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InSide this Issue

by Nigel French

Getting
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Business

How to make the right impression
with a business card design

You only get one chance to make a first impression. A cliché, but true—and while this applies to many things in life, it's particularly true of business cards. Making a strong initial impact with your business card can make the difference between getting the job and your card being on a fast track to a bottom drawer—or the recycling bin.

It's good to stand out from the crowd with a business card that is funny, unexpected, or clever, or all three, but first and foremost a business card should be functional. It's all common sense really, but don't lose sight of the fact that a successful card should give a positive first impression; provide clear and accurate information; and be kept by those you give it to.
Anything else is gravy.

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Figure 1: While these cards contain a lot of information, it is clearly organized using font size, paragraph spacing, font weight, or rules.

What to Include

Designing a business card is not as simple as it may look. They're probably the smallest pieces you'll design, but there's so much information to fit in that making it all legible while establishing an information hierarchy is challenging (Figure 1).

In addition to the company name and logo and the name of the person, there's the phone number, the email address, the physical address, the Web site, the mobile phone, the fax number, the IM address, the Skype address... the list goes on. And there's the company tagline, that pithy one-liner that describes the essence of the company: "Think Different," "Just Do It," that sort of thing.

Sometimes less is more, and that can be the case with contact information. People need a simple way to contact you—having more numbers doesn't necessarily make you more important or easier to contact. It can also make it difficult for someone to figure out which contact method to use. If you feel compelled to list every possible coordinate (along with your blood group, mother's maiden name, and name of your childhood pet), indicate the preferred contact method by some sort of emphasis—spacing, a bigger, bolder font, or a different color.

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Figure 2: If your design requires it, a vertical card can be effective.

A Confession

I find business cards a bit irritating, and—in my never-ending, entirely unattainable quest for minimalist nirvana—toss them at the first opportunity. If it's a standout piece of design I may file it away in my samples file; likewise if it's particularly amateurish I may remember it (for all the wrong reasons)—especially if it's for a creative trade where design expectations are higher.

But unless it's a jaw-dropping, award-winning, laugh-out-loud funny card, then it's bound for the waste paper basket. That is, after I've transcribed all the information into my digital address book—that great design leveler, where no matter how cool the business card, all contacts are equal. Digital information is so much easier to manage and I always know exactly where it is.

I suspect I'm not alone in this rather severe approach: slip it in the wallet, carry it around until said wallet becomes uncomfortably swollen (either with business cards or, less likely, bank notes), then sit down with the laptop and type in the information. That's when I really appreciate having the information clearly and unambiguously presented. A more high-tech approach is to use a business card reader or business card scanning software with Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology to scan the information—placing an even higher demand on legibility.

Orientation

Most business cards are horizontal for a good reason: that's the shape of our wallets. While vertically oriented cards may be preferable for some designs, anyone pulling such a card from their wallet will have to turn the card—or their head—to read it. A big deal? Not really, the sun still rises, but a vertical card filed among a stack of horizontals may cause a moment's hesitation, a trip of the eye in reading and digesting its information. Maybe this is what makes it stand out from the crowd. What you lose on the swings, you gain on the roundabouts (Figure 2).

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Figure 3: These cards effectively use both sides to expand the range of design possibilities.

One or Two Sided?

Sheets of paper have two sides, so why shouldn't our business cards? With the ever-growing quantity of information we need to include, assigning some of it to the reverse side can help de-clutter a card (Figures 3 and 4). While printing on both sides costs more, unless you're planning a large print run, the difference is unlikely to be significant.

But what to put on the reverse? A tag line, a description of services, or perhaps your company philosophy. Whatever you choose, don't put the critical information on the reverse, because it may go unnoticed.

Another argument against printing on the reverse is that it leaves no room for the recipient to write notes—such as where and when they met you.

Figure 4: Two sides not enough for you? How about printing with a flap and turning your business card into a mini-brochure?

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Figure 5: Who says a business card has to be a rectangle?

Unusual Shapes and Sizes

Being a non-conformist is a gamble. Get it right and your work will be reproduced in annuals of the year's best business cards, featured in Web galleries and blogs discussing what makes a successful business card, and passed around for the adulation of your colleagues and potential clients (Figure 5). Get it wrong and you look like a dork.

The problem with oversized cards is they don't fit: literally. People trying to squeeze them into the credit-card sized slots in their wallets or Rolodexes will either end up having to fold them—a big fat, random crease is rarely an attractive design element—or will toss them at the earliest opportunity. But then again, who really uses a Rolodex these days? A card that folds—a sort of mini brochure—offers the best of both worlds, more space for information as well as a larger unfolded size. At the other end of the size spectrum, mini cards (28 x 70 mm) such as those from Moo are becoming increasingly popular.

