Shapes, Colors, And Fonts: The Hidden Power In Employee Benefit Communications

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Organizations Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Brian Shapiro, M.A.

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Shapes, Colors, And Fonts: The Hidden Power In Employee Benefit Communications

Abstract
This capstone explored how an organization can achieve better employee benefit communications with the strategic use of color, shapes, and fonts. To achieve this, I examined the influence of visual communications on people and how that might create a greater emotional connection to their employee benefits, which may ultimately have a longer-term effect on how employees feel about their employer. In doing this, I built a model using a tiered approach to learn why and how this work is important to the business, the individual, and the organization. The study reviewed a broad spectrum of philosophies and psychologies including the work of Louis Cheskin, who built the Color Research Institute and focused on the scientific approach in the use of design and color in selling merchandise. The goal of this study was to apply a similar approach so when implemented these visual resources can result in greater employee appreciation of their employee benefits. By maximizing visual methods that support positive psychology theories, a greater overlap can be created between employees and the organizations they work for, which shows how an organization can support a meaningful whole life through total rewards communication methods.

Employees value their employee benefits but often find them confusing (Wooldridge, 2020). Three in 10 workers (29%) reported they automatically re-enroll in their benefits from the previous year because they find the process overwhelming and spend little time looking at their options. The goal of the study was to identify methods that result in greater employee interest, understanding, and appreciation for the benefits made available by their employer.

Keywords
communication strategy, sensation transference, psychology, brands, organizational commitment, internal marketing, brand preference, employee engagement, sensory, emotions, visual communications, productivity, sensation transference, positive psychology, employee benefits

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Philosophy

Comments
Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Organizations Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania

Advisor: Brian Shapiro, M.A.
SHAPES, COLORS, AND FONTS: THE HIDDEN POWER IN
EMPLOYEE BENEFIT COMMUNICATIONS

by

Pepper J. Krach

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
College of Liberal and Professional Studies
in the School of Arts and Sciences
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in Organizations Dynamics at the
University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2021
SHAPES, COLORS, AND FONTS: THE HIDDEN POWER IN
EMPLOYEE BENEFIT COMMUNICATIONS

Approved by:

________________________
Brian Shapiro, M.A., Advisor

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Charline S. Russo, EdD, Reader
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This novel study offers a potentially powerful approach to benefit organizations and their employees.

*Keywords:* communication strategy, sensation transference, psychology, brands, organizational commitment, internal marketing, brand preference, employee engagement, sensory, emotions, visual communications, productivity, sensation transference, positive psychology, employee benefits
I am extremely grateful to the professors at the University of Pennsylvania, whose work led to my Master of Philosophy in Organizational Dynamics. In particular, I extend my appreciation to Professor Charline Russo, my capstone reader, for her unfiltered insights that gave me the confidence to “keep going” and to develop a deeper perspective regarding visual influences. I am also thankful to Professor Brian Shapiro, my capstone advisor, for his collaborative style and open-minded sharing, which helped me evolve in this project. The support and encouragement from both of these honored professionals, changed my perspective of this project from an obligation into a devotion that opened my mind to a much bigger understanding and helped me see, with new eyes, the true potential in self-realized learning.

I also thank Professor Claudia Tordini, who helped me understand how art creates an aesthetic experience. My experience through her course, Developing Emotional Intelligence Through Art, created personal validation of the impact that art has on our minds and actions, which supports the research in this capstone.

My understanding and appreciation of creativity and innovation were fostered by Professor Francis Mulgrew, whose insights helped me realize how the intersections of diverse concepts can expand our perceptions, resulting in creative change that can disrupt one’s current way of thinking. This shift in perspective led me on a path to create a new communication theory for employee benefits, which is introduced in this capstone and supported by the research along with my case studies that follow.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I did some consulting for a global advertising firm. Their Human Resources (HR) department was frustrated because they had rolled out a new medical plan option for employees that went into effect, but many employees who elected the new option had no understanding of their new plan. Many employees did not understand they had opted for a plan with a limited provider network. The limited provider network only offered healthcare services when using a select group of hospitals and healthcare providers. When employees needed to seek medical care, that is when they realized their doctors were not in the limited network, it created confusion and hardship for families and resulted in disappointment and frustration among employees.

The question is, how can this happen? How can an employer spend financial resources on a new medical program but not take into consideration how to effectively communicate information about the program to employees in a way they can understand?

Our consulting team asked to see how the new medical plan had been communicated during Open Enrollment, which is the time when employees make their annual benefit elections. We were shown a 40-page, comprehensive, employee benefit booklet that was sent digitally to employees via their internal email system. The guide lacked any visual interest and was purely a reference guide with written content in black and white.
The booklet had no images and no illustrations but consisted of pages of written employee benefit plan details. When we conducted employee focus groups, many employees disclosed they had not read the material.

We learned most employees elected the new medical plan because the new plan option was the most inexpensive option offered. Employee benefit elections were made to reduce personal payroll deductions, not based on an educated understanding of the features of the new plan.

This example is not unusual among employers. According to Gallagher (2019), 95% of employers report their primary way to inform and educate employees about their employee benefits is email. The same study shows 85% of employers currently do not have a comprehensive communication strategy, but rely on one or two campaigns during each year or have no strategy at all.

No organization today would be successful if it remained constant without change. Organizations must be in the business of change and transition to remain relevant (Barrett, 2002). However, it is not change itself that can create chaos in an organization; it is how the change is communicated.

I am in the business of helping organizations create simple and engaging communication materials for employees that inform, educate, and guide them through change. My consulting experience aligns with data from Gallagher’s national 2019 Benefits Strategy & Benchmarking Survey, which found most employers do not take the time to be strategic with employee benefits communication. Furthermore, 74% of employers currently do not have a communication strategy but develop one or two campaigns per year, and 11% of employers have no strategy at all (Gallagher, 2019). For
the purposes of this study, I am focused on identifying the advantages achieved when sensation transference is considered in developing a communication strategy, resulting in paying attention to how employees feel about their employee benefits. Can color and shapes influence how people feel about employee benefit information being communicated? And why would this be important? The results can guide an organization to be more effective when connecting with their employees’ feelings and improve the way they communicate their employee benefit information.

Employee benefit communication is complex. Studies show employees do not read their emails (Harter, 2020), may not understand benefit information, or the employer is not an effective communicator. A survey on workplace benefits by Guardian (2020) revealed workers say they value their benefits but still find them confusing. This confusion results in an underappreciation of employee benefits and can result in lower employee engagement scores (Harter, 2020). The challenge is to connect the value of employee benefits to real-life situations (Payne, 2020) and offer a path that engages employees.

Gallup surveys conducted since 2000 have measured that only 15% of the world’s workers are engaged at work (Clifton & Harter, 2019). However, in July 2020 employee engagement scores have leaped to 40%. What was happening that resulted in this dramatic change? During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, from the employee perspective, employers had improved their communication and preparedness (Harter, 2020). Employers understood the critical importance in staying connected with their most important resource, their employees. Communication suddenly became a priority. And
that strategy and focus on keeping employees informed was felt by employees who immediately reacted with improved engagement scores.

