

# Introduction

Color enters every part of our life.

When creating good design, creatives must fully understand both the range of color available and its power to convey feelings. The relation of color to mood is so ingrained that it is like a trigger response. We are calmed by the color of the sky on a sunny day. Grass green brings a feeling of freshness to whatever it touches. Sunshine yellow makes us feel happier. How we relate to color is intrinsic and, with few exceptions, cross-cultural.

Within each range of color are tints or hues that move, for example, from bright, vibrant, pulsating red to soft, pale, quiet pink. Creating exciting and effective design is, in large part, about understanding the subtleties and power of color and how it can work for you—and sometimes against you.

An understanding of color and how it works is critical to developing powerful web design. This means appreciating the limits of this web medium and how best to take advantage of its offerings.

The web, as a means of communication, is instantaneous, changeable, and borderless. A design posted in San Francisco is viewed the same day in Shanghai. An event in Sydney can be webcast and seen live in Santiago. With these opportunities comes the challenge: Never has design needed to be so compelling and universal.

Web design has traditionally been created in industrial nations, yet less developed nations now have wide accessibility to the web also. Designers can come from

anywhere on the planet, from the smallest villages in the most remote areas to the towers of design in the capital cities. Web sites can be launched in tiny towns and viewed in corporate headquarters. With the growing range of the web, both its design and its audience expand daily. As designers can no longer tightly identify their market, they must use all the elements available to them to effectively communicate with this potentially universal audience.

*Color Harmony for the Web* is for designers, web artists, and those looking to use the web to expand their reach. We begin with background information about color and its psychological effects, the demographic palette, trends in color, and web-specific concerns. Then we explore how designers have successfully solved various communication challenges through their design and the use of color.

We also include a color chart of the 216 web-safe colors. This chart allows designers to reference the available colors and their Hex code equivalents. The site examples include large corporate and e-commerce sites as well as small sites promoting local bands; this broad range allows comparison of successful designs and their elements.

Whether you're new to web design, a seasoned webmaster, or someone looking to better understand what makes for good web design, *Color Harmony for the Web* will help you explore the power of color in this new medium and how to use it effectively.

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GOING TO, ARRIVING AT, LEAVING WITH**



# Welcome to Color

Design on the web has grown with its use. In 1992 there were only about 50 web sites. The latest statistics track the number of web sites at 3.6 million, with additional sites coming online at a rate of 4,400 per day! Whether or not you love the web, there's no denying its growing importance: The U.S. Department of Commerce's Census Bureau recently released its first set of e-commerce numbers, reporting that online retail sales were \$5.3 billion for the fourth quarter of 1999.

The number of actual web pages has also reached epidemic proportions. NEC Research estimates that there are around 1.5 billion web pages, with the number expected to reach 8 billion in the year 2002, exceeding the world's population.

The number of potential web sites also continues to grow. Registrar Network Solutions registered 4.7 million new

domain names in 1999. That's more than double their registrations in 1998, for a total of about 8.1 million registered names.

However, amid this breadth of choice, research indicates that 80 percent of users only visit 15,000 sites, or just 0.4 percent of all pages available. Therefore to keep and attract attention, web sites need to focus their efforts. Along with effective site architecture and content, the design and use of color are key to attracting and branding a site, building mindshare with users and the number of all-important return visitors.

In this book we'll explore the aspects of color, from its psychological effects to its limitations when designing for the web. We'll also review several web sites that successfully use color, and we'll explore why the colors work and what inspired the creative directors and designers when creating the site.



# Why Is Color Important?

Do you ever see red? Feel blue? Become green with envy? We tend to associate certain colors with particular emotions because colors have the power to influence our feelings. They strike a chord deep inside us, and we subconsciously respond to their subtle persuasion.

Color plays a role in every design created. Even black-and-white designs convey meaning through their tones. Designers use colors to ignite certain emotions in their target audiences or facilitate brand recognition. Who doesn't recognize the bright orange of the Tide box or the signature red of Coca-Cola? Colors should reflect the image or the message you're sending as you aim for a particular response from the target audience.

The first step in understanding color is knowing how colors influence you in relation to how colors influence your

audience. Put colors in their proper perspective. Some colors, for example, may be popular but have negative connotations. We all have personal associations with color; it's easy to put our own prejudices on color.

Designers must get beyond cultural background and negative feelings to explore the full range of colors available to them. As children, we may be taught or told certain things about color, such as that orange is cheap or tacky, or that it's not an upscale color. But look at designers like Versace.

