

# Expanding Researchers' Understanding of Effective Corporate Identity Design for Company Spin Outs

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*University scientists who are experts within their discipline may lack knowledge on how to begin the process of commercializing their findings. The essential components, with examples for an effective corporate startup identity package, are presented in a web-based guide, "Spin Out: a researcher's guide to corporate identity." This resource, available at <http://innovation.swmed.edu/IDGuide>, was devised as a step-by-step tool for building a corporate identity without expensive consultation with brand developers.*

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## Introduction

Although licensing of university inventions directly to established corporations continues to be a major vehicle for commercialization, some innovative technologies can only be matured within the confines of a startup company because the product concept may not be advanced enough for licensing, be too risky or simply not fit into the product portfolio of any existing company. There is continuous stream of new startups emerging from these research laboratories within universities and institutions. There are readily recognizable startups that span a variety of technology domains, from information technology, to semiconductor and biotechnology (Shane 2006). Startup companies frequently begin with little or no seed funding, but nonetheless have to build corporate identity to effectively show their presence and to attract investment funding. Some universities, such as Indiana University, have established incubator facilities to help the scientist/entrepreneurs start companies. These include the Johnson Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation and the Emerging Technology Center, but many others are left with having to start the process on their own with little funding and insufficient resources (Frerichs 2004). In both cases, effective and inexpensive tools to aid them in establishing their companies are needed. One such tool would be one that assists these new entrepreneurs in the basics of defining their

corporate identity, thus enabling them to produce materials such as a logo, letterhead and web designs.

Companies are continuously searching for a simple and effective means of communicating who they are and what they do; this is especially true for entities wishing to establish themselves. A properly constructed identity system puts forth the company's best traits and improves the ability of individuals to understand what that company does (Fombrun 1996). The concept of an identity system is important because it is often an expression of the company's core idea. It is a badge, a global symbol, an all-encompassing identifier of a company and its promise of quality and lasting relationships. A corporate identity is a crucial element of a company's corporate DNA and intermingles with its brand. It is the essence that imparts meaning and personality to a company (Perry 2003).

## Company Spin Outs

Universities and other nonprofit research organizations generate thousands of new technologies and product ideas annually, and each year billions of dollars are spent to sponsor the research that produces these innovations. A survey published by the Association of University Technology Managers (AUTM) reported over \$41 billion in sponsored research expenditures in 2004. During that



**Figure 1.** Spin Out: a researcher's guide to corporate identity <http://innovation.swmed.edu/idguide>.

same year, there were 16,871 invention disclosures reported, 3680 patents being issued and 462 new companies, based on an academic discovery, were created to develop and commercialize these inventions (Stevens 2005). There are notable success stories such as Medtronic and Google which were founded as university spin outs that have maintained their initial identity, while others such as Polymer Technology Corporation, developers of contact lens technology, have merged with bigger companies like Bausch and Lomb (Shane 2006).

Researchers are faced with several challenges in the process of spinning out a company from a university. Often, a starting entrepreneur is inexperienced and the small company they created may be unable to conduct substantial research and development (Frerichs 2004). One major challenge is attracting partners who will help finance the development of the new technology or product. This is frequently done without professional startup assistance, leaving these scientists to write business plans that demonstrate that they have a novel idea, that it can be protected (patented or proprietary), there is a significant market for the product or technology they are developing, and that they have assembled a strong team that form the core of the startup. Although minor when compared to these aspects, a well formulated corporate identity is needed, if for no other reason than to have consistent and memorable format for their business plan or investor presentation (the pitch). Having a unique initial image is of great value to a company because it, in some form, may stay with the company as it matures, can be protected by law and serve as both a shield and weapon for growth (Chajet 1991).

The value and development of an identity for a new startup can be difficult for researchers or newly designated entrepreneurs to comprehend. More frequently researchers are immersed in the development of their new technology and are more keenly aware of the science behind the technology. As a result, they may not be skilled in, or have knowledge of all the business aspects that are required to initiate a start up company. Although there are many resources available that deal with the topic of designing corporate identities, many of these, while informative, are written for an audience familiar with the ideas and concepts of design such as other designers who are looking for inspiration from successful identities. Others are very extensive and the time required to review the literature is prohibitive when a researcher is committed to devising and executing their startup's business plan.

To address the needs of these inexperienced entrepreneurs a web-based resource for quickly learning the basics of corporate identity was constructed. This tool, "Spin Out: a researcher's guide to corporate identity," leads these scientist entrepreneurs through the process of constructing a corporate identity on their own, without expensive professional help, for which they rarely have funds. This resource is available at <http://innovation.swmed.edu/IDGuide>. This simple and interactive guide on corporate identity design will educate university-based researchers on the fundamentals of developing a corporate identity for a spin out company by addressing key concepts, theories and procedures of

graphic design to meet their needs.