The research for this capstone was focused on how visually engaging communication materials can enhance the employee experience when used to explain employee benefits. When employers focus on employee benefit communication, they tap into the hidden value of employee feelings, beliefs, and perceptions (Thomson & Hecker, 2000). These feelings, beliefs, and motivations are the foundation of emotional capital. Through my capstone I intend to demonstrate the intersection between business considerations and the human experience; when considered in employee benefit communication, this intersection can have a great influence on the way employees think, how they react, and the emotions they feel about the organization they work for.

The complexity of this capstone study is the crossover between two divergent ways of thinking. To fully appreciate the potential that visual materials can have on employees and their appreciation for employee benefits requires the ability to consider both left brain and right brain thinking. The left hemisphere of the brain is regarded as the side of the brain for reason and logic; it is analytical and orderly (Scull, 2010). This side of the brain houses the business logic, which includes the cost of employee benefits, the need for employee engagement, and understanding total rewards. The right brain is connected to the world of social, emotional, and visual representations, as well as affected by sensory transference.

Employees are sensory human beings with limited time to spare. If they are not immediately attracted to visually supported information, they will not take the time to read, study, or appreciate the importance of the message.
I started this capstone with a story of a real-life experience with a company that did not immediately appreciate or understand the importance of effective employee benefit communication until they experienced disruption and employee confusion. My research helped me develop a greater understanding of the connections between the complexities faced by businesses, the need for greater emotional awareness, the psychology of visual stimulus, and the surrounding influence of positive psychology—including how bringing these factors altogether can result in better engaged employees.

Chapter 2 presents an analysis and an understanding of the business of employee benefits. It explores the cost of employee benefits, as well as considers and defines employee engagement and the trending concept of total rewards and why they are important. As a result, I found out the business perspective, although important, is one-dimensional and does not consider the emotional needs of employees. I continue my research with an exploration of emotional awareness and consider how emotions are made, why they are important as it relates to employee benefits, and how employees can be the architects of their own experiences. As I went deeper into my research, I began to understand that psychology, as it relates to visual stimulus, was critical in understanding the impression made by brands, color, and shapes. The final tier of understanding is a review of communication strategy, which includes why a communication strategy is important to an organization and how meaningful communication can achieve the objective of not only informing and educating employees but also motivate and position employees to support the organization’s strategies and goals.

Once the multiple dimensions—including business motivation, emotional awareness, psychology of visual stimulus, and communication strategy—are considered,
I conclude this section with research about positive psychology and how, when this understanding is incorporated, employee feelings about their employee benefits can be elevated.

In Chapter 3 I describe my research methodology. I provide information about the questions, the survey recipients, the visual images, and the colors. From the survey results I draw conclusions about what can make people feel happy or calm about their work.

I provide real-life case studies in Chapter 4 and show before-and-after results to express my findings. The reader can clearly see through these case studies how the before-and-after designs make one feel.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

“We love the things we love for what they are” (Frost, 1916). Even Robert Frost knew in his poem “Hyla Brook” that the use of images stored in the mind elicits an emotion. We also love the things we love because of how they make us feel.

A gap exists within many organizations between the neglected, underused employee benefit communications and the large corporate financial investment made for employee benefits. The realization that employee emotions can be triggered by reading an employee benefit guide, and those emotions can improve employee engagement, is a complex journey that requires the investigation of diverse studies. Such studies have examined a broad range of topics including communication strategy, psychology of color, employee engagement, positive psychology, and marketing techniques that intersect at a place in which emotion and strategy come together. Other studies include how sensory evaluation techniques influence emotions and how the brain processes optical information to quantify and support the subconscious power that effective visual communication can have on employees.

The Medici effect (Johansson, 2017) shows how breakthrough ideas occur when one brings concepts from unrelated fields together. Frans Johansson explains in his theory that deliberate efforts can result when the intersections of diverse concepts connect one field to a new, unfamiliar idea and how we can turn those ideas into innovations, which is a key concept in my capstone study. My research brought diverse concepts together that support the theory of when companies maximize their potential in the way
they communicate, using a diverse series of strategies, they can achieve greater results for their internal audience. I examine multiple resources to synthesize those concepts to form one outcome. This insight that multiple and diverse resources connect at one intersection and create a new idea opened my mind to a greater understanding of how this study could be a supported concept.

I used the PsychINFO database offered by the University of Pennsylvania library for my research to learn about key terminology for communication such as communication strategy, brands, organizational commitment, internal marketing, brand preference, employee engagement, sensory, emotions, color, and visual communications. In addition, I identified several literary publications to support the psychological connection between visually stimulating material and employee engagement.

The research presented throughout Chapter 2 provides the critical analysis needed to connect the diverse intricacies and contributes meaningfully to this underserved topic.

**Key Terms**

The lines of organizational communication across any enterprise are complex. In the corporate environment the relationships within organizations and their people depend on the way they communicate with each other, not as employees but as internal customers (Thomson & Hecker, 2000). The following review of key terms establishes the intended meaning of communication, corporate communication strategy, and internal communication.

Communication: This term is defined as a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is a technique for expressing ideas effectively.
Corporate communication strategy: This term refers to a continuous process, thinking through the current mission of the organization and using a preselected means to achieve its goals and objectives while coping with current and future external conditions (Steyn, 2003). This definition encompasses the idea of the continuous process; it is a never-ending process. It respects the complexities of integrating one’s corporate mission with goals and objectives while recognizing the continuous changes experienced by a corporation and the importance of understanding not only current but also future conditions. This definition of strategy intertwines the many moving parts inherent in strategy work, the opportunity to envision a desired future, and the creation of a process to achieve that vision. Missing from this definition, in comparison with the basic meaning of communication, is its lack of an exchange of words and meanings between the organization and employees. It does not mention the need for a two-way process. Input from employees, including understanding their needs and wants, should be considered as part of the strategy.

Internal communication: This term refers to the process used to deliver the strategy. It is a planned effort to overcome organizational resistance to change and to align, motivate, and integrate employees toward the effective implementation of corporate strategies (Schulz et al., 2017). Today’s internal communication department has a key role in encouraging active employee behaviors, in addition to delivering messages. Developing techniques that reach employees at their career stage is a method to help identify and guide employee behaviors. It is the set of interactive processes to generate knowledge and allegiance, with a connection between internal communication and HR management systems that contributes to organizational well-being, a
collaborative environment, and organizational change that, in turn, promotes allegiance between the company and its employees (Mazzei, 2010).

