicting images and essentially a brand identity "Tower of Babel" that "speaks with many tongues". This is generally a much more common reason for deterioration than obsolescence. [4]

### B. The culprits of visual brand identity deterioration

The culprits behind visual brand identity deterioration can broadly be found in four interrelated chronologically listed areas:

1. In the design itself (design level)
2. In the implementation of the design (design level/user level)
3. In the on-going use of the design as is (user level)
4. In the design and implementation of further instruments (user level/design level)

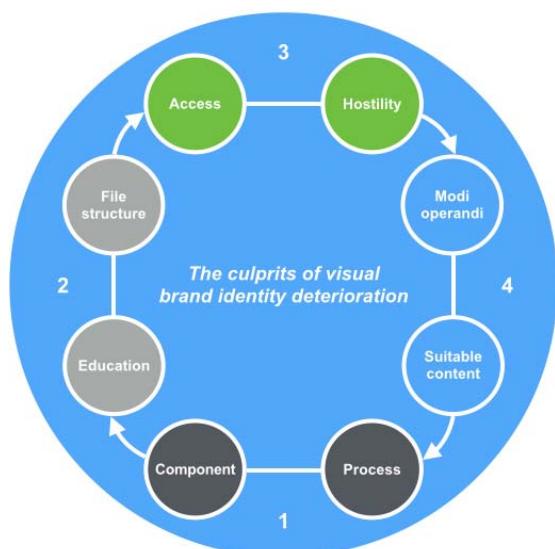


Fig. 3. The cyclic model of visual brand identity deterioration pitfalls.

#### 1) In the design itself (design level)

In order to ensure a long and healthy life and maturity of a visual brand identity there are a number of aspects to consider in the design process – both at the process and component levels. [5]

##### a) Process level

This slightly simplified process level is primarily mentioned to give insight into the design process itself and what must be assumed to be in order for a visual brand identity. It is not the intent of this paper to dwell on design methodology for designers, so the following are provided as background:

- Lack of properly defined visual brand values (what is the overall idea – what is it the visual brand should express?)
- Lack of a properly defined visual brand system/architecture (how is the visual brand interrelated with the corporate overall identity and sub-brands, daughter-companies and products?)
- Lack of properly defined market, geo-social and cultural realms (in which reality/realities should the visual brand exist – now and later?)
- Lack of properly defined visual "boundaries" (how far can we stretch the visual brand identity before it loses its relevance?)

This is (or should be) part of the initial design process and is therefore the responsibility of the designer.

##### b) Component level

The basic visual brand *components* that define the setup of visual brand *instruments* (stationery, brochures, ads, websites etc.) are primarily: logo(s), typography (fonts), colours, imagery, composition and media. Though others may choose to categorize differently, these are the basic building blocks of most visual brand identities. [6]

The mechanisms behind visual brand identity deterioration for each component are:

##### GENERAL

A general culprit that is relevant for all components is lack of flexibility (fluidity) – the design (logo, typography, colours, imagery, composition and media) is too rigid and fails to express the *time* and the *communicative mind state* it is supposed to.

- Lack of flexibility regarding timelessness (too trendy/old-fashioned - based on the specific time it has been developed in)
- Lack of flexibility regarding ability to express various levels of communicative mind states (seriousness vs. casualness)

##### LOGO AND IMAGERY

Aside from lack of flexibility as described above:

- Lack of *uniqueness* in its own right – the logo itself is in essence the "flag of the company/organisation" and should as such be able to carry the visual brand identity on its own
- Lack of ability to be fragmented so just a part of the logo is enough to recognize it (this is intimately connected to the points below – but it makes sense to mention it as a special point for the logo)
- Lack of visual familiarity between photographs, films, symbols, animated objects and 3D-elements

## TYPGRAPHY (FONTS) AND COLOURS

Aside from lack of flexibility as described above:

- Lack of cross-platform compatibility/availability

## COMPOSITION

Aside from lack of flexibility as described above:

- Lack of compositional diversity that caters to an increasing amount of different, physical formats (posters, ads, brochures, business cards, laptop-screens, smart phones etc.).