They're using more orange. You may have this little voice in your head saying "I can't use this." However it's in the context of usage, how and where, that determines what works. So much of your own opinion goes into each color choice. It's important to get beyond personal reactions and responses to properly explore color options.



### Demographic palette

Part of the challenge in color selection is that different audiences respond differently to particular colors—and the trends are always shifting. On some level, the demographic color palette has been reversed. For example, the old-school approach to designing for children called for generous use of primary colors—the bright colors to which kids are thought to respond. Think of PlaySkool and Fisher Price equipment: reds and yellows and blues. Yet, color palettes for older kids are much more sophisticated. Because older kids and adolescents tend to aspire to the age group above them, today's pre-teens prefer the darker colors favored by Generations X and Y. They respond to

black, muddled browns and grays interspersed with flashes of bright color.

Meanwhile, the elderly population is experiencing an opposite reaction to color. Traditionally thought to favor softer, mellow tones, today's seniors are leading more active, involved lives in society: Their tastes and wardrobes reflect this with brighter colors.

Designers need to understand the demographic trends when developing images for age-specific groups.

Remember, seniors are not sitting at home knitting. Go out. See how active they are and what colors they're wearing. Incorporate these colors into your designs. Reflect their lives in your choice of color.

### Popularity shifts

The popularity of colors tends to intensify and fade, and designers should always be aware of what colors are “in” and what colors are not. To discover which colors are popular, we only need to look around us and see what is prevalent. Remember to look outside your field. If you’re a graphic designer, look at the world of fashion or Hollywood. Colors and their popularity come from places other than graphic design. Keep an eye out for what’s popular in other media. Trends in fashion, for example, will often translate into trends in design one or two years later.

To identify which colors may become popular, and coming trends in color, immerse yourself in pop culture—including art and television.

Entertainment magazines, for example, reveal which colors are being used to promote new films. If the film becomes popular, then the colors used to promote it will become popular. Fashion is also a great source. It’s where you’ll see the new colors and color combinations first.

Designers who once complained of restrictions imposed by clients now realize that client attitudes about color have changed. Companies are recognizing the importance of color in marketing. Consider the use of color with the iMac, for example, and other products traditionally in neutral colors, such as cell phones and radios. Previously you had items in either a gray or black. Now these items are available in tortoiseshell, bright reds, and other “fashion” colors.

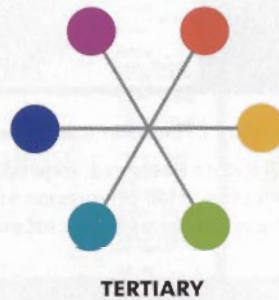
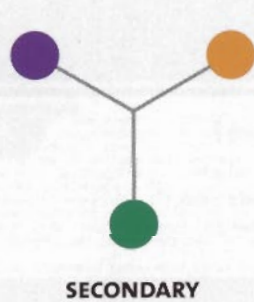
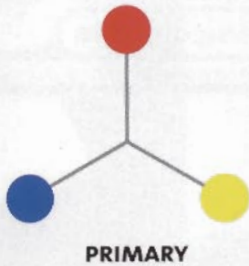


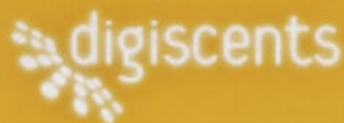


# The Color Wheel

The color wheel divides colors into primary, secondary, and tertiary color. The three primary colors are those that aren't made from blends of other colors. They are Red, Blue, Yellow. These colors form an equilateral triangle in the color wheel. Secondary colors are those that come from blending two primary colors: Purple (a blend of red and blue), Green (a blend of blue and yellow), and Orange (a blend of yellow and red). They are also positioned equidistant in the color wheel. Tertiary colors are then a blend of a primary and secondary color.

twelve segments of the color wheel are arranged by specific tints and shades. A full level of saturation or brightness means that there is no black, white, or gray added to the color. Adding white to any of the twelve colors results in lighter colors or tints, moving in to the center of the color wheel. For example, pink is a tint of red. Shades are created by adding black or gray to the color, moving to the outer ring of the color wheel. For example, maroon is a shade of red. By seeing the effect of shades and tints and their relation to other colors in the color wheel, we can visualize the balance of colors as we're planning a palette.





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# Color on the Web

## Text type tips

There are three types of text colors on the web: Text, Links, and Visited links. Each of these elements must work differently with color.