**Business Motivation**

**Tier 1 - Business Motivation**

*Need for financial success and support investment*

---

**The Cost of Employee Benefits: Why Is This Important?**

Employers invest millions of dollars annually on employee benefit programs (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2018). Employee benefits are one of the largest corporate expenses appearing on corporate profit and loss statements. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2020), the average annual cost of health insurance is $7,470 for single coverage and $21,343 for family coverage. For example, one employer with 500 employees contributing, on average, 70% of the cost for health insurance coverage results in an annual employer cost of $3.5 million. Yet even with this financial commitment, many employers still do not take the time to be strategic with their communication, losing the valuable opportunity to elevate their employee benefit investment among employees. The unintended consequence is lack of appreciation, awareness, and understanding by employees. Ultimately, the lack of effective employee benefit communication can reduce employee retention and affect the way an employee feels about their employer.

Employee benefits are often shrouded in technical terminology and burdened with massive amounts of written content with rules and small print. Employees simply do not take the time to study written material, even when it can help them make choices that
could affect their family’s health and welfare. Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to read, comprehend, and process basic health information.

From an employer’s standpoint, gaining employee recognition and an appreciation of total rewards—including compensation, benefits, work-life quality, and career development—is an investment to achieve worker productivity and has a direct correlation to retention and recruitment of employees (Miller, 2018). Employee benefits are part of an employer/employee contract. A new generation of rewards emphasizes well-being by offering benefits that address financial wellness, fitness, stress relief, mindfulness, and work-life flexibility. Highly valued rewards can become competitive differentiators that make an employer stand out, and these features can be highlighted as the employer’s rewards brand (Miller, 2018).

**Marketing, Advertising, and Public Relations**

Understanding what marketing means to a company and how the components of advertising and public relations are part of that strategy are important to help employers understand how to better reach their employees. Using learned experiences from marketing creates parallels between the two areas, marketing and communication strategies.

Marketing is a step-by-step process that begins with a unique selling proposition; the selling proposition acts as a unique guide to help one reach their target audience. Marketing is a process of planning, implementation, and control; it includes a mix of activities to bring together a company with its customers (Lake, 2019).

Similarly, a communication strategy is a step-by-step process that aligns with the corporate mission and its purpose, which acts as a guide to help a company reach its
employees. Communication is also a process of planning, implementation, and control, which includes a mix of activities meant to bring together a company with its customers, in this case, employees. Public relations then build on those relationships to retain customers.

Companies invest millions of dollars in marketing research and advertising campaigns to reach their audience with a focus to increase sales and enhance their corporate value. Similarly, when we understand the cost of employee benefits and the value of employee engagement, it becomes a corporate imperative to invest in a communication strategy that can maximize this corporate investment and promote a greater understanding and appreciation among employees. Investment in a strategy can result in more engaged employees. The message being conveyed to employees is clear: You are important to us.

Consider the marketing campaigns of Proctor & Gamble and Nike. Proctor & Gambles’ 2018 Annual Report identified their corporate competitive advantage as “meaningful and noticeable superiority in all elements of the consumer proposition, products, packaging, brand communication, retail execution and superior value” (Proctor & Gamble, 2018). The report goes on to discuss that their brand communication, products, and packaging need to be communicated with exceptional messaging advertising that makes you think, talk, laugh, cry smile, act and buy. Proctor & Gamble has built their corporate sales success based on advertising that reaches consumers’ feelings. In 2019 this company generated $67 billion in sales.

Nike reported $37 billion in sales in 2019, a 7% increase over the previous year (Nike.com, 2019). Each Nike ad is designed to inspire, telling consumers we can do
anything if we try. Their tagline “Just Do It” supports their marketing strategy and is aimed to evoke a particular feeling and make their products more meaningful in the eyes of the customer. They tap into the power of “influence marketing.”

Both Proctor & Gamble and Nike focus their marketing strategy on the use of **priming** to influence how consumers feel about their brand and their products (Fitzsimmons et al., 2008). Can we incorporate similar strategies used in marketing to reach employees at a deeper level?

**Employee Engagement**

An organization can have great products, great marketing, and great advertising, but the most powerful behavioral lever to pull is increasing the number of employees who are engaged. Why is it important to have engaged employees? According to Gallup (Clifton & Harter, 2019), engaged employees create customer engagement, which creates sales growth, which creates an increase in profits, which, in turn, creates an increase in stock values. Customer engagement drives sales growth and stock price increases; employee engagement drives customer engagement.

The evolution of employee engagement developed in stages. The first stage occurred from 1990 to 1999. William Kahn defined personal engagement as “the harnessing of organizational members selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performance” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Three psychological engagement conditions are necessary for employees to bring themselves into their work role performance. These determinants are meaningfulness, safety, and availability. In later studies Gallup
determined that engaged employees drive customer loyalty with the right people in the right roles with the right managers (Welch, 2011).

The second stage took place between 2000 and 2005 and consisted of practitioner work with Gallup’s Workplace Audit questionnaire and the Q¹² employee engagement questionnaire, which had 12 items to measure employee perceptions with a combination of cognitive and emotional antecedents. The key scientific development during this time was the emergence of a positive psychology movement, which switched from negative consequences such as burnout to positive drivers such as engagement.

During the third stage between 2006 and 2010, Saks extended the engagement concept to encompass both job engagement and organizational engagement. Gallup updated their definition to “the ability to capture the heads, hearts and souls of employees to instill an intrinsic desire and passion for excellence” (Welch, 2011) p. 334.

Saks believes that employees vary in their engagement as a function of their perceptions of the benefits they receive from a role (e.g., pay raise, job security, training and development). Perceived organizational support is defined as a general belief that an organization cares about and supports its employees. An organization serves as a source of socioemotional resources, including respect, satisfactory wages, and medical benefits (Rothmann & Welsh, 2013).

An Indiana University Department of Journalism and Department of Advertising and Public Relations study introduced a revised definition of employee engagement called employee organizational relations (EOR). EOR is the perceived quality of the relationship between an organization and its employees in terms of levels of commitment, trust, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Kang & Sung, 2017). Employee engagement is
important not only because of its effects on organizational outcomes, but also because it has a positive influence on the psychological well-being of employees (Rothmann & Welsh, 2013).

Communication has been identified as an underlying factor associated with employee engagement (Welch, 2011). Likewise, MacLeod and Clarke highlight communication as a critical factor in enhancing performance through employee engagement. They argue that good quality internal communication enhances engagement. On the flip side, they site poor communications as a barrier to engagement and a cause for disengagement. Well-designed internal communication programs are an important factor for employee engagement. Open, effective communication strategies are recognized as having a crucial role in the development of positive employee engagement.

**Employee Engagement in Action With A Benefits Strategy**

Engaged employees perform better than disengaged employees in terms of more positive emotions, better health, heightened resourcefulness, and stimulating the performance of others (Kang & Busser, 2018). Greater work engagement is associated with various positive organization outcomes, including higher customer loyalty, higher productivity, profitability, and lower rates of staff turnover (Rothmann & Welsh, 2013). Studies show that only 15% of the world’s workers are engaged at work (Clifton & Harter, 2019). The remaining 85% of working adults reported in Gallup surveys that they are either not engaged at work or hate their jobs, managers, and companies.

