

Graphic Designers are trained to be masters of visual language, but can be struck dumb when it comes to translating the visual into the verbal. de Luxe & Associates

Stuck for words

Vague. Easily co-opted. Cliché-ridden, reactive. That's us! When it comes to how we use the written word to describe ourselves we appear to be stuck for words. Just have a look at the following four pages, where we've surveyed the language of 101 Australian graphic design firms. Our completely non-scientific analysis gives us a stark picture of the most used words and phrases in our field.

Why do we use such clichéd language?

What the heck does the word Design mean anyway? Ask 20 people in the street and you'll get 20 different answers.

In the olden days (the nineties) we saw the meteoric rise of 'branding consultancies' — exclusive, analyst-heavy, quasi-scientific disciplinarians that turned many design businesses inside out. The top end of the design field saw it as the next big thing, and was rushing into the promise of a guaranteed winning outcome for their clients. For a brief moment it looked like a whole new world. The arty-crafty, creative types were a-goner.

These businesses used a special language to describe and separate themselves from the old-style design

firms. Their language formed a rampart that only the biggest and brightest, most exclusive clients could scale.

But who owned this language?

Well, anyone it would seem. Simply because, using high-end language turned out to be much easier than building all those bothersome processes and paying for brand analysts.

Within months of hearing about these companies, I remember the astonishment at viewing the new website of a former colleague, who had just launched her sole-operator business and was working out of a spare bedroom.

The site proudly proclaimed 'We provide Corporate Branding Solutions'. We? Corporate Branding Solutions? Gee they must be big and solid. We'll throw them our 5 million dollar account!

To be fair, these words were probably aimed at another small business client, who knew they wouldn't be able to afford what the multinational branding corporations were doing, but vaguely knew that 'Branding' was good for business. Who cared if it had become shorthand for a logo and a basic stationery suite?

Many of you will have stories that echo this rapid co-opting of design language. It is a story that is repeated again and again. It is the story of a devalued language, and the profound problems visual communication businesses have defining their value.

Designers' self-descriptions become instantly meaningless. Ironic, when we are claiming to be good communicators.

Looking at Australian design companies, there is an extraordinary similarity in the way we describe ourselves. The language that we use to set ourselves apart, to offer an apparently unique benefit to our clients, turns out to be very imprecise and full of half truths and un-testable claims. We're all trying to sound different, and madly pressing what we hope will be the commercial 'hot-buttons' for potential clients, despite what we actually deliver.

Of course, we're not alone as an industry with that one. Most industries are very good at claiming vague benefits. And you can argue that it's reasonable in a field mostly comprising small businesses, that the words we use naturally respond to the itch that we think clients will pay to have scratched. But by being so reactive to trends, and by adopting jargon, designers' self-descriptions become instantly meaningless. Ironic, when we are claiming to be good communicators.

If we are to continue as a field that has access to the people in businesses who actually make decisions, we will need to do everything we can to show that good visual communication actually does make a difference. That if there is good, insightful design at the right time and place, it will pay rewards. And that buying 'design' isn't simply an indulgent, stylistic luxury.

If we don't manage to explain ourselves better, we face continued commodification of the field (all those new graduates every year). With a downhill race to the last person standing being the cheapest and fastest.

So. There is a clear challenge. The way we use words is crucial. It

is ultimately up to us to define, not just in visual language, but in written language, why people should spend money with us, why we can improve their world, why our process, and combination of left and right-brained faculty means the world should be beating a path to our door.

Basically, why we can be more than 'end of project' decorators.

But having worked in the design industry for many years, I've realised that a big part of expanding one's own expertise comes through developing finesse at translating clients' words into visual language, and back again.

The most effective communication happens where the visual and the verbal meet to form something greater.

We would all love to be smothered with clients who can just SEE how great we are. But the reality is that we need to do a lot more to explain ourselves, and to deserve the trust that comes with spending our clients' money.

The question for us to answer as a discipline is; What is so special about us?

Visual Communication is surely the most mercurial of design professions. So, it is up to us to take responsibility for communicating

what we offer, and why it can be of value to the world. We have to be the ones to articulate the vision.

In fact, with the world's business schools in a lather about the new paradigm of 'Design Thinking' and 'Business Design', we may have come to a watershed in our field. For some, there is something exciting and bigger to connect with, and for others there will be the simple comfort of craftsmanship.

Please don't think we're saying this is easy. Because there will always be a similarity in our language by virtue of the fact we are a sub-grouping of the wider design field, but let's look at how we can be clear, and how we can move past design fashions to know what difference we really make.