Remember that when designing for the web, the primary goal is information, or content, and therefore the text must be legible. Use a high

level of contrast between the text and the background to allow the text to be readable. The most legible color combination is black text on a white background—easy, but not interesting. Be careful reversing the text out of the background, that is, using a light text on a dark background. This strategy may look interesting, but if you don't choose your colors carefully, the reader will struggle to take in the content.

Links usually have a brighter color than the body text. In this way they are easy to identify. They also work to attract the reader, therefore keeping them at the site for a longer period (the objective of the site design,) making the site “stickier”—the adjective used for really effective sites.

You need to signal to the user which links are new and which have been visited. Generally choose a darker color for visited links, allowing the non-visited links to stand out.

The screenshot shows the ALTPICK.COM website interface. At the top, the logo reads "ALTPICK.COM" with the tagline "THE SOURCE FOR CREATIVE TALENT & INFORMATION". Below the logo are navigation tabs: "ADD YOUR WORK" and "FIND AN ARTIST". The "FIND AN ARTIST" tab is active, showing a search form with a "Type" dropdown set to "All", a search input field, and a "Name, City or Keyword" field with an "OK" button. To the right of the search form are two artist profiles: "Photographers Illustrators Designers Interactive Artists Artists" and "Brian Laidler, Illustrator, Virginia".

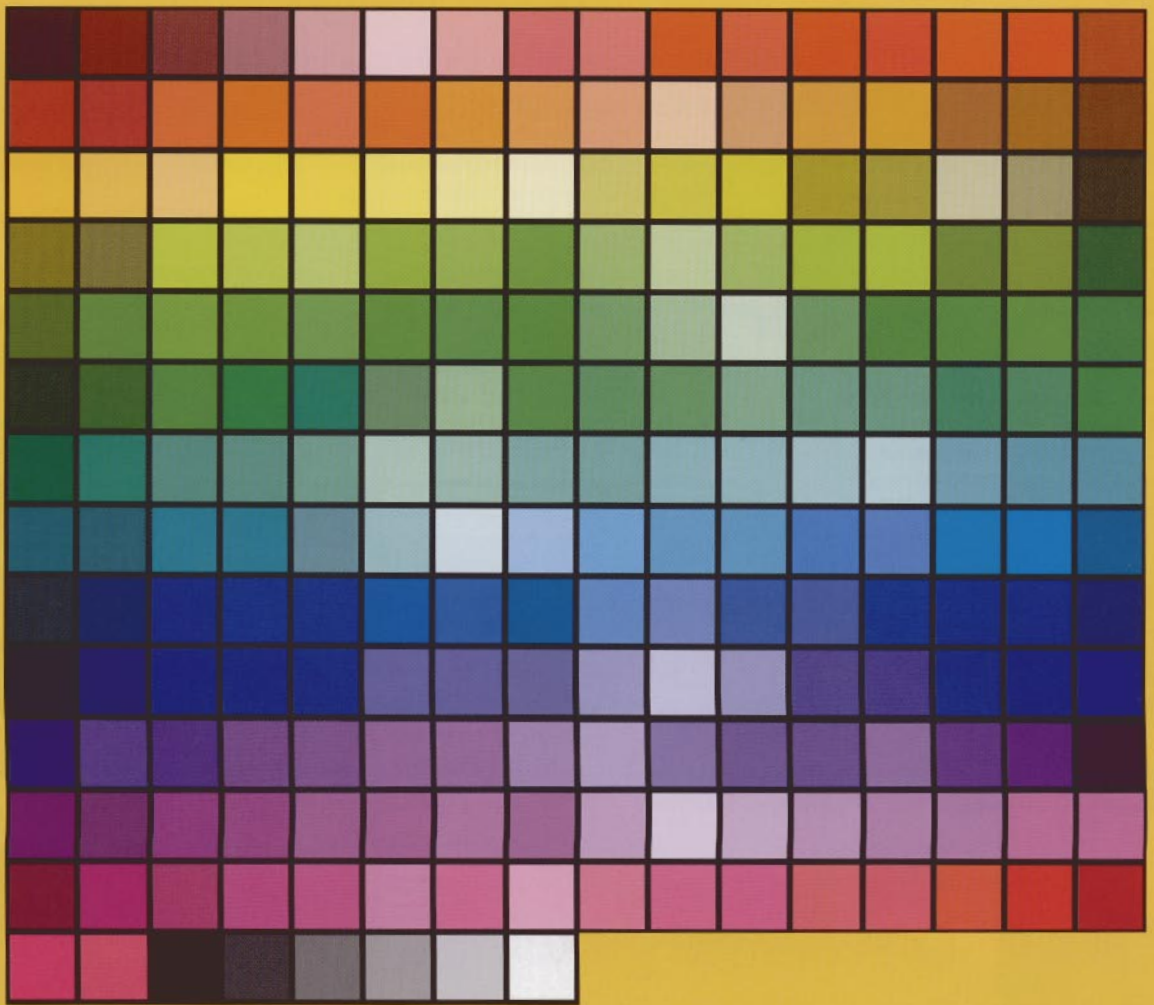
The main content area features an "Artist Spotlight" for "Greenberg Kingsley Designers • New York City". The spotlight includes a large, intricate blue and yellow mandala graphic. Below the graphic, the text reads: "[Feb 17, 2000] It's been over ten years since Karen Greenberg and her husband D. Mark Kingsley left their respective positions as art directors within the cosmetics industry and formed Greenberg Kingsley. Karen oversaw the Paloma Picasso, Armani and Ana's Ana's fragrances at Cosmeair, Inc., and Mark was at Intelligent Skincare, a division of Pola, the Japanese cosmetics giant."

