

## **Basic Design Elements for Belly Dance Promotional Materials and Websites**

Like most small businesses, professional belly dancers are responsible for creating their own marketing and promotional materials. They don't often have the luxury of hiring a graphic designer or marketing consultant. So in addition to being their own salesperson, accountant, promoter and most importantly, dancer, they often have to be their own graphic designer.

Graphic design is an art, but there are small things you can learn that make a huge difference in your promotional materials. Just adapting these few techniques can improve your business and brand. This article is going to highlight basic ideas that will take you a long way. First, I'll start by describing basic design elements that apply to printed materials, but will also apply to Websites and other new media. Then, I'll discuss specific techniques for Web-based materials.

Before we begin, I would like to stress to you that you are your own brand. A brand is what distinguishes you from all other products on the market (i.e. other belly dancers). A brand should build trust, it should speak to the audience you are trying to reach, and it should be unique. A lot of the ideas in this article will help you build your brand. Once you build your brand, I encourage you to stick with it. There is nothing wrong with using the same elements for every item you produce. It may look and feel redundant to you, but you are presenting a sharp, focused product to your audience.

### **Part one: Text on the page**

Text, known as copy, is one area in which a lot of dancers struggle. I am not going to talk about copywriting, but rather how to arrange text on the page.

- 1) Left-align your text, or sometimes left justify. English-speakers read left to right. I have seen way too many people try to center every block of text on their flyers or Websites. This is very hard to read. Readers are habitual in the way they approach text and their eyes follow an "F" pattern on the page or screen. Align your text so that the reader has to do the littlest amount of "work" in order to understand your message. The exception to this rule would be headers. Headers can be centered (but you might surprise yourself by how nice they look when aligned to the left!).

- 2) Keep it simple with your fonts, but don't be boring. Fonts should be easy to read and they should also be considered a graphic design element. I'd like to steer you away from using boring or over-used fonts like Arial, Times, or Courier. They were created during the days of the printing press and they have little use in today's world except for academic papers. Similar fonts like Georgia, Century Gothic, Calibri, and Verdana are also very simple, plain fonts but they are not quite as dated or boring.

Along those same lines, do not use overly dramatic or script fonts, unless it is for a logo or header. The basic rule of thumb is that if you have to increase the font size to anything larger than 12pt to be able to read it, then you shouldn't use the font. Fonts should be crisp, clean and legible at any size.

- 3) Do not use too many fonts. Fonts can be a great way to add pizzazz and style to your materials, and as I said before, you should consider your text to be a graphic element. However, using more than two or three fonts for any given page is too much. And I don't just mean number of fonts, I also mean font effects, like bold, italic, caps or underline. You should consider every change of font or effect to be a new design element. Go through some of your materials and count how many fonts you used and how many times your fonts changed face (bold, etc). If there are more than five, then you've got some serious cleaning up to do.

In theory, you should only need a handful of different text effects: your header, your block of text and your logo. Really, that's it. Only use bold, italics, drop shadow or underline for the most important information, if you need to use it at all. Remember you are going for clear and readable. You want your materials to stand out because they are beautiful and easy to read. You don't want them to stand out because they'll get an award for most fonts used on a letter-sized piece of paper.

- 4) Avoid overcrowding. In graphic design, white space is almost as important as the content on the page. Your goal should be to achieve balance between what is written and what is not. I see a lot of dancers use too many words on their materials. There is a time and a place for verbosity, but try to convey your most important messages and leave out the rest. If you find you are constantly rearranging or adjusting font sizes and margins to get everything to fit on one page, then most likely you have too much copy!

Remember that flyers and postcards don't need to have complete sentences. Brochures and Websites usually do. You can also cut out extra words like "so", "also", "and", "however" and "therefore".

Because I do freelance work, I don't often have the opportunity to cut the text to my liking, but I usually follow a simple guide for making things fit. First, I adjust the margins to be at a half inch. Then, I cut unneeded words. After that, make the pictures smaller. And if I have done all that and the text still doesn't fit, well that's when I start to change font sizes. Consider it your last resort.

### **Part two: A picture is worth...how much?**

I firmly believe that you should never produce print or Web materials without adding pictures or graphics. Your picture will be the first thing that people notice. I'm not talking about being this drop-dead gorgeous dancer; rather I am stressing the fact that you are your brand. How you portray yourself in your photos and on your materials will make a huge impact on how the public sees you.

- 1) Do not use low resolution or low quality images. What do I mean when I say low resolution? Simply put, it means that pictures appear pixilated or boxy. Also, avoid blurry pictures at all costs. Don't over-sharpen images or use inappropriate effects like saturation or glowing edges. Think carefully before using a picture that has been scanned onto the computer.
- 2) Make sure you use pictures that are appropriate for any age. This can be tricky because belly dancers are seen as sensual and exotic and a lot of us really like to play up that aspect. However, consider whether or not your pictures would be appropriate to display at a school or library. Is it really safe for all ages? Pictures with cleavage, high slits and see-through clothing can be used, just be careful where you display them.
- 3) Use current images, when appropriate. If you are promoting an event or class that features YOU today, then you should use a current picture of yourself. For more general promotional materials or pieces where your background or history is being presented, you can use dated photos.