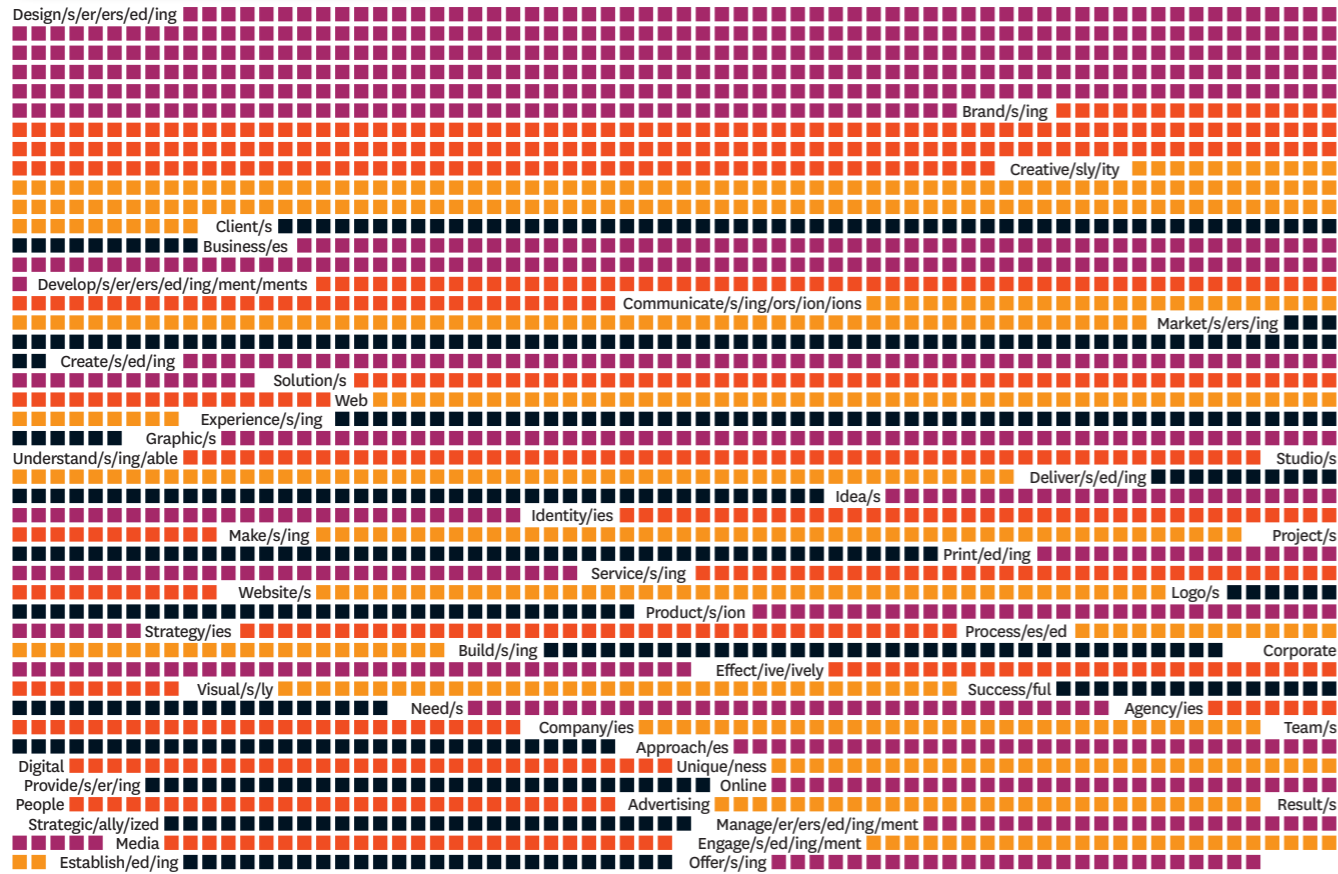
Anyway, have a look at the analysis on the following pages, and see them as a snapshot in time. Draw your own conclusions, and keep a sceptical eye out over the coming months for the three new, hot phrases we predict will be rocketing to the top of the list:

'Design Thinking'
'User Based Design'
'Experience Design'.

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Are we speaking the same language?

Total instances of top 50 derivative words as found in 101 About Us statements from Australian 'graphic design' websites (listed in 2/4).



The grand total of words analysed is 16,654.

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Does the language we use to describe our design practice make sense to anyone else?

