6.3 Useful Design Tools

There are a lot of free, easy-to-use online software packages for developing professional-looking fliers, posters, and presentations. Examples include Canva, Vectr, Venngage, and Piktochart. Most of these websites offer a good selection of templates for the beginner and an ever-growing collection of tools to customize these templates or develop your own formats.

Most of us are familiar with Microsoft PowerPoint for presentations, but this program can also be an effective tool for creating materials. You can change the size and aspect ratio of the slide to match the type of material you are creating (e.g., 4X3 postcard or 8X11 trifold). From there, it's a simple matter of inserting text boxes, charts, and pictures to bring your postcard, flier, or poster to life.

Microsoft Publisher is a bit more sophisticated than PowerPoint but still has the relatively familiar user interface of all Microsoft offerings. If it's your first time using it, you may want to play around a bit or check out some YouTube tutorials, but you'll soon get the hang of it. You can do a lot with Publisher when you get used to it, and it plays nice with other Microsoft applications. This makes it easy to import and manipulate data from Excel or polish up materials originally created in Word.

Adobe's Creative Suite of products is versatile and powerful and is the go-to software for many designers. The cost of these products could have been prohibitive for small shops in the past, but the new line is fully accessible online through a subscription model called Creative Cloud. These tools can do a lot, but they also take a solid time investment to learn. Luckily, Creative Cloud has great tutorials and many community colleges have reasonably priced introductory classes for the software.

Building a website has gotten a lot more straightforward than it used to be. There are now a wide variety of do-it-yourself options that don't require you to be a wiz at coding. Options including Wix, WordPress, and Squarespace allow you to populate existing templates with your content. If you take some time to go through tutorials and instructions, you will soon be able to customize these templates to reflect your vision for your materials and/or the direction provided in your style guide.

A STYLE GUIDE FOR CONSISTENCY

Brands become recognizable and meaningful through repeated exposure. But exposure works only if there is sufficient consistency across all materials, events, and activities, so people link them to each other and to your program or organization.

A style guide can be a useful tool to help you and your partners communicate consistently, thereby raising awareness and recognition of your work over time. A style guide is a set of standards for the writing and design of your organization's publications. Depending on your program and materials, a style guide could include:

- Key language (dos and don'ts) for describing your program and the coalition.

- Visual rules for maintaining your organization's image and imparting a consistent tone and style to your materials. These include rules about the colors that communicate your organization's identity and how to use your logo. You might start with the dominant colors from your logo and, if needed, add a few accents (keeping to five or fewer).

- A selection of fonts and typography, and other graphical elements that are repeated across materials to drive home familiarity and improve recognizability.

Large companies can have style guides that are the size of small novels, but for smaller organizations, that isn't necessary. A simple page or two that outlines the visual guidelines and tone for your organization's brand can be a helpful reference for keeping materials consistent.