During open enrollment season (namely, the 2 months leading up to the annual renewal of an employee benefits plan), the goal is to motivate employees to review and think about their benefit options (Payne, 2020), which is challenging today with virtual
work arrangements. To effectively communicate employee benefits, benefit teams need to connect the value of their benefits to real-life applications. Benefits tied to an employee’s well-being—including their mental, financial, and emotional health—should be at the forefront of engagement strategies. BenefitsPRO magazine reports that many companies view benefits as a series of offerings or a collection of services at a price, rather than a coherent strategy (Payne, 2020).

Some of the key barriers to employee engagement in benefit plans are behavioral and environmental barriers. Behavioral barriers stem from an employee’s feelings and beliefs about benefits. Employees may feel doubtful or suspicious of an employer’s underlying motive or feel as if they do not have enough time to learn what they need to know about the program. Environmental barriers stem from structural aspects that are engrained in an organization such as leaders who, by their words or actions, make it inconvenient to access the program or employees who encounter difficulties in accessing programs because of technology challenges. Through strategic measures as we understand and address barriers, we can establish a system that can drive not only engagement, which is the employees’ understanding and valuing their benefit plan, but, ultimately, action; employees can make informed healthcare decisions. Once those actions are in motion, then supported and enabled by a benefits strategy, they can plan with the employees’ perspective at its center. Strategy is the path that engages employees, fosters efficient action, and includes the whole person at the heart of the plan, which involves considering an employee’s physical, social, emotional, financial, and environmental well-being. These dimensions need to be driven by company goals and
employee population needs, which means implementing a strategy to use the benefit plan design to improve employees’ lives.

Christopher Paquette, who works as Chief Digital and Strategy Officer at Trustmark, a leading insurance company, supports the concept of helping companies think more deeply about their benefits strategy and plan for how to engage leaders in the process. Leaders play a critical role for effective strategy outcomes (Payne, 2020). Corporate leaders understand, and many can explain the company’s motives and benefits philosophy, the need to foster a trusted relationship, which is key in the minds of employees. In tandem with a benefits strategy is the communication strategy that reinforces corporate attitudes and can foster a high level, well-thought-out benefits guide that aligns and reinforces the benefit plan strategy leading to the best engagement outcomes. When done strategically, communication results in elevated employee engagement. If a company is not strategic in their approach, it is a missed opportunity.

Emotions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 2 - Emotional Awareness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driven by need for employee appreciation of benefits</td>
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<tr>
<th>Tier 1 - Business Motivation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Need for financial success and support investment</td>
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The Emotional Mind

The emotional mind is quicker than the rational mind (Goleman, 1995). Its quickness precludes any deliberate or analytic reflection, which is the hallmark of the thinking mind. The interval between what triggers an emotion, and its result is instantaneous. The rapid reaction of emotions reacts to the overall picture or the most striking aspects. It takes the image in all at once, reacting without taking the time for
thoughtful analysis. The emotional mind can read an emotional reality in an instant, making the intuitive snap judgment that tells us how we can feel. The work of Paul Ekman (Barrett, 2017) shows that emotions overtake us before we are aware they are involved. The full heat of emotion is quite brief, lasting only seconds rather than minutes. When feelings persist for hours, they become moods. Moods set a tone. According to Ekman, a second kind of emotional reaction, slower than the quick response, simmers, and brews first in our thoughts before it leads to a feeling. If it is possible for an employee benefit guide to stimulate an emotional reaction, it stands to reason that the essence of that emotion, if it persists or is reinforced over time, could impact an employee’s feelings toward their employer.

The Theory of Constructed Emotion

The theory of constructed emotion was proposed by Lisa Feldman Barrett (Barrett, 2017). Most other theories of emotion assume that emotions are genetically endowed—not learned—and are produced by dedicated circuits in the brain. The theory of constructed emotion suggests that emotions are not biologically hardwired but are a phenomenon that emerges in our consciousness in the moment, giving us more control over our emotional state. The theory states that in every waking moment, your brain uses past experience, organized as concepts, to guide your actions and give your sensations meaning.

This theory is reinforced by Barbara Fredericks (2009a) with the positivity ratio. Emotions do not issue from a specific part of the brain. No scientific innovation reveals a biological fingerprint of emotion because emotions are not built in. Emotions are made by us. We don’t recognize emotions; we construct our own emotional experiences.
Humans are not at the mercy of mythical emotion circuits buried deep in the animalistic parts of our highly evolved brain. We are architects of our own experiences.

Our own source of positivity becomes a healthy investment into our realities that can enhance our relationships, improve our health, relieve depression, and broaden our minds. We become the architect of our emotions.

Using these theories, I propose that our ability to visually incorporate images, colors, and fonts into employee benefit communication can have a positive effect on how people feel about their employee benefits. We are creating an experience for employees’ minds to connect the good feeling they receive from the visual experience, which over time can develop its own circuit of positivity. The question then becomes, what are the colors and images that can create these feelings and emotions?

Psychology of Visual Stimulus

| Tier 3 - Psychology of visual stimulus | Make it sustainable |
| Tier 2 - Emotional Awareness | Driven by need for employee appreciation of benefits |
| Tier 1 - Business Motivation | Need for financial success and support investment |

How to Predict What People Will Buy

Have you had the unintended experience of your mobile phone’s virtual assistant Siri suddenly respond to something that you have said during a casual conversation with someone else? The experience can be startling. This example shows how our subconscious works. Our subconscious is always on and always listening, but we forget it
is there. In 1957 Louis Cheskin published the book, *How to Predict What People Will Buy*. He tackled the concept using various forms of association tests to determine reactions to creative art and design, then established the Color Research Institute for testing marketing media for packaging, ads, and posters. Much of what Cheskin based his study on is known as Gestalt psychology, which stresses the interdependence of component elements and demonstrates the importance of grouping. His work focused on marketing and how color and symbols used in packaging can achieve strong sales.

Cheskin (1957) was a clinical psychologist and marketing innovator. He observed that people’s perceptions of products and services were related to aesthetic design; he named the relationship *sensation transference*. Cheskin’s innovation identified how impressions created in the customers’ minds, based on how they experienced a product in a sensory way, transferred directly to concepts of value, price, quality, and emotion.

One series of tests showed a triangle brought out unfavorable associations in women. When the corners of the triangle were rounded, however, the associations were more favorable. The test showed women react favorably to a triangle with rounded corners and unfavorably to a triangle with sharp points. The kind of triangle design on a package has an effect on the consumer without advertising entering the picture. The diverse attitudes toward the two triangles are unconscious. Further tests proved the female consumers did not care whether the triangle had sharp points or rounded ones. Nor did she care about the packaging. Her interest was not about design and color. *She is only interested in the quality of the contents, the product.* She is not conscious of the fact that she is influenced by the package, that she *transfers the sensation from the package or the imagery or the color to the product.*
As a result of Cheskin’s work, my study builds on the concept of how to build employee perceptions of the quality of their employee benefits in which these perceptions result from the impressions made by the packaging of the employee benefit guide and campaign. This approach is achieved with the effective use of symbols and colors that result in an elevated perception of the quality of their employee benefits, which, in turn, result in a greater appreciation. The sensation transference that takes place allows employers to achieve a greater outcome to their financial investment made in the benefit program.

