

Guide to designing publicity for Triratna activities

8/10/11

A day for **designers in Triratna**. How to make
your design look and work better.

With Dhammarati+Jnanarakshita
Madhyamaloka, 30 Chantry Rd, Birmingham
Saturday, 8 October, 10.00am - 5.00pm

Are you working in print or web design in the movement?

Bring along a sample of your work for discussion. Learn from other
designers in the movement how your work could improve.

For info & booking, contact jnanarakshita@triratnadevelopment.org

Design this better

This is a rare opportunity to gain from Dhammarati's considerable experience in visual communication: a day exploring how to make your design look and work better. Bring along a sample of your work for discussion. Learn from other designers in the movement how your work could improve.

No booking fee, donations welcome on the day.

For further information and to book, please email

jnanarakshita@triratnadevelopment.org

Introduction

The Buddha's teaching can be communicated in many ways, including words, concepts, images, mantras and silence (see 'The Word of the Buddha' in the Dharma section of *A Guide to the Buddhist Path* by Sangharakshita p.65, 2nd edition, Windhorse Publications, 1996).

The following text looks at how we use images to let people know of activities, classes, courses and so on in the Triratna Buddhist Community.

This document looks at clarifying **vision** and identifying target **audience**, then gets into practical **design** details and how to ensure your vision is informing your publicity materials. (This is an approach that the Sheffield Buddhist Centre team have taken – to very good effect!)

Visual communication is a vast subject, and it won't be possible here to do more than just give a few pointers, stimulate some ideas and offer a few possible places to follow up or find help. There's also links to some sample images and posters for you to use.

This guide was inspired by a talk given by Vajragupta in May 2010. It's still available at www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=LOC350

Things will hopefully have started to change by the time you read this, but there has been a tendency in recent years for Triratna centres' websites to use words and images which present Buddhism as *calm, gentle* and *peaceful*, and concerned with our *inner personal life*.

At the time of Vajragupta's talk in 2010 there was little mention on Triratna websites or in centre programmes of attempting to *transform society, making the world a better place*, or the whole *other-regarding dimension* of practice. Words like *courageous, selfless, resilient, fearless, confident* were not commonly in use in our publicity materials!

The most common images on Triratna websites have been peaceful meditating Buddhas, flowers, candles, soft nature images, as well as pictures of centre buildings and people in groups (talking, meditating, etc). So centres have been presented as calm oases. This is all very positive of course, and is appealing to some people.

It varies from centre to centre, but it seems that lately on the whole the movement is attracting more women than men. There is also an issue about involving young people: there is currently hardly anyone in their twenties training for ordination.

Could we do more to present ourselves in a way that attracts people (including younger people) who are looking for something *challenging* or *radical* to engage with? Could we do more to present the *heroic, dynamic* aspects of the Dharma?

Is the way we use publicity a factor in who is coming along to Triratna activities? Are we managing to communicate the Dharma visually, and showing how fresh, relevant and unique it is? Are we managing to avoid having ourselves placed in a category (e.g. relaxation / complementary health centre) which is convenient for the world around us, but which doesn't do full justice to all that the Triratna Buddhist Community can offer?

Vision: take a fresh look at your visual communication

Is there a balance between faith and wisdom, energy and meditation in your publicity?

Exercise: Leave your centre, go outside, walk up the road and then come back. As you approach the building, try to see it as if for the first time and see what your impressions are. What do you notice? What do the things you encounter say about the place and what happens there?

Have a look at what is on display: posters, leaflets, notice boards, etc. What is written on the dana bowl, on the bookings forms? What strikes you most obviously?

One Triratna centre chair did this recently and noticed that what was most obviously on display was yoga, T'ai Chi, alternative therapies, NVC activities, MBSR course and so on. Somewhere in amongst it all were notices for Dharma activities, but first glance wouldn't have given the impression that the Dharma was what was most important or central there.

When the chair realised this, she had a complete overhaul of the centre's notice boards so that now Dharma activities are what are most dominant and immediately obvious. The meta-communication is: *"this centre is about the Buddha's Dharma, the other things that happen here are peripheral or supportive"*, not the other way around.

Alternatively, ask some people who are fairly new to your centre: what are their first impressions of your publicity and website? Are there any differences when you ask younger people?

Audience: who would you like to see becoming more involved?

Presumably we want to attract people of all types and ages. Are there any types of people that your situation is not appealing to? Which kinds of people are you currently attracting, and which are you not?

Do you just want people who just want to learn how to relax? Is your publicity such that that it is those people who will be attracted?

Think about the kinds of people you would like to see becoming really involved with the activities you offer. Then think about what is attractive to them.

Most centres find that the most common way people get to know about their activities is via word of mouth or the internet. These seem to be the most effective way for people to find out about us. Some Buddhist centres have a fairly visible 'on-street' presence and become known to people that way too. Market research done at centres seems to suggest that flyers in local cafes, libraries, community centres, alternative hang-outs, etc don't have a great deal of success. Relatively speaking, there aren't many people who say they first came along because of a flyer. This is not to dissuade you from using this method, but it would seem to imply that there's little point spending vast amounts of time or money on it.

In fact, a slightly home-made feel could be a distinct advantage. Isn't a key aspect of what we're trying to communicate is that we are *building community together*? If publicity is too slick it may give the impression that we have pots of cash, that we are the kind of professional organisation where everything is already worked out, and that people coming along will need to 'fit in' to the existing superstructure.

The question is how to communicate from the beginning that the movement is what we make it and what we give to it, that we appreciate constructive contributions of all kinds, that the movement open to all, that the best that each person has to offer is welcome, and that there's no question of fitting in unthinkingly? At the same time, presumably there's no reason why the way we present ourselves shouldn't be clear, inviting and aesthetically pleasing.

