



# Your products deserve a language

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**A Visual Brand Language  
(VBL) can speed product  
development and strengthen  
the brand with your customers.**



# Do your products speak the language of your brand?

How do we know the difference between a designer handbag and a knockoff? Or identify which insurance company is advertising just by the chime of a jingle? What is it that makes an Apple product instantly recognizable? Perception is a powerful cognitive and psychological job that's constantly performed by our brains. We process massive amounts of incoming information from all of our senses, filter that information and select the most useful parts. Perception goes back to ancient times, when we learned what to like and what to fear based on sensory input. In today's reality, our perception field is required to filter all of this information in a way beyond survival to fit our social realities.

Consider how uniquely the Cooper Mini, a pair of Beats headphones or the Burberry plaid pattern communicate their brands. It's not just their marketing materials or logo emblem, it's the choice of each curve, negative space, proportions and color palettes that artfully coalesce to reflect their brand essence.

So what is it that designers do to make products 'speak' their brand? It's something called a Visual Brand Language (VBL). A VBL is a tool created by designers to establish, at minimum, a consistent aesthetic, form or appearance across products—physical or digital or both. A VBL can even extend into interactions, establishing the feel of things like physical buttons and digital clicks.



*Beats by Dre have a strong VBL.*

# Your products deserve a language

The toolkit of elements a designer includes in a VBL are things like: shape, proportion, line, silhouette, motion, color, contrast, texture, lighting and sound. These are elements that, when combined in various ways, communicate different messages.

## Who needs a VBL?

When applied to multiple products, a VBL results in a consistent look and feel that clearly communicates your brand to customers. You might be in need of a VBL if the look of your products no longer reflects your corporate brand. Perhaps the look of your products is disparate because of acquisitions, siloed business units or lengthy gaps between new product launches. One way or another, if your products leave an inconsistent impression on your customers then they are not performing up to the potential strength of your brand.

A company without a VBL may go unrecognized in the chaos of the marketplace or, even worse, be mistaken as a competitor.

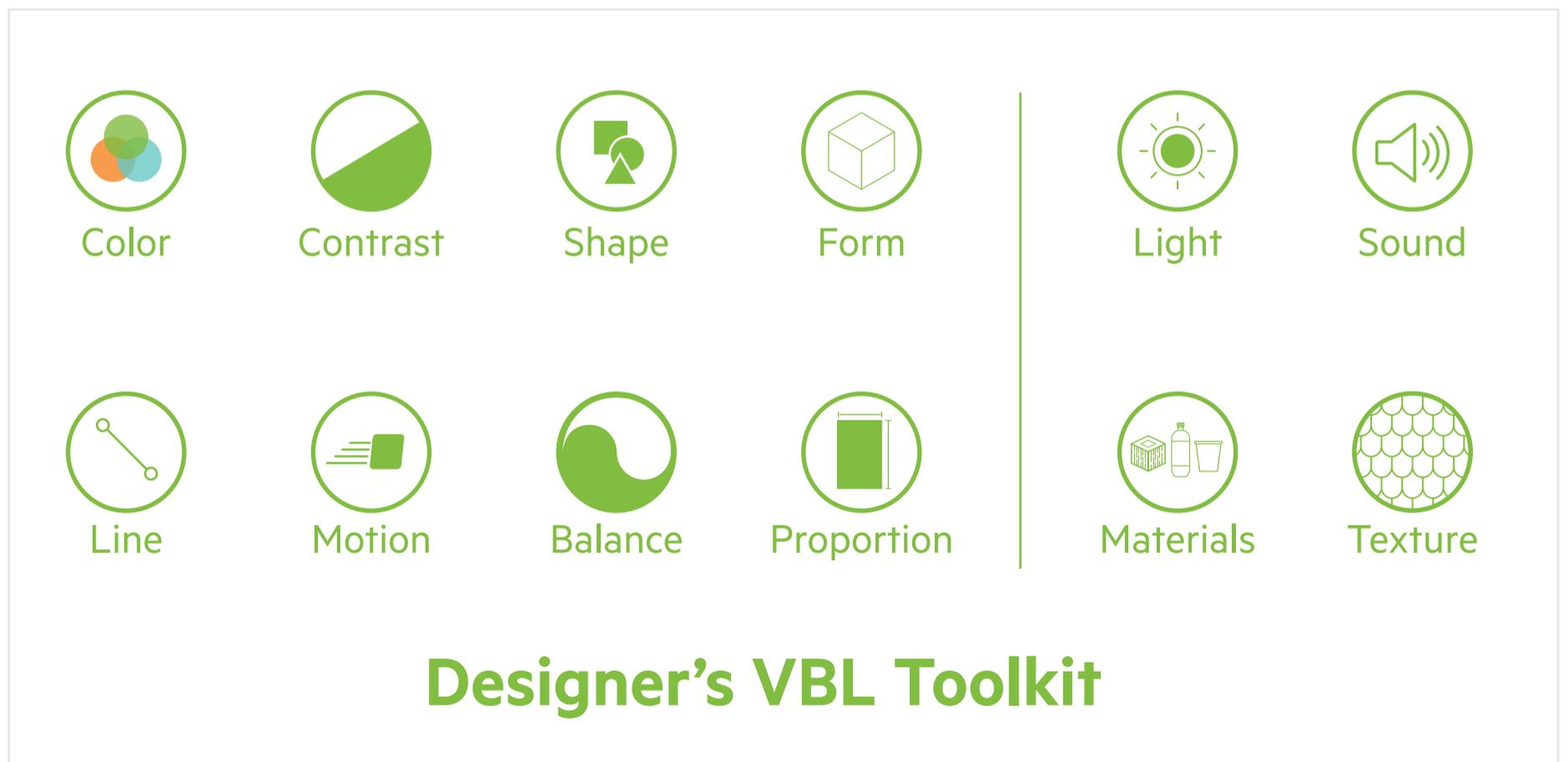
A company with an established VBL creates tremendous brand strength by delivering a consistent look and feel across every single touchpoint and