## **Development of the Identity Design Guide**

The development of this guide required us to: 1) determine the needs of researchers wishing to create an identity for a spin out company, 2) research the steps necessary to develop an identity package and transforming that information into an interactive guide presenting the fundamentals of designing an identity package, and 3) have seasoned entrepreneurs test and evaluate the identity design guide.

### **Needs Assessment**

The initial impetus for developing the corporate identity resource was provided by Dr. Harold Garner at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. From his experience in spinning out companies, which include BioAutomation (<http://www.bioautomation.com>), Nimblegen (<http://www.nimblegen.com>), etexx Biopharmaceuticals (<http://www.etexxbio.com>) and Holocept (<http://www.holocept.com>), Dr. Garner recognized a need for an instructional or reference source on identity creation that was specific and tailored to the needs of researchers who may not have the background in graphic design to assemble a complete corporate identity that was both informative and visually appealing. Lessons learned from each of these startups provided a starting point for a more thorough study into the basic and minimum components of a startup identity package. The guide was developed in parallel with the corporate identity package for the startup, Holocept, enabling us to utilize the Holocept identity as the testing ground for the instructional resource, which was then implemented on the web. Every component of this company's identity needed to be developed, and could then be used as examples of each of the package's components and used to observe and monitor the process of identity creation.

The process for devising both the Holocept identity package and the resource tool was iterative, cycling between discussions with the innovator/entrepreneur and investigation of basic reference sources in corporate identity making to identify those concepts missed by Dr. Garner and his team, who are self-professed novices in corporate identity development. These sources included books and web material on designing corporate identities, image development, logo design, and name creation (Knapp 2001, Olins 1990, Skaggs 1994, Charmasson 1988). As part of the web-based guide, a bibliography is included, and that bibliography includes substantially more references than those presented herein.

Some essential components of a successful corporate identity package require knowledge of graphic design. This is another area in which researchers lack experience since it may require a different type of creativity and certain artistic talents. Because identity creation requires an understanding of basics of graphic design principles which are crucial to the presentation and comprehension of corporate identity design, these were researched and incorporated into the resource. Again, a variety

of graphic design sources were consulted and compiled as part of the needs assessment and content development of SpinOut, of which a subset are included in this manuscript (Briscoe 1990, Haller 2001, Lauer 1995, McClurg-Genevese 2005, Mundi 2005, Wheeler 2003, Williams 2004).

**Content Development**

**Identity Design Process**

The process of developing the corporate identity design tool involved condensing all the primary resource information and experience obtained while developing the identity for our example company, Holocept, into a clear and concise guide that was both brief and thorough. The target audience for our tool, as mentioned before, is scientists and inexperienced entrepreneurs that need to quickly master the components of corporate identity so they can quickly develop identity components for their primary endeavors (company operations and seeking funding) while devoting a minimum of time and effort to the process.

The approach in the guide was to provide just enough information to keep it simple and was supplemented with general examples based on the package developed for Holocept. The final format included three sections; one on identity design concepts divided into ten topics one for each component of an identity (Table 1), another section on graphic design and related issues, and a final section defining key terms. Each of the sections and topics section included several visual examples that were cross-referenced and hyperlinked with key terms and these terms were simply defined in a glossary and in the discussion included in the guide. It was important to focus the guide on the critical topics for the identity package, which we and the entrepreneurs we worked with considered essential, however it should be noted that there are potentially many more (and evolving) components for a more advanced corporate package.

**Method for Presentation of the Guide**

As important as the refined content of the guide was its proper presentation so that it was readily available to the target audience and presented the material in a clear and easily navigable way, enabling users to master and utilize all or just parts of the guide to appropriately develop their corporate identities. The guide was therefore based on a previously established format developed by Marla R. Wilkins, "The Busy Researcher's Guide to Understanding Web Design," detailed in a thesis within the Biomedical Communications Department at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas (Wilkins 2003) and available on the web at [http://edissertations.library.swmed.edu/pdf/WilkinsM052903/design\\_guide/index.html](http://edissertations.library.swmed.edu/pdf/WilkinsM052903/design_guide/index.html).