Below this, a quote from D. Mark Kingsley is displayed: "Design in the cosmetic industry mainly consists of Mother's Day, Christmas and everyday 'line maintenance,'" says Kingsley. "We would spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours on copy rapping, getting the perfect color, or adjusting how a vacuum-formed base would 'grab' a bottle. It's a wonderful experience for a young designer, but for some people it could be boring. We always wanted to work in the music industry, so as regimes changed and department hierarchies shifted, we did too."

At the bottom of the spotlight, it states: "Among Greenberg Kingsley's first clients were Este' Lauder, Sony Music and Amnesty International."

On the right side of the page, there are two sections: "WHAT'S NEW" and "CALENDAR". The "WHAT'S NEW" section lists several items with arrows pointing to them, including "Tillem Python", "Smay Vision & Heretics", "Cremated by Genoc Shree", and "Taylor in Society of Hustlers Annual". The "CALENDAR" section lists events for October, including "Interactive Music 100(M3) LA Convention Center", "Copy Dev/tech ADC Speaker Series", "SASA Business & Design Conference", "William Wineman Fashion Photographs", "Billboard Video Music Awards Los Angeles", and "Beats Online".

A vertical sidebar on the left contains navigation links: "HOME", "MEMBER AREA", "NEWS", "ARTIST SPOTLIGHT", "BOOK", "MOVING IMAGES (50)", "Contact ALTPICK.COM", "Join The ALTPICK.COM List", "Download the ALTPICK.COM App", and "ALTPICK.COM".



### **The browser-safe color palette**

Images on your color video monitor are created by use of three phosphors, red, green, and blue, which are activated by an electronic beam. You can only see colors on your monitor that fall within the range covered by these three colors. Because of this requirement, colors for the web are specified by their Red, Green, and Blue color values, or RGB. Colors for HTML, hexadecimal numbers, are specified by #RRGGBB. The # sign indicates that it's a color code in HTML. The first two numbers in the RR position reference the red content of the color, the second pair of numbers in the GG position reference the green content, and the third pair of numbers in the BB position reference the blue content of the color.

To make using color on the web even more challenging, realize that most computer monitors can only display 256 colors at once. Yet, with digital technology, designers can create up to 16.7 million colors. Despite a designer's desire to use a certain color, if it won't

show up on a user's screen, the color will be shifted or "dithered" and the effect lost. Metallic colors, for example, are popular in print design. Include them in your web design, and metallic silver can appear gray, and that just-right gold may become a bland yellow. The quality of an image depends on the capabilities of the user's hardware and software. To display images, Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer use only the 216 colors that are common to Macintosh and Windows operating systems. These 216 colors have been dubbed the "Browser-Safe Palette."

If a design consists of images created on a 256-color palette, when displayed on a browser using a Browser-Safe Palette, the colors will shift, depending on the browser and the platform. This problem is most noticeable in areas of a design where there are large areas that use a single color. Here there will be a noticeable shift in color, often with less-than-pleasing outcomes. Using a Browser-Safe Palette helps designers achieve predictable results.

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# CMYK Process Color

CMYK is the standard model used in offset printing for full-color documents. In the CMYK model, all tones are described as a mixture of these four process pigments: Cyan [C], Magenta [M], Yellow [Y], Black [K].