## MEDIA

Aside from lack of flexibility as described above:

- Lack of visual familiarity between online/offline media: Print, spatial and digital
- Lack of immediate (and automated preferably) adjustment to diverse sizes (responsiveness to format)

A note on media is that they have a large degree of fluidity. Since 1990 the media reality has changed tremendously and will presumably continue to do so. This sets a new paradigm for demand specifications, not least the challenge that the design must be able to meet media realities *that are yet unknown*. Therefore, a definition of the basic design elements that have to be maintained in spite of new media is crucial. In an article from 1999, Jakob Nielsen, a renowned usability expert, among other claims stated that "*Anything that is a great print design is likely to be a lousy web design*". While true at the time of the article, we are now having digital displays with resolutions and color depth rivaling that of offset print. [7] [8]

### 2) In the implementation of the design (design level/user level)

The implementation of the design within the client company/organization is generally challenging and presents certain typical pitfalls that are contributing factors to the visual brand identity's speedy deterioration.

#### a) File/folder-structure

- Lack of a consistent file/folder-naming using a standardized, consistent and meaningful nomenclature (especially MEANINGFUL is here of highest relevance to ensure that the user can understand what the file contains in a standard Windows Explorer)
- Lack of an expandable folder-structure
- Lack of files produced in a sufficient amount of formats and resolutions

#### b) Documentation/education

- Lack of consistent and full (and preferably user-friendly and to the point) documentation of the design in a standardized format and written in a standardized way

- Lack of easily available documentation – anytime and anywhere – easily updated and under control of preferably one responsible person - preferably a dedicated person within the client company/organization in collaboration with the designer

- Lack of education of client key-personnel
- Lack of internal branding within the client company/organization to promote the visual brand identity from the responsible management

### 3) In the on-going use of the design as is (user level)

After implementation and hence the use of the design as is by the client company/organization the typical problems are (almost directly related to the mistakes made during implementation):

#### a) Lack of access

- Lack of access to centrally updated and managed files – anytime and anywhere
- Lack of overall templates
- Lack of access to documentation and a coherent help-function

#### b) Hostility

- Internal hostility to the visual brand identity within the company – the main reason being lack of leadership and incorporation of crucial departments in the design process
- External hostility (and a need for promotion of own creativity) from external suppliers (advertising-agencies, printers, etc.)

### 4) In the design and implementation of further media/instruments (user level/ design level)

After implementation and after a while (the actual time frame differs depending on the depth and quality of the initial design and implementation) a need for new types of media/instruments typically arises. This is the most volatile phase where the visual brand identity can be jeopardized more or less overnight.

Aside from points above the pitfalls here are:

#### a) Lack of modi operandi

- Lack of development of and access to dynamic interpretations and rules (documentation) for new (and essentially unknown) visual and graphical expressions
- Lack of design managerial modi operandi when new visual needs arise

#### b) Lack of suitable content

- Lack of development of and access to media streamlined basic visual brand identity components (the correct file format/resolution) for specific use at specific media

- Lack of suitable visual content (e.g. lack of good images/photographs is a reoccurring challenge often leading to use of low resolution and low quality imagery illegally downloaded from the internet)

The solution to these pitfalls actually lies at the first level in the initial design phase (making sure the design vendor has a reasonable process-model) [9] – as well as in a new approach to the visual brand identity documentation.

### III. A NEW APPROACH TO CONSTRUCTING THE VISUAL BRAND IDENTITY DOCUMENTATION (OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE DESIGN PROGRAM)

In this new paradigm the visual brand identity documentation should ideally move from being a static “registrant” of design specifications to becoming a dynamic and interactive tool, where focus is not solely on specifications for individual instruments but rather on a combinatorial system of components that can be put together in diverse (fluid) ways depending on time and communicative mind states in order to ensure a long lasting visual brand identity. [10]

#### A. Types of visual brand identity documentation/programs

Visual brand identity documentation/programs span from simple one-page definitions of the company/organization’s basic design to complex multi-volumes incorporating sub-brands, affiliated companies, product designs etc. to achieve an identity synergy among e.g. products and services. This, however, does not alter the fact that the documentation/program remains a visual representation of an *already determined* visual and graphical expression. The documentation/program does not by itself generate new expressions – it can only show predefined expressions. Obviously also as design *principles*, but as the expressions, these principles are also predefined. [11]

The basic goal of any identity documentation/program is, of course, to secure the company’s visual brand identity and communication. But the ways it is done differ. The static documentation/program is useful for swift and precise use in daily operations. Expressions not already defined are then dealt with otherwise, which is both time consuming and leads to deterioration. Thus, most documentation/programs allow for a certain degree of interpretation (narrow or broad) by the user which inevitably puts responsibility in the hands of largely non-graphical employees – again deterioration is the most likely outcome.