A study by Göransson and Fagerholm (2018) discussed the use of engaging images as resulting in a better educated, better informed, and a more positive employee. The researchers of this study noted that visual resources in communication are acknowledged to be powerful in cognition and memory and that 75% of all information reaching the brain is visual and becomes the main source of stimulus from which we form our perceptions. Over time the reinforcement of positive emotions can influence how an individual feels about their employer, compared to content heavy, corporate information that over time can have a negative effect.

Color branding is not about being pretty. Color is about conveying crucial information that triggers a specific response in the central nervous system and the cerebral cortex. Colors can activate thoughts, memories, and perceptions (Hogshead, 2010).

Think about the internet. We have messages coming at us from videos, emails, voicemails, tweets, and apps. As a result, we are learning to process information differently. We think more quickly and are distracted more easily. The effect of
technology on the human brain leaves us with an attention span of 9 seconds. In the span of 9 seconds, we need to reach our audience. The use of images, colors, and impact words becomes critical.

Sensation transference is the reason why an attractive store draws customers, why a beautiful automobile is considered a good car, and why an effective package sells a brand. If the consumer has pleasant sensations from the color of an auto, they are most likely to conclude the car is of good quality; the sensation from the color is transferred to the performance of the car without any consciousness of such a fact. Rarely is the consumer aware that they are influenced by the color (or design) of a product or package. Sensations involve associations, which are generally unconscious or subconscious.

Here are some familiar and successful brands that have had lasting success. Notice the use of circles and soft, rounded features. Cheskin’s studies revealed magenta red had a preference rating of 90%. More tests consistently revealed that of the two geometric images, the oval is the most effective in that it has greater preference and retention in memory. Cheskin’s association tests showed ovals have predominantly favorable associations and sharp rectangles have largely unfavorable associations.

Figure 1. Examples of Brand Logos

Source: Google.com images

Sensory Effect on Communication

Companies that experience the benefits of strategic communication also understand the effective use of written content when combined with the right colors
Aslam, 2005), fonts, shapes, and images, which can alter how employees feel about employee benefits and ultimately how employees feel about their employer. Cheskin (1957) holds that while the “product” quality is the determinant of consumer satisfaction, imagery generates interest via “sensation transference.” People react to the image, not the idea. Each image generates an emotional response: Books are judged by their covers, corporations are judged by their brands, and products are judged by their package (Roth, 2019). It stands to reason that employee benefits can also be judged by its “packaging.” Figure 2 shows before and after design changes using the same content for the same employee population. Such visual changes can result when employee benefit communication design is strategic, creating a more engaged way to reach one’s audience. In this case the target audience was women between the ages of 25 and 40 years. The use of different fonts, colors, and images, along with layout changes, were some of the changes. These design changes did not just happen. They were prepared strategically using a communication assessment strategy and results from employee focus groups.

Figure 2. First Example of Before and After Design Changes

Source: Gallagher (2020), Communications Catalog
Emotional branding closes the gap between the logical approach of corporate cultures and the emotional world of employees (Gobe, 2009). Emotional branding connects one’s purpose to employees in an emotional way. It focuses on shared values that can tap into the aspirational drives that underlie human motivation. It is the unseen magic that reaches our subconscious and influences the choices we make. When we are able to shift from “me” and “you” to “we” through positive shared experiences, we reach a level called self-expansion (Barbara Frederickson, 2009b), defined as incorporating the other person’s skills, traits, and resources as one’s own. Positive, shared experiences broaden and expand people’s self-views and how they fit into the larger organization. When we can incorporate shared values into employee benefit communications, we can elevate the relationship between the organization and the employee, recognizing each as partners who are inspired to achieve the same outcome.

**Thinking Fast and Slow**

System 1 thinking is fast and intuitive, whereas System 2 thinking is slower and more logical (Kahneman, 2011). System 2 thinking is the conscious reasoning self that has beliefs, makes choices, and decides what to think and do. System 1 thinking is effortless impressions and feelings that are the main source of beliefs and choices in System 2 thinking. You can perform less well or not at all if you are not ready and prepared with System 2 thinking. System 1 thinking constantly generates suggestions for System 2 thinking: impressions, intuitions, intentions, and feelings. If endorsed by System 2 thinking, impressions and intuitions turn into beliefs, and impulses turn into voluntary actions. When all goes smoothly, which is most of the time, System 2 thinking adopts the suggestions of System 1 thinking with little or no adjustment. You generally
believe your impressions and act on your desires, which is exactly what we are doing with employee benefit communication material and benefit guides. We are creating a visual impression that supports a feeling and turns into a belief.

The Florida effect study done at the New York University by psychologist John Bargh and colleagues (1996) asked students to assemble four-word sentences using words such as Florida, forgetful, bald, gray, or wrinkled. Even though the words such as old or aging were never included, students displayed characteristics of aging with merely the suggestion of words, then later insisted their behavior did not change nor were they influenced in any way by the “primed” words. Priming aligns with my research. As we work toward gaining a better understanding of the words and symbols that can influence employee selection and appreciation of their employee benefits, the words chosen in benefit guides can influence how employees think about their benefits and the organization they work for.

Typographic Taste Changing

Sarah Hyndman’s (2019) study called the Jellybean Experiment linked types (fonts) with taste and explored the sensory connection of humans demonstrating the strength that our brain has when it visually connects with a font, brand, or image, then connects with the visual for taste or emotion.

Hyndman gave study participants a bag containing more than 100 jellybeans but had only two identical jellybeans. At the appropriate moment they were instructed to eat a jellybean while looking at a jagged typeface, then to eat the second jellybean while looking at a rounded typeface. Hyndman found the study participants rated the second jellybean as sweeter than the first jellybean. This finding supported her theory that
typefaces can have an impact on intensity ratings of taste. This finding was later supported in a study by Carlos Velasco, Sarah Hyndman, and Charles Spence (2018).

Understanding the optical connection to our senses is important to this capstone study because it supports the concept that we can elevate an employee benefit guide to have a greater influence on employees, reinforcing the brand and using fonts that can connect the employees to their deeper emotions including their alignment with the organization’s core values and corporate mission.

**Studies That Support Visual Stimulus**

There is great complexity in analyzing the assumption that a corporate brand holds the ability to affect how employee benefits are perceived (Ramsøy & Skov, 2014). We cannot assume that producing an informative email can communicate the value that has been invested in employee benefits. Several studies have shown the direct link between effective communications and improved employee engagement scores. The essay “Mapping Visual Studies in Communication” by Barnhurst et al. (2004) provides a history of the recorded and published research in the area of visual studies. This research shows psychology, when used in the field of visual studies, is dynamic, not a passive process. Psychological theory builds from visual recognition, based on shape identification and categorization, and provides an understanding about what happens to the human brain when it sees those objects.