It might be interesting to have a look at the materials produced by local activists in your area (e.g. Transition Town initiatives) and see what they're doing.

Design: choices

It seems important to consider what will be most immediately obvious when people encounter the images and designs we choose.

- *What does the image or design communicate? Is the flavour or mood evoked congruent with the spiritual qualities you hope it will inspire? Is it bold and daring, or safe and tame? Over-the-top? Out of balance?*
- *What are people likely to associate with the elements you've chosen? What will they contrast them with? Are the likely associations in keeping with what you're trying to promote?*
- *Are there any current cultural or social considerations to bear in mind?*
- *In what order will people 'read' the different elements of the design? (Remember eyes usually scan left to right, top to bottom. So a common implication is that elements at the top and to the left are the most important.)*

A few design principles:

- It can be quite effective to surround an image with space, and have any text above, below or to the side of the main image. This will be all the more appropriate when using pictures which are very 'busy' or 'crowded'.
- If you're going to be adding text within the image itself, respect the main areas of open space - ideally leave them empty, but certainly don't crowd them too much by filling them with words.
- Observe the main lines of the composition and use them to inform your choice of where to add text to an image.
- Create a sense rhythm within text boxes by giving prominence (e.g. use of bold, or larger font) to the most important items of information.
- Be aware of when you are matching or aligning left- and right-hand margins (and when you are not).
- Aim for simplicity, i.e. more and more of less and less. Get rid of any superfluous text or punctuation.
- Aim to use a maximum of two fonts in a maximum of three point sizes, or even better, just two of the same font family.

Sources of images

There are plenty of places to find images which may be suitable for attracting people to Dharma activities. There may be artists and photographers in your sangha who will be only too happy to contribute their work, or be commissioned according to your requests. Again, there will be a need to be discerning: *"art may be expression, but not all expression is art"*.

There's also a vast array of material on the worldwide web available for use. It is often possible to use images free of charge, for example those which have a 'Creative Commons' license on flickr.com or Picasa.

If you come across something you'd like to use elsewhere (e.g. by searching with Google images), you can send an email explaining what you've got in mind and requesting permission to do so. (Most sites provide a contact email address for sending enquiries to.)

There are also sites (e.g. fotolia.com) that specialise in providing images that are 'royalty free'. There's usually a small charge for purchasing the images, and you'll need to check the terms & conditions of usage (e.g. how many times and for what purpose permission for use is given).

There's a caveat to using stock images though. This is from a blog by photo agency boss John Harris:

Website consultant Jakob Nielsen has released a study which indicates that generic stock pictures are almost completely ignored by the punter when on the web – and one can imagine it is probably equally true of publishing in general – whilst they are attracted by real pictures of real people... It seems human brains are not easily drawn by simplistic affirmations of the status quo.

(from <http://johnmbharris.wordpress.com/> 9 November 2010)

This is saying that, where possible, it's preferable to use real images of real situations and real people. The more bland and generic an image is, the more people are likely to ignore it. There's also another danger to be alert to when using stock photos (or any others for that matter): make sure that they're appropriate to the location you're advertising in.

Of course one needs to be sensitive to the culture one is operating in, but this is pointing to something further than that. It seems that people often identify quite strongly with the place they live in. So, for example, if you are designing a poster for use in Britain, there may be an advantage in ensuring that any cultural references are British. Otherwise, at best the references might get missed. At worst they might inhibit someone from feeling like the image is relevant to them.

To put it simply, if you're designing a poster for the Worcester Buddhist group, and you want to depict an urban scene, then use images of Worcester streets, etc. If you're going to depict a rural scene, use images of local countryside. If you're going to show someone meditating in a Buddhist group, show them sitting at Worcester Buddhist group. You may be surprised at the extent to which people will (consciously or otherwise) think that an image isn't relevant to them if it shows references to somewhere else (say Warwick or Birmingham instead of Worcester in the above example).

Designers

Creating publicity provides an excellent opportunity to involve the energy, enthusiasm and skills of younger sangha members (as well as the maturity and perspective of more experienced practitioners). Some centres form *publicity kulas* that specialise in looking at the issues around how we communicate ourselves and our activities. Bodhinaga had the bright idea of forming a kula at the Sheffield Buddhist Centre for young guys with an interest in computers. They get to hang out with each other, have fun and help the centre with its I.T. needs all at once!

Visual communication can be one of the more popular and enjoyable ways that people can volunteer their time and energy. People can find offering their design skills and creativity to be a very satisfying way to contribute to the life and work of the local centre. Many sanghas often have people with flair in this area, people who are in touch with current visual trends and well able to use graphic design software. This is probably one of many areas where there's a real need to be discerning. Those who are most keen to be involved may not necessarily be the ones who produce the kind of results you're looking for. If you are really stuck finding people who understand what you're trying to do and have suitable skills (or the time to spare), then other Triratna centres may be happy for you to borrow their publicity materials. We are also planning to provide some sample materials, with blank areas for you to fill in your details, at the web address below.

Please contact the Development Team if you need recommendations of designers. Alternatively, contact centres whose website, publicity materials, etc you like and ask who has done their design work.

Software

You don't have to use expensive graphic design software to get good results. It is possible to make very basic posters using Microsoft Word, although dedicated graphics packages will offer much more versatility. It can be handy if someone in the sangha with design abilities is already using one of the professional packages such as Lightroom3, QuarkXpress, CorelDraw, Adobe Illustrator or InDesign. But free software is also available. We're currently hearing good reports from designers using GIMP (GNU Image Manipulation Program), a free package which offers many of the same features as Photoshop.

Sample materials

Here is a link to some ideas for images and posters that we hope you will find interesting and useful: www.triratnadevelopment.org/quote/publicity