So while the static documentation/program is useful and sufficient for production of predefined instruments it lacks behind when new communicative needs arise and put responsibility into the hands of employees not necessarily competent for that responsibility.

Therefore, an added focus on principles for different directions seems prudent – depending on the level of seriousness vs. cheerfulness (event) – the communicative mind state. [12]

#### B. Weighting model

An aspect of the fluidity and flexibility of a visual brand identity is its ability to express differently weighted mind states in terms of *high vs. less seriousness* (cheerfulness). It must be ensured that the overall desired visual brand image is expressed continuously and not least *relevantly*, and not merely as a rigid repetition of a basic rule-set as the viewer may be presented for the single component separately and without any prior knowledge about the overall visual brand identity. With the rapid expansion of new media and *engaging* branding this appears to become increasingly applicable [13] [14] [15]

##### 1) Slidability

This means that the visual brand identity should contain an ability to *slide* over a broad scale between expressions of high and less seriousness as needed in the individual situations. The highest seriousness is determined from the beginning and consequently lesser degrees of seriousness are incorporated in the sliding model.

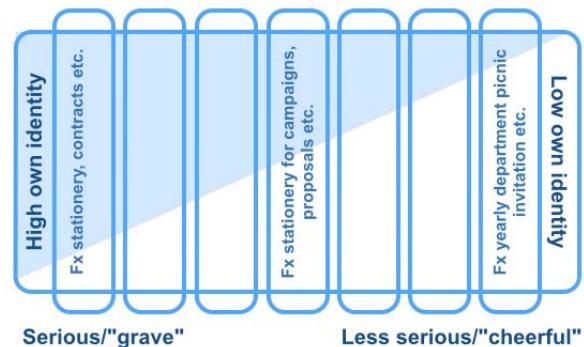


Fig. 4. Principle of weighting model from high to less seriousness

This can e.g. be obtained via use of logo-fragments, screened areas and other graphical components such as symbols and imagery. There are other ways to creatively change the expression such as print-technology, paper-quality etc.

The use of a visual brand identity program along these lines starts with defining the component's *volume of own identity* vs. *impact of foreign identities* - preferably to its extremes, thus, defining how much volume of own identity can be reduced without the component losing its ability to express the overall visual brand identity. Examples could be a web-site or a catalogue where the front-pages typically have high own identity which is then attenuated on the following pages to give space for the individual messages on each page - or a shopping-mall where the entrance has high own identity while the interior leaves room for the individual shop-identities.

Ways to increase own identity are e.g. a unique image manipulation, characteristic margin-ratios etc. such as a formal letter from the CEO (high own identity) compared to a product sales-sheet with impact of the product's foreign identity.

If a visual brand identity program has been developed with conscious seriousness in its basic component design then a consistent use of these components will lead to high own

identity. Next step in the design of a new component will then be to decide its level of seriousness which will trigger a collection of examples from that level - thus, changing the concept of the visual brand identity program from being a rigid set of rules to becoming a still increasing dynamic flow of inspirational inputs serving as a complete overview of the graphical components' behavior within each level of seriousness.

## 2) The dynamic logo

The so-called dynamic logos have become popular recently and present an example of fluidity and flexibility. Also known as *generative art* the dynamic logos are auto-created paraphrases via algorithms and they maintain sufficient elements of the original logo (e.g. basic shape, typeface, color and overall composition) to ensure the visual brand identity is intact. Their popularity stems from an idea of employees becoming more involved in the brand as on-going creators taking part in the logo-evolution.

MIT Media Lab and The Norwegian University of Life Sciences have been highlighted as good examples. [16]

An important aspect is that the goal of the design - a possibility for dynamic changes without altering the basic design - seems to have an effect on the overall graphical quality of the logo. Furthermore, the viewer will eventually see the logo in its basic 2D-form, and if this has not been properly designed, the viewer will very often sense it.

So why do designers design that way then? A tempting answer would be "because they can..." with a pandering to the "holy grail" of new media when instead a more prudent way might well be firstly to focus on the highest possible quality of the basic logo design in its 2D-incarnation after which you arguably have the best possible foundation for exploring directions for its future dynamic incarnations.