An exploration by Göransson and Fagerholm (2018) demonstrated how a visual perspective can be applied to strategic communication. In their paper entitled “Towards Visual Strategic Communications: An Innovative Interdisciplinary Perspective on Visual Dimensions with the Strategic Communication Field,” these researchers acknowledged
visual resources in communication can be powerful in cognition and memory. They also noted visual resources are not only transmitters of information but can also be the products of cultural histories and cognitive resources used to create meaning. About 75% of all information reaching the brain is visual, which becomes the main source of stimulus that forms our perception of reality. According to Barnhurst and colleagues (2004), all communication has a visual dimension; research in communication areas such as advertising and public relations often relies on such visual language, which is exactly what we want to translate into a visual language for employee benefits: to enhance understanding and appreciation.

**Color**

Most research related to color is concerned with color preferences. Researchers have examined how colors affect mood (Hamphill, 1996). As a marketing tool, color attracts consumers and can shape their perceptions. Through color a brand can establish an identity, form relationships with a target market, and position itself among competitors in the marketplace (Labrecque & Milne, 2011). One classic example is a case of Coca-Cola versus Pepsi. To distinguish itself from its main competitor, Pepsi moved away from red and embraced the color blue. Victoria’s Secret used the color pink as the core of its rebranding strategy to create personality, and Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation relies heavily on the color pink to increase awareness. Associations are triggered in our memory through the color’s referential meaning. The color of a brand logo is designed to activate associations. The activation of color associations, as well as their influence on affect or behavior, may occur without a person’s conscious awareness or intention. The color red can be linked to excitement and associated with the
characteristics of activity and strength. Studies have found that longer wavelength hues (e.g., red, orange, yellow) induce states of excitement. Yellow represents warmth.

Blue is linked to competence; it is associated with intelligence, communication, trust, and logic. Green is primarily associated with nature and creates feelings of security.

**Communication Strategy**

![Communication Strategy Diagram]

**Tier 1 - Business Motivation**

Need for financial success and support investment

**Tier 2 - Emotional Awareness**

Driven by need for employee appreciation of benefits

**Tier 3 - Psychology of visual stimulus**

Make it sustainable

**Tier 4 - Communication Strategy**

Communicating Change

We use a process to communicate change, which is called change management. Change is a *situational process*; the way we communicate, the process used to disseminate information, can affect any transition. The first critical step is to analyze the current employee communication situation to understand the communication breakdowns and the barriers so we can determine how best to reach the organization with key messaging (Barrett, 2002). The goal is to achieve intellectual buy-in, creating a story in which employees can see themselves as part of a bigger purpose, are aligned with key business issues, and understand how these issues can positively affect them.

The second step involves the psychological process that guides how people think, what they go through as they internalize the material, and the subconscious effect it has on behaviors (William Bridges, 2016). This second step is the opportunity to build
commitment by engaging people using strategic messaging tactics combined with graphic design elements. In addition, this second step relies on sensory transference (Cheskin, 1957), which is a subconscious assessment of a service or product based on associated secondary inputs. It is how we make snap judgments and how people make decisions based on how content is presented. And when information is presented in a way that reaches one’s emotions, behaviors change. Emotion is to an organization what petrol is to a car. One cannot go far without it (Thomson & Hecker, 2000). But one also needs a strategy to build the car first. The strategic and psychological processes go hand in hand.

A strategic approach to communicate benefits can create greater understanding and unity, as well as provide not only the education needed but desired by employees. Excellent employee communications can ultimately produce quality employee relationships and supportive employee behaviors toward their organizations, which ultimately can impact employee engagement (Grunig et al., 2002).

Communication Strategy

What does it mean to be strategic? Fagerholm’s definition of strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission. This broad definition reflects the connection between the organization and its mission. An effective communication represents the strength of an employee’s desire to remain in their organization and to work for that organization because they endorse what the organization stands for and is interested in supporting its mission, goals, and values (Schulz et al., 2017).

Barrett’s (2020) study entitled “Change Communication: Using Strategic Employee Communication to Facilitate Major Change” identifies how to structure change
communication to improve the employee experience. Barrett’s hypothesis is without effective employee communication, change is impossible and change management fails.

Barrett’s study showed meaningful communication can accomplish two objectives:

1. It informs and educates employees.
2. It motivates and positions employees to support the strategy and the goal.

If communication accomplishes both objectives, it is “meaningful,” contributes to the company’s financial success, and helps the company become high-performing. The findings that emerged from the research includes some of the following best practices.

In high-performing companies they found a one-on-one correlation between the corporate strategic objectives and the objectives for communication. Supportive management with top-level and mid-level management must be directly involved in and assume responsibility for communication. Targeted messages need to provide information tailored to the audience. Organizing effective distribution vehicles can reach all audiences with the use of all available media. Key to the outcome is the communication team needs to have a “seat at the table.” Communication needs to be integrated into the business process.

Barrett (2002) acknowledged organizational change is difficult and then defined the various scenarios of change to include a merger or acquisition, a new venture, a new process improvement approach, or reengineering. I propose an additional scenario is the communication of employee benefits. Annually, employee benefits change. Employee benefits may change to enhance the plans being offered, manage corporate costs, or better meet the needs of employees. Regardless of the reason for the change, change happens annually; those changes affect employees in some way. Employees need to know what
the changes are and how these changes will impact them; this communication must be done in a way that is understood by all employees.

Barrett (2002) introduced the following problem to illustrate the strength of a strategy on outcomes. Companies in 1999 spent $3.3 trillion on mergers and acquisitions yet “less than half ever reach their strategic financial goals” (Barrett, 2002, p. 219). Her assumption is the company’s leaders think they will be different, and their change program will work, which supports “under-communication” as a major reason change efforts fail. An analytical model was used to assess and improve communication.

Positive Psychology

Figure 3. Krach’s Employee Benefit Communication Theory

The gold standard for measuring happiness was life satisfaction. But that thinking has evolved forward to the topic of positive psychology with its goal to increase life satisfaction. But now that thinking has evolved forward with the topic of positive psychology to mean well-being; the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Good feelings come and go, much like perfect weather. Positivity fades. If positivity were permanent, you wouldn’t notice the difference between good news and bad news, or between an invitation and an insult. The goal is to increase positivity over time (Barbara Frederickson, 2009a). Much of what people report as life satisfaction is determined by how good they feel. People who have the most positive emotions, the most engagement, and the most meaning in life are the happiest, and they have the most life satisfaction (Seligman, 2011).