The collective industry loosely termed 'graphic design' can be very hard to explain to someone outside the fraternity. In fact, sometimes it seems that many of its own members struggle to grasp exactly what it is, and how it fits into the broader marketplace. As the industry continues to grow and evolve, and more and more 'buzz words' are introduced into our everyday language, it seems to be even harder to pin down exactly what value a

design company can bring to the table — and how to distinguish one firm's points of value from another's.

We sampled the 'about us' text from 101 Australian graphic designer websites, ranging from companies working in print, branding, multimedia, advertising and everything in between. We then analysed these statements purely on the actual words used, to try and see if we could find a collective, concrete definition of what our industry is all about. Or perhaps to see if we all need to take a good, hard look at what we're saying about ourselves.

Brand/Branding

Web/Website/Online

The 101 companies whose websites we visited:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 01. Precinct Group | 50. Pica and Punch |
| 02. Saatchi Design | 51. Lemonroe |
| 03. 3 Deep | 52. Meld Creative |
| 04. Design By Pidgeon | 53. The Measure |
| 05. Twolanes Creative | 54. Paste |
| 06. Percept Design | 55. Please Don't Feed The Bears |
| 07. Parallax | 56. We Buy Your Kids |
| 08. Cornwell Design | 57. Logorilla |
| 09. Fabio Ongarato | 58. Qube Konstrukt |
| 10. Turner Design | 59. Underbrand |
| 11. Hoyne Design | 60. Rhombus Digital |
| 12. Future Brand FHA | 61. Mont Creative |
| 13. Moon Design | 62. See Creative |
| 14. X-Sight Design | 63. Yello Brands |
| 15. Chemistry Design | 64. Proof Creative |
| 16. Box Communications | 65. Koodoz Design |
| 17. Watts Design | 66. Silver Pistol |
| 18. Doppio Design | 67. Creative Resauce |
| 19. Chimera Design | 68. Synergy Studios |
| 20. Walter Wakefield | 69. Beanstalk |
| 21. Naughty Fish | 70. Landor |
| 22. Harcus Design | 71. Blueboat |
| 23. David Lancashire Design | 72. Visual Jazz |
| 24. Hunt Studio | 73. Treehouse Creative |
| 25. Engine | 74. Blue Flame Design |
| 26. Ross Barr & Associates | 75. Isotype |
| 27. Fusion Design Consultants | 76. Neat Creative |
| 28. DT Digital | 77. Ennis Perry |
| 29. Paper Stone Scissors | 78. Sassen Design |
| 30. Sweet Design | 79. Symple Creative |
| 31. WhiteRhino | 80. Blunt Agency |
| 32. Tank Studio | 81. 21-19 |
| 33. Frost Design | 82. Golden Grouse |
| 34. Eskimo Design | 83. Caper Creative |
| 35. Charles Elena Design | 84. Anthouse |
| 36. Wishart Design | 85. The Squad |
| 37. Cato Partners | 86. The Grain |
| 38. Toko | 87. Deuce Design |
| 39. Canyon Brand Designs | 88. Holy Cow |
| 40. Seesaw Design | 89. Creative Industries |
| 41. Alter | 90. Philter |
| 42. Studio Round | 91. Univers Graphic Design |
| 43. Marameo Design | 92. Limeshot Design |
| 44. Artichoke Design | 93. The Creative Company |
| 45. Go Design | 94. Stella Design |
| 46. Depot Creative | 95. Chorus Design |
| 47. April 77 Creative | 96. SproutMedia |
| 48. Sense Advertising & Design | 97. Hopping Mad |
| 49. NHO Creative | 98. Fresco Creative |
| | 99. Dilfinch & Dilfinch |
| | 100. Igloo |
| | 101. de Luxe & Associates |

