Creating Great Layouts on a Tight Budget
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Loads of money won't save a bad design. And good design doesn't need a big budget. Creating great layouts on a tight budget all comes down to the fundamentals of effective contrast and great concepts. Combine them with smart economical use of your time and you can have your pages hitting above your budget.

Type is the most important and cheapest tool for designing great layouts.
Make sure you employ all the forms of type contrast available: size, weight, colour, and structure (serif vs. sans serif).

Size and weight establish the hierarchy of meaning on the page. When you prioritize your information, you create a typographic funnel into the story: image to headline to deck to drop cap and finally into the body copy. This means making sure that the headline is the primary typographic element on the page. Make it bigger, bolder or brighter than all the others.

With display type, try breaking out of your regular format occasionally by adding an illustrative touch to a headline. If the head is "Taking Play Seriously," try drawing the word "Play" in crayons.

Contrast your main body copy with your sidebars. If you use serif in justified columns for the main body, use sans serif in flush-left rag-right columns for all sidebars. The reader now has two subtle clues to help them navigate through those different levels of information.

When choosing the font families for your publication, always select ones that reflect the personality of your magazine. Don't just pick your personal favourite of the month.

Format every repeatable item in your magazine.
Use style-sheets, libraries, templates and colour palettes to store all repeatable elements — you'll save time with every page you execute.

Try to keep your templates down to one document with repeatable items (such as folios) in the root master page. If you have a separate template for every department in your magazine it will take hours to implement any global change to the design or style-sheets. Instead, group all of the repeatable elements on pages — such as regular columns — with a small blank picture box in the top left corner at x:0 y:0 coordinates. Dump these grouped elements into your library. When you need that column again, pull it onto the page and double-check its coordinates for x:0 y:0 (this will be slightly different if you have rules bleeding off the top or to the left).

Colour palettes for typographic and graphic elements (rules, backgrounds, etc.) establish an emotional tone for your publication, provide unity within all the departments and save time. Allow yourself to depart from this rule in longer features that need their own internal unity. Draw colours for typographic and graphic elements from the images within each feature. If you pick accent colours, rather than the most dominant ones, you will create a visual surprise that enhances both the image and the other coloured elements in the layout.

Be smart about the images you commission or the ones you grab from stock photo agencies.
Does Time's use of a $30 iStockphoto image on its cover allow us to abandon the concept of commissioned artwork? You'd be surprised how many good illustrators and photographers are willing to take on interesting assignments from small niche publications for very little money. If the project intrigues and challenges them, it will result in work that they'll be proud to add to their portfolio.

Before you assign, make sure you understand the main point of the article. If you can't figure it out, ask the editor of the piece. Then pass that information along to the visual contributor. Don't let them find it for themselves. It's disheartening how often some obscure detail near the end of the article is highlighted in the first sketches. Get them going in the right direction from the outset.

If you do go the stock photo route be prepared to do a lot of looking. There are very few standouts in the mountain of clichés on the cheaper sites. Ask yourself if there is some way you can turn the cliché on its head and come up with something surprising. And keep honing your Photoshop skills so that you can combine generic elements into an exciting original.

sans serif

serif

36pt

bold

play