

Choose a Clip Art Style

BY CHUCK GREEN



Has it ever happened to you? Your project deadline is fast approaching and you find a gap that needs filling—you need the kind of clip art image that slows your reader down long enough to get them interested. The visual puzzle piece that explains your point in a way that words cannot. You search the Web and your arsenal of disks, catalogs, and CDs to no avail; minutes ago you were sailing along, now you're dead in the water.

This is precisely why we need “flying pigs” (above)—they are the hundreds, even thousands of images you have to wade through to find the one that matches your need. I'm sure the folks at New Vision—the company that supplied this fine pig—will forgive me for using their illustration as the example. In truth, I love it, but my point is that, until today, I couldn't have guessed when or how I'd use it. Here are a few points that might help you choose and use clip art:

You certainly wouldn't choose one book over another because it had more pages. More of a good thing for your money, of course, makes sense. But with illustration—just as with books—quantity is no gauge of value.

If you doubt the value of high-quality illustrations, price a custom one. Even a simple black and white image by a proficient artist will typically cost at least \$100. Color work by recognized illustrators begins in the thousands. In retrospect, good clip art is a bargain.

As any designer will tell you, the main criteria for choosing an image are a sound concept and a stylish execution. What it costs and what form it is in are only important if an illustration says what you want to say, the way you want to say it.

Choosing a concept

A good illustration is much more than mere ornamentation. At a minimum, it should grab attention and draw your reader into the message. At its best, it will express something words can't.

The clip art images that are the easiest to execute, and therefore the most common, are objects, something material such as a bouquet of flowers. By putting the bouquet in the context of a flyer for a florist, you visually communicate the topic.

More interesting and less common are images that illustrate ideas or tell a story—such as the act of giving the flowers. These images are more interesting because they contribute meaning to your message, and they are less common because they are more difficult to conceive and are useful in fewer situations.

Once you begin to notice the subtleties of the visual language, you'll be better equipped to choose concepts that better illustrate your message. Some examples (right).



A CLICHÉ for example, has a widely understood meaning. In this case, a skull and crossbones represents a danger to life.



AN ICON is an image that suggests its meaning. The opened padlock represents the state of being unlocked.



A METAPHOR suggests a likeness between two ideas. Here, a half full/half empty glass of water is analogous to one's attitude about life.



A SIGN is a shorthand device that stands for something else. The @ sign, for example, represents “at.”



A VISUAL PUN uses one or more symbols to create two or more meanings. Here, the sharks' fins represent the concepts of money and caution.



A SYMBOL is a visible image of something invisible. Here, an hourglass represents time.



Illustrations (left) © NVtech. nvtech.com; (above) Skull and Lock: © Image Club Graphics Inc. eyewire.com; Glass: © CMCD Inc. visual-symbols.com; @: Adobe Minion font. © Adobe Systems Inc. adobe.com; Shark: © Art Parts. ronandjoe.com; Hourglass: © Dublin-Click Software Inc. dubclick.com

Borders, rules, ornaments, and backgrounds typically are decorative elements used to break up space and enhance the overall design of the page.

As the audience for clip art grows, so too will the diversity and quality of the images and the ideas behind them.

Choosing a style

If concept is what you say, style is how you say it. There are as many illustrative styles as there are illustrators. In fact, it is not uncommon for one artist to use several different styles.

These light bulbs give you some idea of that diversity.



Illustrations (left to right): © NVtech. nvtech.com; © MVB; © Art Parts. ronandjoe.com; © Image Club Graphics Inc. eyewire.com; © Chuck Green; © Image Club Graphics Inc. eyewire.com

While one artist simplifies the image to a series of basic shapes, another captures the contours and shading to achieve a completely different look and feel.

Style must be built on a strong foundation. It is said that to be a good abstract painter, you must first master realism. Although all good illustrators have not necessarily mastered realism, they understand basics such as the proportion of the human figure and the use of light, shade, and perspective. If you find it difficult to nail down whether inconsistencies in a drawing are part of an artist's style or simply poor execution, move on to another image.

And old is not necessarily bad. Like wide lapels and bell-bottom pants, illustrative styles come and go. It's not unusual to find artwork from past decades incorporated into the work of a world class design studio or advertising agency.

If you have space within your design to isolate one image from the next, you can often use more than one style. If the piece is small, or images are close, it's better to use a single style throughout.

The clip art checklist

Beyond concept and style, judging a drawing is subjective—you either like it or you don't. But before you make your final selection, consider these issues.

INTEGRITY. Isolate the image from others around it. Twenty different images grouped together on the same page take on a personality of their own. To get a realistic view, cover the surrounding images and see if the artwork survives on its own.

SIZE. View the image close to the size at which you will use it. Lots of images look terrific as tiny thumbnails and not so terrific blown up to two or

three inches across. Likewise, some images work better large than small.

SHAPE. Consider the shape of the overall image. A long horizontal image may not work well on a short vertical brochure cover. Organic shapes may require white space you simply can't spare.

ABOUT CHUCK GREEN'S DESIGN IDEAS

Effective design targets a precise group of prospects, highlights consumer-centered benefits, presents solutions to specific problems, and uses unique words and imagery to move people to action. Anything less is decoration.

Chuck is a veteran designer, author of *Design-It-Yourself Graphic Workshop* (Rockport Publishers), and the host of ideabook.com: the how-to hub for everyone interested in the real-world, practical application of design in marketing ideas, organizations, and products or service (<http://www.ideabook.com>).

ABOUT SHARING THIS DOCUMENT

You may share this PDF document "as is" (without change or modification) for non-commercial purposes. If you would like to include the document on a web site, or re-publish the material in web page form, or distribute it for commercial purposes, please e-mail your request to info@ideabook.com.