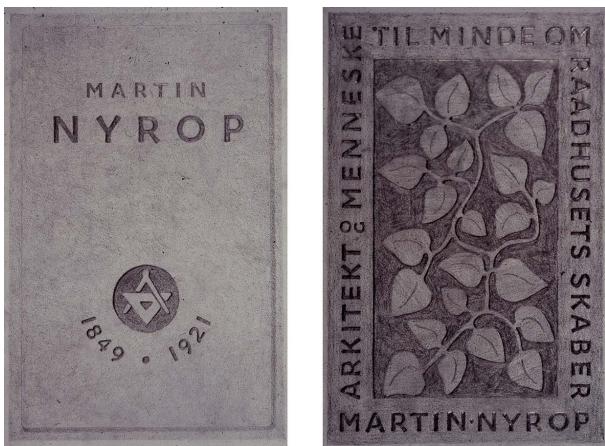


Fig. 5. Left grave stone, right plaque for renowned Danish architect, Martin Nyrop (1849 - 1921) as an example of the fact that the application of different levels of graveness vs. cheerfulness in otherwise rather similar designs is not merely a new, trendy need arisen from new media. Design: Klint & Vejse, 1998

## IV. VBIMS

Most new instruments not already defined in the visual brand identity documentation/program are produced decentralized (by non-designers) as this is where the demands arise and often on very short deadlines and with very little supervision. This inevitably leads to slight changes in the visual and graphical expression, so each new incarnation moves away from the original intention of the visual brand identity. Such deviations should ideally be registered and centrally evaluated and perhaps implemented. In this way the documentation/program would remain relevant and dynamic.

Unfortunately, such an evaluation/implementation rarely takes place – mostly because of lack of design management – within the company and even with external design agencies.

VBIMS has been developed to give a centralized yet readily available platform for all visual brand identity related components, instruments and documentation.

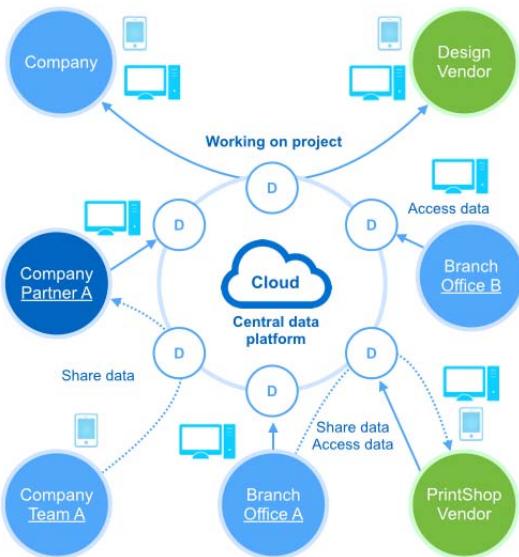


Fig. 6. Principle of VBIMS

### I) How it works

VBIMS is a web/mobile-based design management/distribution system developed to store and share graphic files. All files are stored on cloud servers and accessible (using as few clicks as possible) via a graphical web/mobile-interface with substantial use of meaningful thumbnails that depict the content of the actual file.

At top level (sub-brands and/or categories) thumbnails (and menu) indicate the collective content of the sub-brand/category.

At file-level thumbnails give a representation of the actual file-content.

Aside from the hierarchical file-structure with files stored in a predefined order, tags and search-functionality enables the user to access files across the file-structure.

Users are assigned different rights to ensure that only selected personnel can make lasting changes to the content.

While downloading files to one's own computer is a basic facility, users furthermore have a variety of sharing/distribution options via email and social media as well as access to updated visual brand identity documentation. [17]

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper presents the authors' both professionally empirical and academic research ongoing work revelations regarding a visual brand identity's design and use process and its inherent deterioration within an era that has presented the most challenging and paradigm-changing reality since Gutenberg's invention of the print-press within the fields of graphic design and communication.

The work and research constantly present new challenges, and continue to - the conclusion of the authors is that much more focus on due-diligence/best-practices in and structured, accumulated knowledge of the initial design-phase is paramount to the longevity of a visual brand identity (on design-level) as well as user-friendly and dynamic systems (on user-level) to ensure that the inherent danger of a visual brand identity's deterioration is postponed - or better yet, avoided. Our proposed solution is a VBIMS.

This topic has - to our best of knowledge - never been addressed before in a PHM-related context (or coherently in any other, for that matter) - perhaps because there seems to be a common myth that scientists and artists "don't mix".

Obviously, the authors of this paper disagree with such a position.

PHM is just as relevant within the combined technical/artistic field as it is within strictly engineering fields and presents a more disciplined way to efficiently improve the artistic design-field without neglecting the artistic, not(yet)-so-easily quantifiable parameters and, let's be honest, designer-whims.

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