Standard Sizes

There is such a thing as a standard business card, but what "standard" means depends on where you live.

Region	Dimensions (mm)	Dimensions (inches)	Aspect ratio
US, Canada, The Netherlands	89x51	3.5x2	1.75
Australia, New Zealand	90x55	3.54x2.165	1.636
Japan	91x55	3.582x2.165	1.655
Europe	85x55	3.346x2.165	1.545
Czech Republic, Hungary	90x50	3.543x1.968	1.8
China	90x54	3.543x2.125	1.667
Credit card sized	85.60x53.98	3.370x2.125	1.586

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Humor

Business cards don't have to be serious and depending on the nature of the company, humor can be an effective way to communicate and help you stand out from the crowd (Figure 6). If your clients are international, remember that humor doesn't always travel well—your biting wit, irony, or sarcasm may miss the mark completely and convey the opposite of what you had intended. Worse, your joke may be offensive. But being humorous doesn't necessarily mean telling a risque innuendo or side-splitting joke; it might mean a clever and playful twist on your line of work.

The Numbers Game

There are several things to consider with numbers you include—and the order in which you list them. In the UK, mobile phones have a five-number prefix, making them easily distinguishable from landline numbers. Some small businesses have ditched the landline altogether. But what message does listing only a mobile number send? A fly-by-night operation and thus untrustworthy? Or a dynamic person—always on the move, yet always reachable?

Beyond that there's the decision on how to divide the number chunks: with hyphens? Spaces? Periods? There's no right or wrong way, but whichever you choose, be consistent. And what about the style of the numbers themselves? Proportional Old Style? Lining? With OpenType Pro fonts it's effortless to use proportionally sized numbers that have ascenders and descenders and so fit with the surrounding upper and lower case text more harmoniously.
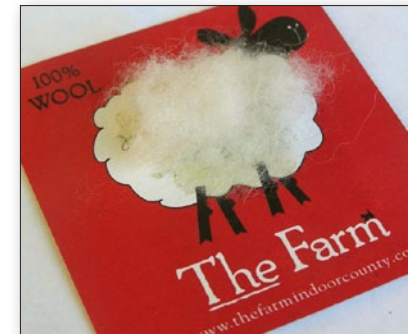

Figure 6: Funny or playful, your card doesn't need to be serious business.

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Photos
Call me old fashioned, but I find business cards with mug shots cheesy. Unless it's the convention for that particular trade to include a headshot, or unless you plan on using the photograph in particularly stylized, humorous, or clever way (in itself a gamble), then spare us the car-salesman grin.

Working from Templates
InDesign comes with several standard business card templates and you certainly won't go wrong using these as a starting point. But really, what's so hard about setting up a business card document? Call me a fuddy-duddy purist if you like (I'd be flattered, really), but I always feel that no matter what the document, setting it up yourself gives you a connection to and sense of ownership of that document.

One Card, Many Names
Using InDesign's Data Merge feature can take the tedium out of designing a card for which there are multiple names—and the greater the number, the bigger the benefit of this approach. You design the card as usual and then combine it with a data file prepared in Microsoft Excel that lists the names and other information that changes. In the template card, you place fields for the real information then merge the file with the Data Source, and presto! Your result is a document with as many cards as there are records in the data source.

For step-by-step Data Merge instructions, see "Automate This!" in the April/May 2006 issue (#11), also posted on CreativePro.com at www.creativepro.com/article/indesign-how-to-automate-this-.

Focus Group
Before you run the presses be sure to test mock-ups of your card on people whose opinions you trust. Watch their first response when you hand them the card. Are they squinting to read the information? Are they turning the card around, confused about which way is up? Is it clear to them how to contact the person? Did they turn it over to read the reverse side? Present them with several card options and ask what they like and dislike about each. Be prepared to act upon their suggestions—but also be prepared to (politely) ignore them—design by committee can leave you with a bland result.

Getting it Printed
When choosing a printer, assume nothing. If you're working with an online printing company they will likely have directions on how to prepare the final piece for their specific printing press, but never underestimate the power of an older piece of technology: the telephone. Successful print jobs depend on good communication between designer and printer and there's nothing like a quick chat to clear up any areas of confusion. Printer reps should be able to answer your technical questions and advise you through the process—and if they're not, then find one who is. There are plenty of them out there and successful commercial printers are built on good customer service.