Component	Description
Name	The unique identifier of a company. Usually a short phrase or single word. It endows the company with character, personality and distinction to make it appealing or desirable.
Logo	The graphic element of a brand or trademark. Usually a simple and unique design used to draw attention and serve as visual representation to make it easily distinguishable from others.
Tag line	A short, memorable phrase that sums up the premise of a company and reinforces the consumer's memory of it.
Letterhead	Stationery custom printed with the company's name, logo, address and contact information. Letterhead is used when creating documentation that will include original signatures and is an important conduit for doing business.
Business card	A small and portable marketing tool used to quickly give the consumer enough information to maintain contact with the company and its members.
Business plan	Similar to the letterhead but used for printing the company's plan for business and its anticipated growth.
Powerpoint	Graphic used as a background image when creating Powerpoint presentations. The design includes a color scheme that matches all other design elements of the company identity.
Web site	The electronic document that a consumer can find about a company. The web site is organized in a way that provides easy access to information about a company, its products and/or services, its members, latest news, or any pertinent information. Design and function are important to attract and engage the consumer as well as provide the information they request.
URL	Also called a web address, is a standardized address for some resource, such as a document or image, on the internet. A URL uniquely identifies a company on the internet so a consumer can directly link to the information listed by the company.
Fax sheet	A page including the company's name, logo and contact information, designed in black and white that is used when transferring facsimiles.

**Table 1** Table briefly describing the components that make up a corporate identity package, each of which is the focus of a topic section in the guide.

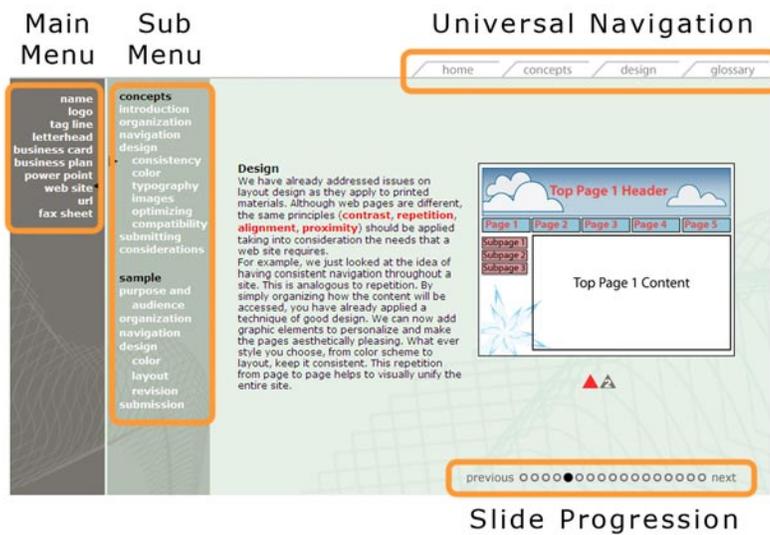


Figure 2. Menus used to navigate between sections of the identity design guide.

The SpinOut guide, following the instructional module format, uses a hybrid slide show/web page format as a means of presenting the material. Using this slide show format and the ease of web page style navigation techniques that enable interactivity, researchers found it to be very familiar and were able to follow and navigate to specific sections for future reference quickly and efficiently.

To make use of the slide presentation format, the page dimensions were kept to a size that would fit within the screen so that no scrolling would be necessary. This format maintains a simple and clean layout and a navigation system that was easy to follow, as seen in Figure 2. On each slide descriptive content (text) on each of the topics is accompanied with several visual examples, and the appropriate example is automatically presented by rolling the cursor over specific hot spots below the region that contains the images. Also, terms or jargon specific to corporate identity and graphic design are defined in a glossary which is accessed via a hyperlink. A universal navigation bar is included along the top that leads viewers to the three main sections, a main menu bar along the left containing the topics to be covered in the active section and a secondary menu to the right of the main menu that outlines the information presented within each topic. A progressive navigation system is also included along the lower right corner. This allows the user to proceed serially, one page at a time, and includes a visual cue of the progress made in the presentation. The colors used for the background are kept to a minimum and in a neutral shade to accentuate the content and not compete with the example visualizations.

### Evaluation of Design Guide

During the preparation of the guide and its content and following deployment as a web-based tool scientists and entrepreneurs were consulted on all aspects, from the balance

between thoroughness and focus to the streamlining of the presentation technique. This feedback yielded valuable information on the guide's effectiveness, method of presentation and relevance of material, enabling us to converge on the final version of the guide which is now available on the web.

The scientists who tested our final guide found it to be easy to understand and navigate. It was agreed that the method of presentation and its content was clear and efficient. After reviewing the guide, these evaluators stated that they were well prepared to design a corporate identity. These evaluators and other comments from sample users also felt that the material presented on design principles and how they apply to the creation of a corporate identity were critical and increased the value of the guide significantly.