The goal of positive psychology in well-being theory is to measure and build human flourishing. Achieving this goal starts by asking what really makes us happy. The gold standard of measuring life satisfaction is measuring happiness, and the goal of positive psychology as it applies to employee benefits is the effective use of total rewards as well as the expanded set of services a company makes available to help employees and make them feel happy.

The results from many studies in this area are that positivity broadens one’s outlook. It expands one’s mindscape, bringing new possibilities into view. It can broaden people’s views of themselves and can be pivotal for relationships. Art Aron, one of the leading scientists studying human relationships, asked thousands of romantically involved people to use a set of overlapping circles to represent how they feel about their
relationships. This simple measure was a way to see an overlap between you and your partner. The greater the overlap, the more likely the relationship grows in the long run. Aron and his colleagues call this concept self-expansion. With positivity you go from classifying people as a separate “me” and “you” to seeing more interconnection, as in “we” and “us.” The reinforcement of shared values can be one way to achieve this within an organization.

Figure 4. Aron’s Schematic of Concept Self-Expansion

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Creating conditions that promote behaviors of feeling better about oneself, or feeling good about the information being received, can push positive primes, resulting in a significant number of individuals who become slightly more positive in a calm realm (Shalev & Bargh, 2011). It is possible that a variety of visual conditions—especially revolving around issues of trust, happiness, and calmness—could be of great value as it relates to employee engagement, particularly as it relates to nonconscious interventions such as the use of color and shapes in employee benefit communication materials. Social psychologists have produced numerous demonstrations of nonconscious processes that play an important role in behavior change. Conscious processes are generally costly, intentional, controllable, and effortful, and the individual is aware of engaging in them. Nonconscious automatic processes are characterized by their unintentional, relatively effortless nature, and they operate outside of awareness (Williams et al., 2009).

Priming based interventions are based on the perception that stimuli (primes) automatically activate the resulting emotions. A good example of subliminal priming is the music played in stores to influence shopping choices. In one study researchers played tunes that would be regarded as German or French on alternate days. They found that on days when the French style music was played, shoppers would be more likely to purchase French wine. Similarly, customers purchased more German wine when German music was played (North et al., 1984).
For the purposes of this study, I began with an understanding that colors represent visual properties that carry meanings and lead to specific effects of perceptions and behaviors (Briki & Hue, 2016).

Participants

A survey was distributed via email to 372 people working in the Employee Benefit consulting industry. A total of 157 survey participants (40%) responded to the survey and voluntarily completed the survey; 29% of the respondents reported they were male, and 71% of the respondents reported they were female. Their ages ranged from 16 participants at less than 30 years of age, 40 participants between 30 and 44 years of age, 49 participants between 45 and 54 years of age, and 49 participants over 55 years of age; 3 participants did not reveal their age.

Experimental Design

The survey received the approval of the Organizational Dynamics professors at the University of Pennsylvania. The Qualtrics analytics tool was the survey platform used. The survey consisted of 28 questions focused on circles, triangles, and square shapes. The layout and images were chosen to relate more closely to employee benefit guide materials.

A range of color tones in red, blue, green, and yellow were used. The red, green, and blue (RGB) color model was used in selecting the hue:
Figure 5. Color Model Used in Survey Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color Family</th>
<th>RGB Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Family</td>
<td>R=0, G=45, B=91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=0, G=95, B=158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=0, G=174, B=239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=102, G=159, B=213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=170, G=206, B=237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Family</td>
<td>R=100, G=0, B=2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=210, G=35, B=42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=204, G=0, B=0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=255, G=0, B=0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=255, G=117, B=97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Family</td>
<td>R=200, G=157, B=17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=255, G=194, B=32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=220, G=186, B=6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=250, G=255, B=164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Family</td>
<td>R=20, G=66, B=20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=70, G=128, B=0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=136, G=188, B=40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=202, G=221, B=9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R=216, G=237, B=176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Figure created by Krach, P. and colleagues.

The ratings assigned to responses were focused on a range of emotions from anxious to calm (1 being anxious to 10 being very calm), happy (1 being very unhappy to 10 being very happy), and a sense of belonging (1 being detached to 10 being very connected). These characteristics were chosen as they align with emotions tied to employee engagement.

**Survey Results**

A total of 58% of the respondents selected option A in response to the question, "Which image do you prefer?" The majority of respondents reported the image made
them feel “calm.”

Figure 6. Font Options Presented to Survey Respondents

![Font Options](image)

Font A: Falco Black; Sans Sarif
Font B: Lickety Split
Font C: Halimun
Font D: Konigsberg Semi Bold, Sans Sarif

When given the choice between blue, red, yellow or green, 71% of the respondents selected the blue option A in response to the question, “Which image do you prefer?” The majority of respondents reported the image made them feel “calm,” with a mean of 7.31.

Figure 7. Color With Font Options Presented to Survey Respondents

![Color Options](image)

A total of 91% of the respondents selected the circle in option A in response to the question, “Which image do you prefer?” The majority of the respondents reported the image made them feel “calm,” with a mean of 6.72.
A total of 75% of the respondents selected the circles in option B in response to the question, “Which image do you prefer?” The majority of respondents reported the image made them feel “happy,” with a mean of 5.32.
A total of 52% of the respondents selected the circle in option A in response to the question, “Which image do you prefer?” The majority of respondents reported the image made them feel “happy,” with a mean of 5.81.
The majority (72%) of the respondents selected the circle in image B when asked, “Which image do you prefer?” The majority of respondents reported the image made them feel “happy,” with a mean of 5.58.
The majority (48%) of the respondents selected the blue image A when asked, “Which image do you prefer?” The majority of the respondents reported the image made them feel “happy,” with a mean of 6.79.
Figure 12. Fifth Set of Image Options Presented to Survey Respondents
Benefiting from the use of colors requires sensitivity to organizational goals and how to incorporate the corporate brand guidelines, along with the elements such as circles to support the communication strategy. My survey showed that blue, when partnered with circles, elicits calm. By contrast, red, yellow, and green circles elicit happy emotions.

But often when we are creating communication materials, we are confined to use corporate brand guidelines, which dictate primary and secondary colors, fonts, and images to be used. A collaborative, strategic process needs to take place that coordinates the needs of HR leaders, our employee benefit consultants, and the creative graphic design team.

The approach to this study assumes that the colors and shapes when used in employee benefit materials can influence how employees feel about their benefits and ultimately their employer. By using circles and colors to illustrate information, employers
can influence feelings of happy or calm related to employee benefit communication information. Using the results of the survey, we began to incorporate our findings into employee benefit guides, while incorporating the existing corporate brand guidelines for each company.

My last course in the Organizational Dynamics program was entitled “Developing Emotional Intelligence Through Art.” The course created an awareness of how art creates an aesthetic experience. When art is an aesthetic experience, it *intensifies* the sense of immediate living and accentuates what is valuable in enjoyment. Through that course I experienced how art removes filters we create in our relationships, allowing for a more intense, authentic experience. Color, when expressed through art, helps to break down our barriers. And as our professor Claudia Tordini explained, “Color describes the world without words.” When we can reach people at an emotional level through an intentional process, we can begin to break through barriers and filters that people establish about their employer and open them to a more authentic employee experience.

