

Colour psychology in marketing: why '50 shades of grey' just won't cut it

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You are getting sleepy... Ok, probably not, but depending on the design elements that surround the text you're reading right now, you may be feeling any range of unconscious emotions, from calm and trusting to agitated and excitable. Colour psychology in marketing is all around us, from the classic red Coke can that makes you want to chug caramel-flavoured sugar water, to the glittery rose gold MacBook you drool over every time you visit the iStore.

With the world going digital, the principles of colour psychology are increasingly in use among developers and designers. With the right amount of consumer data and millions of dollars going into UX testing, we now have more insight into the way people perceive colours – and their effects on the human psyche – than ever before. It's not just marketing fluff either. It's biology.

Colour holds amazing influence over human behaviour, our attitudes and emotions. When our eyes perceive a colour, they trigger activity in the brain's hypothalamus, which then sends a cascade of chemical signals through the pituitary gland and onto the endocrine system and the thyroid glands. This causes the release of hormones, which cause fluctuations in emotions, moods, and ultimately, behaviours. Phew!

Websites are the perfect place for creatives to start putting colour psychology into practice. What if we told you it was possible to increase conversion rates, sales, and engagement, simply by tweaking the colours on certain design elements? Well it's true! Try one of these tricks on your next build and let us know if you notice any changes in the way your users interact with your site.

Use blue to gain your users' trust

Perfect for: backgrounds, logos, general CI, and pretty much anything else

One of the best all-rounders, and for good reason. Blue is the world's favourite colour, evoking feelings of calm, serenity, and trustworthiness. You've probably already noticed the affinity for blue branding that banks, financial services providers and insurers display, but it works fantastically well for any business with trust at its heart. Facebook, for example, has made their particular shade of blue (hex value of #3b5998, in case you're interested) world famous. And with 1.66bn users worldwide, you'd best believe they enjoy a strong image of trust with their fans. Another famous blue-user is PayPal, for whom trust is an absolutely core feature. As a conduit for billions of dollars in annual transactions, trust is paramount, and the company's own dedication to user security is reflected in their UX design as well.

Use green to trigger action

Perfect for: nature brands, financial brands, calls to action



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Green means go (no surprises there). It's the colour of progress, growth, and of course, money. And its relationship to nature and the outdoors makes it ideal for outdoor and environmental branding. Green triggers an inclination to take action, making it the perfect call-to-action colour, tempting users to browse a shop, accept an offer, sign up for an emailer, or add something to their basket. It is particularly powerful when used sparingly in what is known as the 'isolation effect' or 'Von Restorff effect'. This theory dictates that things are remembered better if they stand out. In terms of colour psychology, this means that a website where green is not used at all should try using it for action steps, like sign up buttons, for increased clickthrough and conversions.

Use yellow and red to add excitement

Perfect for: food brands, kids' brands, calls to action, special offers

Yellow and red are the colours of danger and warning signs, but why? These colours have been shown to stimulate the brain's excitement centres, so they are often used by brands with a sense of fun, to trigger powerful emotional responses and a sense of urgency. Ever wondered why so many fast food outlets use these colours? It's because yellow and red décor results in customers ordering more food, and eating faster (ka-ching if you're a restaurateur, right?). In terms of web design, these colours are perfect for more time-sensitive and aggressive calls to action. Use it for your add to basket button, or to highlight limited offers and special deals.

Use black to add a sense of luxury

Perfect for: fashion, automotive, luxury goods, loyalty programmes, offers and upgrades

Armani Black Code, Tom Ford's Black Orchid, Uber Black, black credit cards and even Sobranie's famous black cigarettes – the list goes on. The colour black holds a sense of mystery and premium value that speaks to those who love the finer things in life. If you are selling high-value luxury consumer items on your website, black is a safe bet with timeless appeal.

Five basic colours with a whole marketing language lying just beneath the surface, and that's just the beginning! It's clear there's more to picking colours than meets the eye. Whichever colour scheme you go with, these suggestions are a good place to start, but by no means a hard and fast rulebook for digital design. The most important thing to consider is that your colours align with your brand's identity and personality, and that your target market finds your site appealing, inviting and engaging.

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