

Design Driven by Excellence

David Waweru, publisher of WordAlive Publishers Limited (formerly Cana Publishing; www.wordalivepublishers.com) in Nairobi, Kenya, says design is worthless if it does not help readers connect with the message.

And God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. With light came visual perception; color, beautiful and ugly; symmetry and asymmetry. With light came graphic cognition, communication and competition. And light made it possible to appreciate good design ... and to sneer at the mediocre.

In a study published in 1982, researchers W.H. Levie and R. Lentz identified four functions of graphic design. These are: attention-getting,

affective, cognitive, and compensatory. A designer must marry the objective of the author or editor to the message of the book to accomplish these four functions. The importance of each function varies depending on the subject matter and audience of the book. Failure to communicate with your reader occurs when you do not pay enough attention to one of the functions.

Capturing customers' attention

A print design project, such as a book or promotional tool, communicates a message, but that message will go unnoticed unless the project has the visual impact to capture the intended reader's attention. You can fail to get attention with a boring design or poor execution—or you can get too much, or the wrong kind, of attention!

Our cover design for a book on love, sex and relationships floundered. The color, typography and image used were deemed too "sexy" in a culture that treats the subject as taboo. Booksellers reported that some customers literally looked over their shoulders when presenting it to the cashier. Some who bought it immediately covered it up. Parents who would have selected it for their teens feared the book was about hot tips on sex and relationships. We were told that someone even asked whether it had photographs and other illustra-

tions. We had not considered the fact that good design should say not only "I am here!" but also "Pick me up." We learnt from the school of hard knocks that what matters is not how pretty a design looks—but what results it gets.

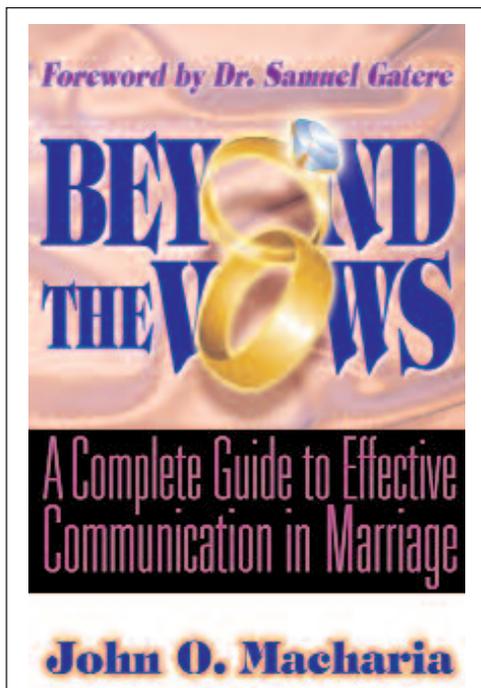
Our cover for a marriage book, *Beyond the Vows*, was an outright winner. The symbolism, color, proportions and typography were all just right. Its aesthetic message tied up quite well with the title.

The affective effect

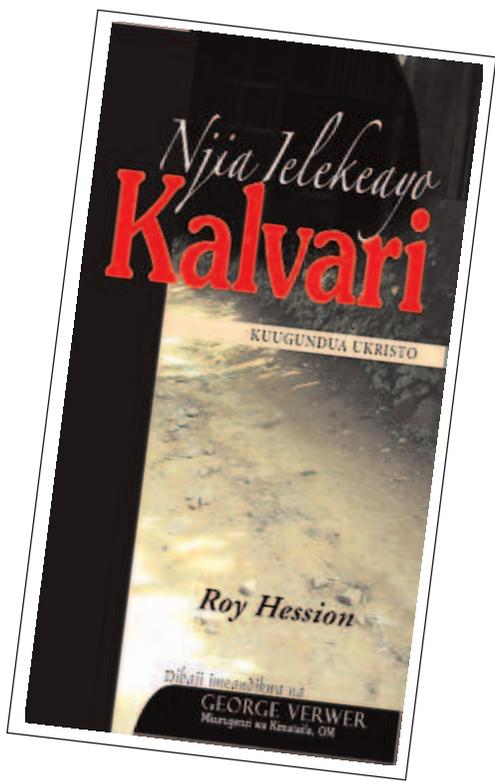
A design can fail to connect with the intended readers because it does not appeal to their emotions. It would be considered unwise not to use red in designing a project for the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania. One rite of passage for the Maasai boy is to hunt down a wild animal, such as a lion, and spear it to death. The most common and popular meal among the Maasai is comprised primarily of raw cow blood. While the color red may be repulsive in another culture, it immediately evokes feelings of belonging among the Maasai. It is the dominant color in Maasai traditional attire.

Matching the message

You can fail because you do not pay attention to the cognitive message of the design. Because designs from the West are typically well executed, there is always the tendency to assume that



"This title transcends cultural barriers," says Waweru. "Rings are more effective than any other marriage symbol."



The design for this translation of Roy Hession's classic, *The Calvary Road*, makes strong use of color.

their symbolism will be effective in another culture. This is not necessarily true. A book on how couples can work out their differences with a cover depicting pillow-fighting would not work. The pillow-fight concept is quite foreign in the African context, and it is almost inconceivable to imagine a couple sorting out their differences this way.

Aiding comprehension

A design can fail by neglecting the compensatory function. Children who are learning to read, as well as poor readers, need the help of pictorial clues to decode the text. Your drive in design should be effectiveness in communicating with your audience.

Excellence in design

Kirabo Lukwago, one of Kenya's most respected graphic designers, says that the pursuit of excellence has more to do with attitude than the amount of money we can allocate to a project. It is quite possible to have an expensively done design that does not communicate. Conversely, it is possible to have a high impact design simply produced.

I concur with Lukwago: it is not a question of money, but of attitude. Our publishing house cannot afford designs that do not resonate with readers, and which result in slow-selling titles or dead stock piled in the warehouse. The right attitude asks: "How can we attain excellence inexpensively?" It does not conclude: "Quality is too expensive. We can't afford it!"

Publishers and other Christian communicators must realize that we are expected to be good stewards of the resources God provides. And He expects excellence of us, not constant griping. It is what we do with what we have that counts, not what we *might* do with what we do not have! If we are driven by excellence, we will refuse to settle for anything less. ▽

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to connect with readers
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FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- 1. What colors should you consider most in design for your culture? What tests could you use to learn about color acceptance and your products?**
- 2. How do design traditions in your country impact your use of white space?**
- 3. When do your readers prefer abstract art? Representational art? Type treatments?**
- 4. What symbols do not communicate effectively with Christians in your country?**
- 5. Have your public's tastes changed? Do you have self-imposed rules that must be reconsidered given the context in which you now operate?**
- 6. How does your company's budget impact your choices in design?**
- 7. What criteria do you use to select the design motifs you choose for original titles versus translated or licensed ones?**
- 8. How does competition with imported titles impact your locally-published titles?**
- 9. Should you consider designing some titles so that they are suitable for co-edition? If so, which ones?**
- 10. Are any of your products under- or over-designed for your market? What will you do to strike the right balance with your future projects?**

—Kim Pettit