

ROAD TALK: a Facelift and an Update

ROAD TALK is the Ontario Ministry of Transportation's quarterly newsletter. The mandate of the newsletter is to "provide *easy to read* and *reliable* access to technology transfer information."¹ While the mandate's ideals are wonderful, the newsletter fails to deliver on the easy to read category. To encourage people to read the newsletter, the newsletter needs something to draw them in, and unfortunately, the original version of the *ROAD TALK* newsletter fails to encourage continued reading for a number of reasons. Essentially, the form of the newsletter does not match its prescribed functions. My redesign of *ROAD TALK* succeeds where the original fails because the intended audience is considered and acknowledged. The following essay is an analysis of the elements used in the redesign of *ROAD TALK* and an attempt at explaining why these elements are effective for the intended audience.

The brief editorial note on the cover of the original *ROAD TALK* is the major attempt to encourage the intended audience to read the newsletter. Presumably, the intended audience is the employees of the Ministry of Transportation, but the audience may also include parties who are interested in the Ministries work, such as taxpayers and other Ministries of Transportation. The editorial note flatters the audience and applauds them for their participation in the creation of the newsletter's content. While I'm not going to comment on the actual content of the note—that's a topic for a different class ☺—I will comment on its legibility. To be blunt, black text with a white drop shadow on a blue background is an adventure in eyestrain. The inability to read the editorial note easily is frustrating for the reader. It does not encourage further cooperation from the intended audience. Any goodwill the message intended to create is negated by the hassle the reader must endure to read the message.

Looking Good in Print tells us that we should "strive for as much contrast between type and background as possible" (239). While the blue background of the original *ROAD TALK* is appealing, the lack of legibility is not. As an added problem, the contrast between the pictures and the background is also reduced due to the various shades of blue sky in the backgrounds of the pictures. The plain, white background in the redesign of *ROAD TALK* is traditional and boring, however, it gives the newsletter legibility and high contrast. It also boosts the ethos of the newsletter. After all, if you can read the newsletter easily, it's harder to argue that the editors are hiding things from the audience!

¹ <http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/transtek/roadtalk/roadtalk.htm>, their italics, not mine.

Another problem with the original *ROAD TALK* is the use of pictures. While the newsletter attempts to connect with the readers by showing workers and machinery in action, it fails for a number of reasons.

First, the sheer number of pictures is distracting. The arrangement of the photos, as well as the content, suggests a relationship between the images to the reader. However, the various saturations of colour, as well as the mixture of monochromatic and full colour pictures are confusing to the readers. Where should they look first? Is there a particular arrangement or logic to the pictures?

Second, there are no direct gazes in any of the pictures. None of the people depicted in the pictures acknowledge the reader or make any sort of demand or request. Over half of the people in the pictures have their backs to the reader, which does not create a welcoming environment.

Third, the shape of the pictures is misleading. An oval shape among squares draws the readers' eyes. An oval is a focal point. However, the use of multiple oval shapes, as well as the rounding of the square pictures' corners, blurs what might have been a focal point for the collage, further frustrating the readers.

The redesign deals with these issues in a number of ways. By reducing the number of pictures from thirteen to two, the new *ROAD TALK* gives the readers a distinct focus for their gaze. Also, there is stronger implied correlation between the pictures and the article titles on the front page.

The picture of four workers building cement forms continues the relationship between the workers and the Ministry's newsletter that the original *ROAD TALK* attempted to create. The man featured in the bottom left corner of the redesigned newsletter is looking directly at the viewer. He demands that we acknowledge his work, while inviting us to join him. The focus of both pictures is workers, rather than machinery. While the machinery used by the Ministry of Transportation is important, the people working for the Ministry are more important. The pictures must create a connection for the readers, so depicting workers rather than tools works to achieve this connection by illustrating people that the reader might work with or talk to on the job.

The pictures are two different sizes, applying a dominant and secondary role to the images. The redesign creates much less confusion about where to look than the original *ROAD TALK*. The colours in the pictures are bright and catch the readers' attention, since they contrast with the black text and the white page. The pictures encourage interest in the articles listed, because the high modality of the images depicts scenes that are familiar to the readers.

The realism of the pictures is necessary, due to the subject of the newsletter. Lower modality images might also generate interest in the newsletter, but would probably not be as pleasing visually. By being more selective about the images used, the redesigned *ROAD TALK* assists the readers in connecting with the situations and people depicted, rather than bombarding the readers with a variety of images.

The font sizes and types used in the original *ROAD TALK* are distracting and hard to read. While the editorial note on the cover should be considered equal to the content on the inside of the newsletter, the font size is smaller which minimizes the importance of the message. Likewise, the switch between a serif and sans serif font between headers, article information and endnotes does not provide a large enough contrast for the switch to be useful. The redesign uses fewer font types and weights. It relies on colour to draw a distinction between the subtitle and the article headings, creating a better sense of connection between page elements than the original *ROAD TALK*. A slight increase in the body text font makes the articles easier to read and to scan for information. Aiding scanning is important, because many of the people who read the newsletter do not have a lot of time to read the articles from front to back.

Likewise, increasing the size of the table of contents box in the bottom right of the page allows for easier legibility and less crowding of the contents. The table of contents remained boxed on the page, because it is secondary to the information provided in the articles. The information in the box is important, but should not detract from the content of the rest of the page. Changing the box from thin, black to a thicker blue ties the header and the bottom of the page together through repetition of colour.

While *Looking Good in Print* warns us that pages that are text-heavy are uninviting to readers, adding more text to the cover of the newsletter makes the content more accessible. In addition to the introductory note, a teaser article is added to encourage the readers to open the newsletter and continue reading. The added text also draws a connection between the images and the articles, making the overall appeal of the contents higher for the intended audience. Also, the addition of columns makes the line lengths more manageable for easy reading, and mimics the layout used in the main pages of the newsletter. The columns also add white space, which reduces the appearance of dense text on the page and draws the eyes of the reader between the individual elements.

The new version of *ROAD TALK* is more accessible to the readership in many ways. It provides more information on the first page, encouraging the readers to continue into the newsletter to read other articles. The pictures on the front page target the intended readership explicitly, while tying the

topics in the articles to a visual medium. Since the intended audience is featured in the artwork, there is more room for a sense of comradeship between the articles' authors and the Ministry of Transportation workers. The clean, straightforward fonts and layout appeals to quick reading. Since the intended audience has a number of time restrictions, the layout encourages scanning to attract interest to the content.

By considering the intended audience, the redesigned *ROAD TALK* increases interest in the contents of the newsletter. Clarifying the visual message of the newsletter helps to build a stronger ethos for *ROAD TALK*, since the layout adheres to the mandate of the publication: easy to read and reliable.

Works Consulted

Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. New York: Routledge. 1996.

Parker, Roger C. *Looking Good in Print, 4th Edition*. :Scottsdale: The Coriolis Group, Inc. 1998.