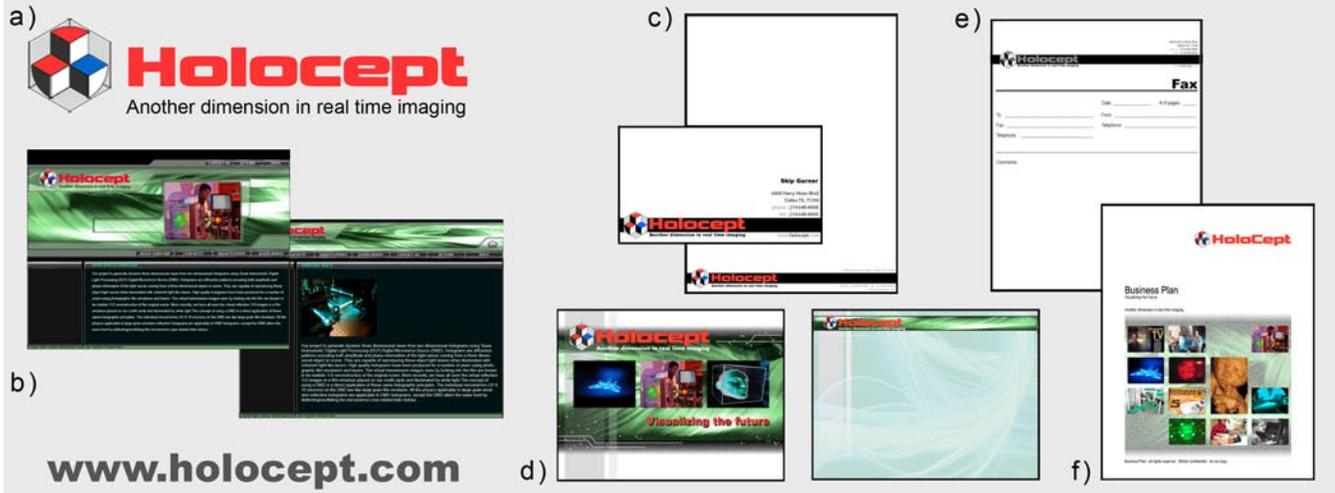
Our evaluators also recommended that the guide, in future editions could be enhanced by including more real life examples of corporate identities from other university spin outs that are common or easily recognized as a means of relating the material presented to successful

startups at various levels of maturity. An added benefit would be a component that was interactive in which they could test aspects of their particular corporate image design. Although this would be a challenge, and be beyond the current scope of the guide, some of these could be implemented simply, such as a color matching guide, in which users could visualize their color schemes using the examples already in the guide. They also suggested that the guide could be formatted in such a way as to make it useful as an instructional tool which can be presented to groups in a lecture format.

### Discussion

New technologies are constantly being generated and emerging from university research laboratories. If this trend continues and research institutions begin transforming more and more of these technologies into spin out companies, there will be a growing need for informational resources that address specific issues associated with the transformation of a research-centric scientist into a successful entrepreneur with a startup company. The tool, SpinOut, is an attempt to help meet this need.

The SpinOut identity design guide is intended for researchers and novice entrepreneurs and attempts to present the information essential for establishing a basic corporate identity in a concise yet comprehensive manner. Researchers possess varying skill levels, knowledge and understanding of design principles, spin out companies, corporate identities and software programs. Some may need more detailed and extensive information if they are already versed in a particular topic. Others may find the information presented overwhelming due to their lack of knowledge or understanding which may require a more condensed and simplified version of the guide. SpinOut was designed as a compromise.



**Figure 3** Corporate identity package designed for the holographic imaging company, Holocept, and included in the identity design guide as an example: a) name, logo, tag line b) web site and URL c) letterhead and business card d) Powerpoint template e) fax sheet f) business plan.

A key point in the design and construction of the identity guide was the development of an identity package for a university spin out company, Holocept, and incorporation of specific components created for that spinout company which is discussed in the guide (Figure 3). This was viewed as a novel approach for other researchers to follow and better understand the information presented by putting it in context. As noted in the guide's evaluation, the incorporation of existing corporate identities from other well recognized and successful spin out companies may provide an even better understanding of these concepts and their application. This approach, supplemented with more case-specific examples, may help emphasize the concepts presented by making the information appear less foreign due to the familiarity of some of these "real life" examples. Including examples of what to avoid and why they are flawed may also help emphasize these concepts.

### ***The SpinOut Identity Design Guide is Designed to Evolve***

A major goal was to make the guide available via the world wide web and respond to feedback from users, not only for evaluation, but also to continuously improve this dynamic guide. By using the Instructional Module approach, the guide is not just easy to use, but also easy to modify, enabling us to keep it up to date as corporate identity components change, but also to continuously add newer and better examples. A number of potential revisions immediately come to mind. Information such as the increased use of PDF documents, the use of trademark sounds such as the NBC chimes or the Yahoo! Yodel, media packets, brochures, methods to enhance the placement of the corporate web in search engine results and the possibilities stemming from the increasing use of mobile devices with web access and Bluetooth technology are but a few.

### **Conclusion**

This paper serves as an introduction to the web-based guide and describes the motivation behind its creation and its development and testing. Only a small portion of the content incorporated in the guide is presented herein, so for those wishing to start to understand these concepts, by example, should explore the guide and consult its references for additional detail.

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