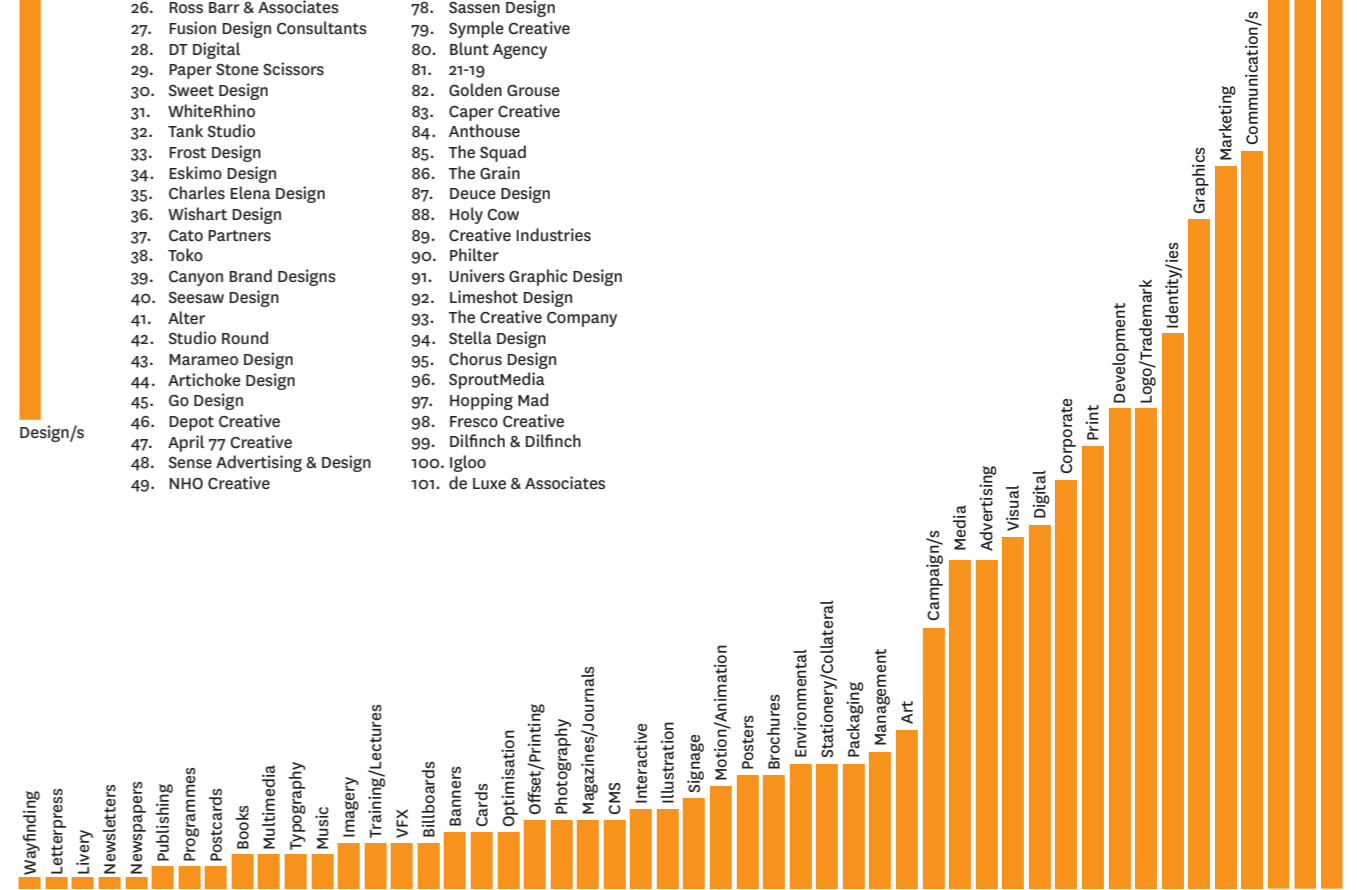
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What tangible product or service do we offer?

Total instances of 50 key words/offers.

Brand: *n.* An identifying mark burned on livestock with a heated iron.