There's a fine line between presenting your best self to the world and lying about what you look like. Using old or overly edited photos can give audiences the wrong idea about who they are hiring and why. If you've changed weight, hairstyles, or aged considerably, it may be time to invest

in a new photo shoot. If you are insecure about your looks and feel as if you can only promote yourself at a size two (even though you are currently a 12) or at a certain age, then you may want to reconsider your brand and business plan.

- 4) Don't steal images of other dancers or use clip art. This is a big no-no for ethical reasons. You should also always ask the photographer for permission to use photos for print and Web materials. Don't be surprised if they ask for payment or require you to display their watermark on your image.

Especially in the digital age, it can be very tempting to pull pictures off of the internet. Please be careful when doing this and know that if you are downloading it from the internet, chances are it is copyrighted. If you would really like to use a picture you found on the internet, you must try to track down the owner of the image, ask permission, and be prepared to give money and credit if they agree.

However, it is easier than ever to buy stock photography or clip art. You can download images for free if you have Microsoft Office installed on your computer and you can subscribe to pay-per-use sites like istockphoto.com and fotolia.com.

- 5) Pick a color scheme and stick with it. Don't use every color of the rainbow for your materials. Rather stick to a color palette of only two or three colors. I usually draw inspiration for my color scheme from the color of the costume that I am wearing in the picture that I choose to use. I find that to be the most reliable and dramatic technique. And to take that further, I have created a color scheme that I use for all of my materials. It makes my materials look consistent and well thought out.

### **Part three: Specific techniques for Web use**

All of the above hints will apply to Websites, but you also will need to know a few other tricks to make your Website or social networking pages look slick and current.

- 1) Use system fonts for Web materials. System fonts, also known as browser-safe fonts, are fonts that come preinstalled on most computers and they display well on Websites. Using a non-standard font will cause your font to convert to a standard font if someone is viewing it from a computer that doesn't have your chosen font installed. If there are non-standard fonts that

you would like to use, the best option is to make an image of that text and place that in the Website as an image. You should also try previewing your Website on different internet browsers.

- 2) Resize all pictures for Web use. It is important to resize pictures for your personal Websites. Some Web applications like MySpace, Blogger, WordPress and other editors resize images for you. If you are creating a new Website, you'll need to resize your images so that your page loads quickly and your Website doesn't use too much bandwidth. This is the one instance in which it is appropriate to use low resolution images.

If you are on a Windows computer you can easily resize images for the Web using Microsoft Office Picture Manager. The program has built-in resizing tools that you can use. I find that the "Resize for Web" option is the best to choose. You should never have to resize your image in your Web editing program. You should do that before you insert it on the page.

- 3) Avoid bright colors and non traditional backgrounds. I ran into a site recently that had fireworks going off as the background image for the page. It was appalling. While we're probably not dealing with something like that right now, there are some tips that will make people want to stay on your site.

The first tip is to use a solid background color. This assures that your text takes precedence. You'll also want to use Web-safe colors, also know as HEX colors. A simple Web search for HEX colors can greatly expand your palette. Then you'll want to make sure that there is enough contrast between the text and the background. However keep in mind that what works on paper, may not work on a screen.

Avoid using a solid black with white text or vice versa. If you stare at the screen for 10 seconds and then close your eyes, can you still see the page? If the answer is yes, then your contrast is off. For Websites it is nice to use gray text instead of white or black, however this may change based on your background color. For example, my Website features a purple background, so white text works fine.

- 4) Make use of columns and tables. Columns and tables give your Website structure. If you find text too hard to read because it spans across the entire width of the page, then a column can keep it contained. You can even

format it so it won't show the table or column outlines. Using tables and columns can also make your Website organized and easy to read.

- 5) Use best practices for Website links. Those include only underlining text if it is a link and using the same color for every link on your Website. There are usually two kinds of links: active links and visited links. They are different colors and the colors remain consistent throughout the site.
- 6) Use the same colors scheme and formatting on all pages within your Website. Creating a template or using the "save as" function are easy ways to accomplish this.
- 7) Place important information above the fold. "Above the fold" is an old newspaper term used to describe how papers are displayed to customers folded up; meaning that only the top half of the front page is visible. Therefore, information that is above the fold is used to draw readers in. The same is true for Websites. Consider the information that is displayed when someone enters your site to be above the fold. Avoid having your readers scroll too much on your page to find the most important information.

The easy steps outlined in this article are just the beginning, but they are a good way to get started. Don't get too frustrated with the technical language or your perceived lack of artistic skills. It just takes patience and a good understanding of layout and best practices.

Need more information? A basic Web search can uncover loads of articles. Just use some of the key words in this article to start your search. Or for more in-depth help contact me at [andalee@andaleedance.com](mailto:andalee@andaleedance.com) for a consultation or visit <http://andaleedance.com/designservices.html>.