interaction a customer has with its products. After you've made the sale, it allows you to continue delivering your brand message through the customer experience. It gives companies the opportunity to reinforce their brand values and extend their brand into daily interactive experiences.

A VBL may or may not help you single-handedly sell more products. However, given the fact that you have to apply an aesthetic to every product anyway, the effort to make it consistent results in value-added marketing. Consider what you invest in marketing to your current customers every year. What would happen to your marketing budget if you needed to deliver an additional branded message to each customer once a week? What would happen to that budget if you increased it to two times per day? Now consider that if you establish a VBL, you can remind your customers of who you are and what you stand for every single time they look at or interact with one of your products. That is an exponential increase in brand reach.

## Cost and benefit considerations

Depending on your business needs and your product approach, the cost of developing a VBL can be a



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*For companies with many products, a VBL reinforces brand.*

significant investment. However, with some thoughtful planning, establishing a VBL can be very affordable, especially relative to other marketing costs.

For example, you could begin by establishing a design language for a product that's currently in development and take extra care in the approach so that it can be extended to future products and redesigns. A step further would be to take a subset of products in your line and create a VBL for them that can be expanded

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over time. The most strategic approach involves creating a VBL for a future product offering—or a current and future offering. Sometimes, that's what is necessary to revitalize your brand but many companies don't need to make that level of investment.

A VBL has some additional organizational benefits. It creates a tool for design and development teams to more efficiently make decisions about how to execute products. It provides consistency between business units, suppliers and partners. It streamlines decision making about the forms, colors, materials, finishes and graphics for the development of every new product, whether it's a simple incremental update or a ground-up new product. A VBL is based upon established brand guidelines that define things like brand values, personality, colors, fonts and logos and extends it by defining the design elements required for physical and digital products.

If you don't already have a VBL in place, consider the current state of your product portfolio. Is it time for a VBL? Might it be time in the next year or two when you are planning some key new product launches? When is the right time to get this into your strategic plan and budget?

A VBL is an investment, but when compared to the potential benefit, it's a small one in the grand scheme of things. Not only will you significantly strengthen your brand with your customers, but you will increase your recognition in the marketplace, establish operational efficiencies and reinforce a sense of pride within your company.

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