The CMYK palette offers a wide range of colors. To specify a process color, you specify a percentage value for each of the four colors. A nice red, for example, would be 0% C, 100% M, 40% Y, and 0% K. If, however, you'd rather have orange, you would decrease the magenta and increase the yellow: 0% C, 50% M, 100% Y, and 0% K.

The CMYK model is unique in that it works by subtractive, reflective color rather than the additive, radiant color system used by RGB color. Radiant color is produced by the energy radiated from a luminous object such as a cathode-ray tube or a light-emitting diode, hence the color used on the web. RGB is called additive because a color becomes lighter as higher levels of red, green, and blue light are added.

Reflective color, by contrast, represents energy that is not absorbed by a substance such as ink or paint. Pigments and CMYK color work the way color does in nature, according to the subtractive color model. Sunlight contains every visible color. When sunlight is projected onto an object, that object absorbs, or subtracts, some of the light and reflects the remainder. The reflected light is the visible color. For example, a tulip is bright red because it absorbs all non-red from the light spectrum.

CMYK is important to web designers because of the recent repurposing trend. While web color is typically specified in the RGB formula, good web design may need to be converted to CMYK to continue branding in print media, or printed material may form the basis of web design. As the importance of the web for branding and messaging expands, the web-based RGB palette and the print-based CMYK palette must produce colors that match. To this end, many software programs have conversion features that allow RGB colors to be converted to the process colors of the CMYK palette.

# Aspects of Color

## Historical fluctuations

History shows that each decade has been dominated by color groups synonymous with that time period. The 1950s were pinks. Innocent pastels dominated everything from lipstick to cars. The turbulent '60s brought a period of organized defiance, a freedom to experiment, and a redefinition of fashion. The British Invasion, Twiggy, and the Mod movement—so well captured in the *Austin Powers* movies—reshaped our cultural identity and gave artists the courage to create psychedelic swirls and pop-art prints. Yellows and oranges

made famous by Andy Warhol were everywhere. A return to the earth tones in the '70s popularized avocado green, gold, and rust in everything from kitchen decor to clothing. These browns and rusts yielded to the shiny pinks and purples ushered in by the disco era. The extravagant '80s, billed as the Color Conscious Decade, began with glitter and gold and then moved toward powerful red and corporate navy, with muted mauves, grays, and teals.

The 1990s kicked off with neutral tones, predominantly in the green family.

The screenshot shows a website layout for the Hewlett-Packard International Women's Challenge. At the top right is the HP logo. Below it is a navigation bar with links: "search", "the teams", "the course", and "race results". Under "race results" is a "stage" selector with buttons for stages 1 through 9, with stage 6 selected, followed by "1 2 3 to date". The main content area features a large, vibrant image of a female triathlete in a blue and red jersey. At the bottom of the page, there are two smaller images: one of a triathlete's feet on a bike and another of a triathlete celebrating with arms raised.





Neutrals like gray, khaki, and navy were popular. The 1990s are best known for the “colored neutrals,” soft yellows, yellow-greens, and corals. Tints of pinkish and peach were equally prevalent. Gray took on a lavender or bluish hue. Red was heightened as a tint. Eventually these tints will evolve into the next hot colors. Currently gray, often with a blue cast, is the leading neutral color, while blue-lavender has gained status as the top fashion shade. These current blue undertones provide the indication that blue will be the hue of the future.

Revival- and nostalgia-based design can benefit from these periods to capture a mood through color. For example, kids born after the '60s never saw the psychedelic movement, so when it was revived a generation later, the bright, bold colors were new to them, and they loved it. In the same vein, if you were young in the '70s, you didn't get tired of avocado green. So when it's available again, it's new to you. Or, if you loved harvest gold in the '70s, its use today—possibly with a slightly fresh spin—holds a kind of nostalgia for you, and can evoke some warm feelings, like hearing an old song that takes you back to that time and place where that song

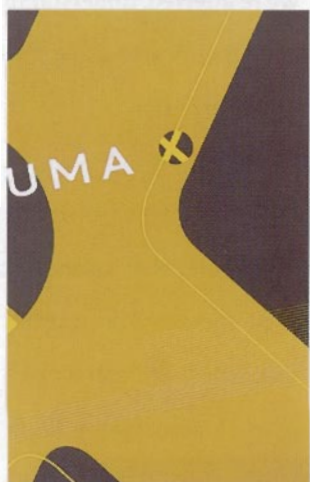
was important to you. The psychedelic colors are used so successfully in the re-introduction of the VW bug. It's their tie to the '60s that Volkswagen is conveying by the use of the bright colors.

