

Shades of Success (Color Theory)

Color. It is to our eyes what music is to our ears. Those of us blessed with vision can barely imagine a world without color. Colors evoke feelings, and stand to represent ideas, and so, in web design, as in all things designed, knowledgeable and appropriate use of color is critical.

There are many issues of color involved in web design. Besides the psychological aspects of color, one must be sure that the site is easily readable, and that the palette used in background, graphics, links and content work together. And so, we will look at some of the known psychological qualities of color and how colors relate to each other, both online and off with plenty of tips on palette development and web color usage.

Blue is by far the most popular color - conveying peace and tranquility, harmony, trust and confidence. Luckily for web designers striving to use the 216 color palette, there is an overabundance of blues to choose from! Lighter shades of blue, both solid and textured, make excellent backgrounds for web sites which are lighthearted and positive. On the other hand, blue is the worst possible choice when developing sites for food or cooking because there very few blue foods on earth and it is known to be an appetite suppressant!

Blues work well with other pastel and "cool" shades (like greens), and are an excellent compliment to earth tones and neutral colors like gray and beige. But be careful when using orange with blue, because these two colors vibrate against each other and cause a jarring effect.

Beige is a neutral color which suggests practicality and conservatism, and alone, it can be tiresome and plain. But as a background color with graphics which are earthy, like browns and greens, or blue and pink palettes. Beige is a good color to use in the background, as it will allow for maximum readability of content.

Black is generally considered a mournful, heavy and depressing color, but in the right context, can be sophisticated and mysterious. Studies have shown that online reading can be difficult on a black background, but many sites have been done successfully using colors which contrast heavily (white, neon green). Usage of black as a predominant color should always be carefully considered - if you are designing a children's bookstore, black is the worst possible choice, but if the site is a gallery of photography, black might be an excellent choice... after all, black is the preferred backdrop for an artist's work. In addition, a site which is highly technical, or has an underground feel, would work well in black.

Brown is another conservative color, which depicts stability, simplicity, and comfort. It can also be considered a drab color as well, and unless it is used correctly, can be very boring. Successful applications might include sepia toned photographs, as well as designs which use a palette of different shade of brown accented by accent colors like green and blue, or red and orange. In a site which depicts the ideas of hearth and home, or outdoor activities, brown can be a wise choice for graphics.

Green is a color to be used with care, because it generates a strong feeling of either positively or negativity in most people. For some, it is a kind, generous color, which represents loyalty and intelligence. It is often a logical choice for financial sites, and represents fertility, healing and ecology in many cultures. But keep in mind that for many people, it conjures up imagery of envy, reptiles and insects, and bodily functions! You may wish to use green as an accent color only because as a predominant color it has been known to drive people away in product design studies. Whatever you do, if you use green DO NOT

closely combine red with green, as these two colors vibrate against each other and make readability nearly impossible, as well as being difficult for the color blind to read.

Gray is the most conservative of neutral shades, and represents practicality, sadness, security and reliability. It is often hard to believe that gray backgrounds were all that web developers had to work with once! Unless you WANT to convey lackluster or conservatism in your site, you would do better to choose another neutral tone like beige or white as a background. Of course, if gray is used properly in a palette of cool tones like blues and purples, it can be quite successful, however staid.

Lavender is another color which most people have a strong feeling towards. It is a pastel, properly used to generate feelings of romance, nostalgia and daintiness, and it is also a favorite color for the creative, different and unusual. If your intent is to stand out and be noticed, lavender might be just the choice, depending on what your site is for. It works nicely with other pastels, for a feminine feel, as well as other cool tones like blue, green and even as a highlight for neutral gray.

No matter how evolved we would like to be, pink, like lavender, is considered a frilly, tender, feminine color. It can be used with care on sites for which that feeling is appropriate.

The grandfather of lavender, purple is the color of mystery, royalty and spirituality. For the unconventional and creative, it is not only a good choice, but often the only choice! When used in a background, as with black, be sure to use a highly contrasting color for content so that your words are readable.

Orange is a warm color - enthused, vibrant and expansive. If you want to be flamboyant and get attention, use orange! As a predominant color, however, it can really grate on your visitors nerves, so better to use it sparingly, to highlight certain aspects of your site. Orange would be a poor choice of background colors (unless you sell fruit juice), and remember... beware combining blues with your orange.

Red is the hottest of all colors, and as such, represents all things intense and passionate. Heat and fire, speed and zest, blood and excitement, competition and aggression, are all feelings and imagery evoked by the color red. It can be an irritating, restless color though, and should only be used when you wish to ignite your visitors. Red makes an excellent accent color, particularly when used with neutral colors, but clashes with green, blue and purple. Temper red with other warm tones like oranges, browns, and yellows, and you could easily make your site stand up and shout at the world.

Sunshine is yellow (in our minds at least!) and so with yellow comes optimism, happiness, idealism, and imagination. It can be an unsettling color though - which shouldn't be used unless you wish to convey bright, cheery feelings in your visitors. If you should decide to use yellow a lot in your site, it works well as a background color for easy readability with contrasting colors.

Psychologically, and on its own, white is the color of cleanliness and purity, youth, simplicity and innocence. White has become a very popular background color in web sites, because it offers the best readability onscreen, and as a "non-color," just about any palette works well against it.

by Eileen Parzek