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**Figure 7:** Paper cards are so last century.

Paper Choice

Consider the weight of the paper, its finish and its texture, and what's appropriate for the type of business concerned. Textured, uncoated stocks lend themselves to "green" or nature-themed companies and non-profits that want to avoid looking too slick. Coated stocks are typically better for photographic reproduction. Terms for describing paper are confusing and, unless you're experienced in handling paper, can be abstract—so ask your printer for samples.

If you need a small number of cards right now and want to print them on your desktop printer, avoid the sheets perforated in business card sizes. Nothing says Cheese quite so much as a rough perforated edge to your card. Instead, gang up the cards on an A4 or A3 (Letter or Tabloid) size page and cut them with an X-Acto blade and metal ruler.

But before you even start thinking about paper, ask yourself—does it have to be printed on paper? What about steel, wood, transparent plastic, cotton, stretchy plastic (Figure 7)? There's even an online spoof offering business cards on beef jerky!
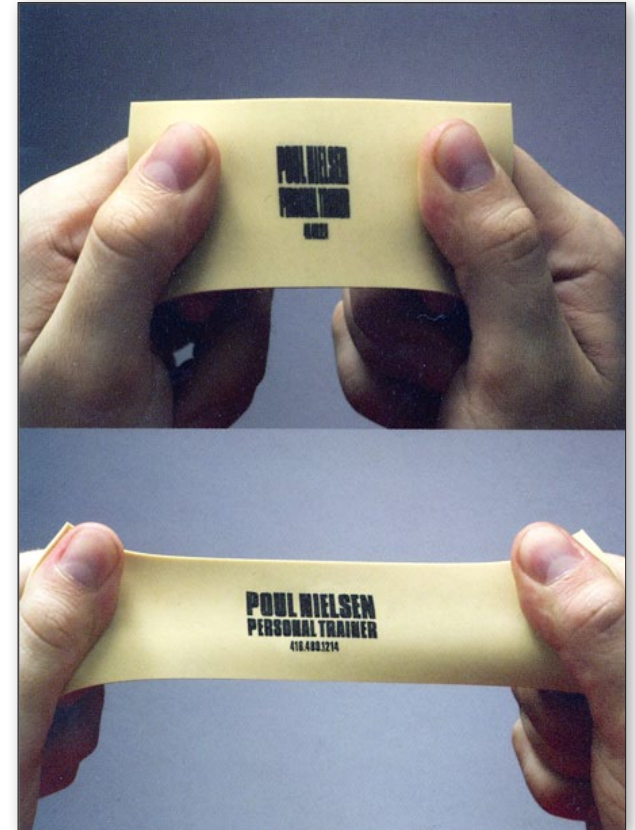
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Extras

Online digital printers offer a limited range of extras to keep costs low, but if you opt for offset printing there are many customization options: spot varnish, rounded edges, embossing, raised printing, foil stamping, die-cutting. In the right context these might be the perfect embellishment: for example, rounded corners (not necessarily all four) can give a friendlier vibe and complement a card with round design elements. In the wrong context, they could make your card into the equivalent of an over-coiffed poodle. Ultimately it comes down to the strength of the basic design and concept—if that's sound then a subtle spot varnish or elegant foil stamp might be the icing on an already delicious cake (Figure 8). On the other hand, if the design is weak… well, homilies about silk purses and sow's ears come to mind.

There's more than meets the eye when designing a successful business card that really works. Considering all of the above won't guarantee a successful result, but it will guard against a bad one—and as with any set of rules, they can all be broken, if broken well. The hard part is finding the happy medium between convention and irreverence, designing something that ticks all the functionality boxes while at the same time makes people think about business cards in a whole new way. Innovations in affordable printing and the over abundance of "standard" business cards, have allowed and demanded greater creativity in business card design. Today your business card is a blank canvas—or clothes peg, or bar of chocolate, or whatever else you choose.

Figure 8: Some examples of tastefully deployed printing extras.

Nigel French has more than 15 years' experience as a graphic designer and graphic design educator. He is the former director of the graphic design program at University of California, Berkeley Extension, and has taught various aspects of graphic design in colleges. An Adobe Certified trainer and Certified Instructor, he is author of *InDesign Type: Professional Typography with Adobe InDesign,* and *Photoshop Unmasked: The Art and Science of Selections, Layers, and Paths,* as well as an author for the lynda.com online training library. He lives in England—but left his heart in San Francisco.

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