### The psychology of color

Each color reaches us in a different way. Often we don't even recognize how we're affected. Understanding each color is critical to using it well and wisely in design.

**Red.** Red is the most studied and fascinating of all colors. It connotes excitement and danger, fire and bloodshed. Red can evoke a psychological fight-or-flight response: blood pressure and adrenaline rise, and hearts beat faster. We pay attention to red. It's a warning signal that is imprinted and reinforced generation after generation. It also has the most energy. Due to the physical stimulation associated with red, there is a sexual quality to the color. Because of this quality, red works well to underscore sexual allusions.

**Blue.** Blue is the opposite of red. We associate this color with serenity and tranquillity. Blue is seen in relation to



sky and water. We relate blue with dependability and constancy. This explains why certain types of blue are often used in company logos to evoke reliability.

**Green.** When people look at green, they see nature, which conveys a freshening and cleansing. Among the most-often-cited favorite colors—by consumers, as studied in color research—are the blue/greens because of the fresh and calm feelings associated with them. Therefore green works well to connote healthiness and freshness, for example.

**Yellow.** Yellow represents the sun in many cultures. Lighter yellows inspire a more cheerful, inviting feeling, while brighter yellows get more attention. Bright yellow is the most visible color. It's what our eye picks up first, so it's a good choice to grab attention, especially if highlighted with the opposite, cool colors—such as blue and green—that retreat in our field of vision.

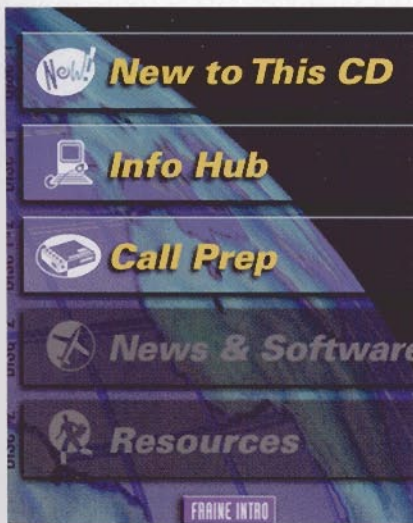
Yellow and black are the most powerful color combination. Together these colors instinctively remind us of predatory animals and stinging

insects. The attention-grabbing nature of the color combination remains with us today.

Cross-culturally, yellow evokes an upbeat, enthusiastic feeling. Therefore it works well when trying to convey happiness.

**Orange.** Orange is a combination of red and yellow, adopting qualities from both; it encompasses the excitement of red and the warmth and good cheer of yellow. Orange has a wide spectrum of hues, from brilliant neon to a softer, terra-cotta color. Because of the wide range of orange it's often the color that's the most misunderstood, and misused. Orange is a popular color for children, and therefore works well with toys and games. Because of its energy, orange is also associated with festivity and is a good choice when designing around celebrations or happy events.

**Brown.** Brown traditionally represents earth and dirt—both positive and negative. But recently the perception of brown has changed. It can now be associated with chocolate and coffee, gaining an air of deliciousness that it



previously didn't have. Through the color associations with furs and dark woods, brown now has a more luxurious quality to it.

Outside the realm of the richness of coffee and chocolate, brown can evoke a sense of wholesomeness. How people feel about the color depends on the way brown is used. Often brown needs language associated with its design to properly connote the right mood.

**Black.** Black is a psychological color. At one time, black was considered funereal and associated with grief. But black now has an upscale aspect to it, evoking sophistication, power, and elegance. Black is a good choice when communicating a sense of elite or when targeting a design at a more urban audience.

**Purple.** Purple, a blend of red and blue, is the most complex of colors. Red makes purple hot and can bring out sensuousness in the hue, while the blue tones cool purple, making it more sedate and calming.

The heritage of purple and royalty dates back hundreds of years to European nobility. Originally purple was difficult to produce. Its dye was only available from a difficult-to-find snail whose shell had to be broken open to access the dye. Therefore, given its rarity, only royalty could afford the color. In some European cultures it was even declared that only royalty could wear purple.

Today purple is a good color choice when targeting creative types. Purple is so complex that it's effective when used with less traditional designs. It's often an underused color. As it has the element of red to it, it engenders excitement and causes us to stop and take notice. Purple is so unique that until recently there were few packages on the shelves dressed in this hue, other than Cadbury's chocolate in the UK, for which purple referenced a feeling of royalty.

Now that we've reviewed the colors and the reasons for web- or Browser-Safe Color, we'll explore some web sites that successfully celebrate color in their designs.