Oxford Dictionary 2003



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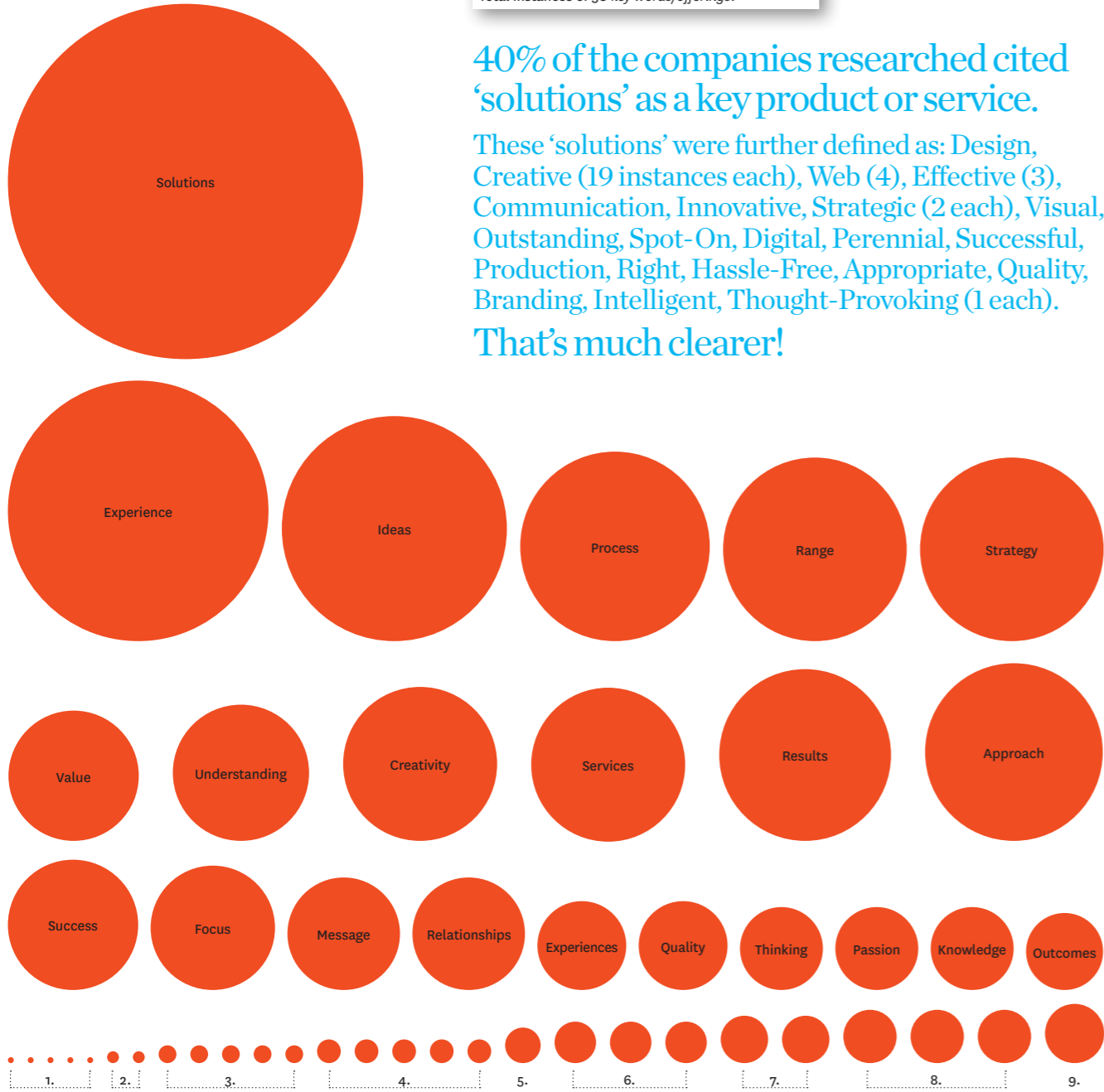
What intangible product or service do we offer?

Total instances of 50 key words/offerings.

40% of the companies researched cited 'solutions' as a key product or service.

These 'solutions' were further defined as: Design, Creative (19 instances each), Web (4), Effective (3), Communication, Innovative, Strategic (2 each), Visual, Outstanding, Spot-On, Digital, Perennial, Successful, Production, Right, Hassle-Free, Appropriate, Quality, Branding, Intelligent, Thought-Provoking (1 each).

That's much clearer!



- 1. Exposure, Alignment, Advocacy, Acumen, Advice
- 2. Calibre, Methodology
- 3. Synergy, Clarity, Foundation, Exploration, Dialogue
- 4. Concepts, Aesthetics, Innovation, Intuition, Perspective
- 5. Change
- 6. Reputation, Collaboration, Research
- 7. Skills, Implementation
- 8. Philosophy, Solution, Vision
- 9. Expertise

Creative Business Studio/Agency Group/Collective/Team

Designers
International/Global, Unique
Effective

Strategic
Specialists/Experts
Partnership

Established
Driven

Individual/Distinctive, Innovative, Committed, Diverse
Engaging, Commercial, Multidisciplinary

Personal, Experienced, Integrated/Seamless
Traditional, Focused, Professional

Consultancy/Consultants, Collaborative, Valuable, Passionate, Original, Memorable, Tailored/Bespoke

Sophisticated, Contemporary, Dynamic
Intelligent/Educated/Knowledgeable, Sustainable, Consistent

Talented, Versatile, Visionary, Boutique, Economical, Intuitive

Skilled, Marketers, Communicators, Practitioner/Craftsperson, Engineer/Developer

Intelligent/Educated/Knowledgeable, Sustainable, Consistent

Sophisticated, Contemporary, Dynamic

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How do we describe our work and ourselves?

Total instances of 50 key words/offerings.

Interestingly, the word 'jargon' only appeared once.