What are the images that can make a difference? And how do we incorporate those images and color into our work with employee benefit communications? Chapter 4 presents some case studies in which we began applying color and circles to real-life employee benefit experiences.
CHAPTER 4

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1

The first case study was a holding company for multiple theme parks with a large number of employees enrolled in employee benefits. We began by first looking at the current 2021 benefit guide (Figure 14), which another designer had prepared. The leadership was not impressed with the look and felt it was not creating a connection with employees. This client applies strict adherence to their brand guidelines and corporate pictures. You can see the former cover image shown below. Dark blue was the dominant color used, along with a wave design to provide a custom look. A red circle was used to feature and communicate open enrollment dates for employee benefits.

Figure 14. Case Study 1 Benefit Guide – Before
For the refreshed design shown in Figure 15, our designers began with multiple cover options for the employer to choose from. The cover image shown is the one that was selected. Notice how the lighter blue combined with circles better defines a feeling of happiness. By being limited to the use of the client’s image library, we selected the joy of a roller coaster ride.

Figure 15. Case Study 1 Benefit Guide – After

Case Study 2

The second case study was a staffing company with 3,000 employees. Employee benefits are a key strategy used for employee recruitment and retention. This organization’s ability to communicate their employee benefits was of key interest to them. Exhibit E is the cover from the former Employee Benefit Guide. Creating a benefit guide that communicated the feeling of happiness was a key directive from this employer. Exhibit F is the benefit guide cover that our designers created. This guide will be posted on the employer’s intranet site and will be digitally distributed to employees. Visual access will occur on laptops and mobile devices. The question is, will it pass the 9-second
rule? Will those employees who view that cover page be motivated to open the guide and look further into it?

Figure 16. Case Study 2 Benefit Guide – Before

Figure 17. Case Study 2 Benefit Guide – After
Case Study 3

The third case study was a holding company for several hospital networks. Each hospital has their own name and identity, which is separate from the holding company. The holding company did not want to compete with the community hospital identities but wanted a brand to suggest wholeness and inclusivity. We created a symbol by using a circle that represents energy with a subtle message that represents unity, encircling each employee in their journey. We bring the “whole” person to work as being protected by employee benefits that support physical well-being, financial well-being, career well-being, community well-being, and emotional well-being. We kept within the color scheme as dictated by their brand guidelines.
Figure 18. Case Study 3 Benefit Guide – Before (at Top) and After (at Bottom)
Case Study 4

The fourth case study was a large hospital, which was very interested in creating a greater employee experience. Figure 19 shows the before cover, which meets the business need to present benefits to employees, and what the cover looked like after we created the revised design. The use of brand color, circles, and images creates a greater impression. We changed the title to “Colleague Benefits.”

Figure 19. Case Study 4 Benefit Guide – Before (at Top) and After (at Bottom)
There is complexity to this capstone study due to the merging of two philosophies. The first is the business considerations that influence the need for employee benefits and communication. The second is consideration of the human experience expressed to influence emotional intelligence. The case studies shown here illustrate the intersections and connectivity of these influencers and how they can expand our expectations in communicating information about employee benefits. When we elevate the cover of the package through design, the greater quality of the product is represented, resulting in a greater appreciation and respect from all parties.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

The research for this capstone demonstrates that when one follows the steps that lead to a greater understanding of the importance visual opportunities create for employees and employers, maximizing every opportunity becomes critical to an organization’s strategy. Visually communicating benefits without maximizing one’s visual tools is an organizational weakness and harmful with respect to both employees and the cost invested in these services. Identifying emotions in the workplace is not a weakness but a strength so that we can use it to fuel an understanding of the shared experiences between employees and total rewards.

When we recognize an organization’s financial investment in total rewards, yet they choose not to effectively communicate them to employees, it represents a shortsighted misunderstanding of the influence that visual communications can have on people. A strategic shift takes place when an organization can recognize the importance of effectively communicating to maximize the powerful benefits the company offers employees. Celebrate it! Communicate it! Benefits and the ability to understand them are so valuable and important in the employment contract.

We are in an arena of achieving greatness. And to achieve greatness in business requires that we squeeze the maximum capabilities out of every single opportunity in front of us. Nothing is more important than our human capital, our employees, our teams, their experiences, their motivations, and their life’s purpose. We learned that when employees are aligned with the organization’s corporate purpose, they go from me to we,
and at that level the greatest engagement takes place. But being engaged is a two-way street of giving and receiving. Employee benefits and total rewards are an organization’s opportunity to give back and support the well-being of their employees. It is connecting their physical, emotional, financial, career, and community well-being and communicating these connections in a way that touches emotions using the reinforcement of positive psychology. When we fail to make the connections needed, the result can be a turnover of employees and an inability to recruit new hires.

We have shown how we can elevate employee appreciation with the effective use of color and shapes. This journey has shown that as humans we are influenced greatly by color, shapes, and the smart use of corporate branding. When we are strategic in our approach, we honor the investment made in employee benefits. We can be successful at reaching employees at a deeper level. For this study I have been using employee benefit guides as a starting point to help employers communicate. These guides are only a small part of an overall strategy and campaign but an excellent example of how we can use fonts and colors to make a difference. This capstone study experience increased my awareness of the influence of images and colors and increased my understanding of the intersections of diverse understandings that were needed. Ultimately, that understanding led to my model in creating the tiers in better understanding business motivations, emotions, sensory psychology, strategy, and positive psychology.

Rooted in the belief that positive psychology follows the gold standard to increase the amount of life satisfaction on the planet and is determined by how good we feel at the moment, Martin Seligman (2011) created a visionary understanding of happiness.
In summary, my ability to transform this feeling into visual appreciation is supported by my findings on the colors of blue, red, yellow, and green. This capstone study revealed and supported how visual communications influence people and how that might create greater emotional connections to their employee benefit information and ultimately the longer-term effect of how employees feel about their membership and belonging to their company.


Beggs, A. (2019, February 20). There’s an entire industry dedicated to making foods crispy, and it is WILD. Bon Appétit, 82-87.


Spaho, K. (2009). *Organizational communication as an important factor of company success: Case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina*. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/ORGANIZATIONAL-COMMUNICATION-AS-AN-IMPORTANT-FACTOR-Spaho/bca8516614cf1509bae2a43d06187326df144a64


APPENDIX A

KRACH’S VISUAL OF LEFT BRAIN/RIGHT BRAIN CONSIDERATIONS TO MAXIMIZE EMPLOYEE BENEFIT APPRECIATION

KRACH’S EMPLOYEE BENEFIT COMMUNICATION THEORY

Source: Krach, P. (2021). *Shapes, colors, and fonts: The hidden power in employee benefit communications* [Capstone, University of Pennsylvania].