



Open space

An audio retailer designs a card that floats on *air*.

Continued ▶

Open space

Your design should not impose a style but express who you are. Here, an audio retailer turns its blocky old card into a minimalist beauty.



Audio FX is a small, high-end, home audio retailer in Sacramento, California, whose sound rooms are rich, aural realms in which the music can swell and soar as if toward infinity. Its components and furnishings are uniquely sculpted, uncluttered, radiant and beautiful.

And quite different from its business card.

Blocky, static and uneven, the card (right) does not look like the store or its products. Its heavy, stylized appearance is the opposite of clean lines and open spaces.

The result sends a false message. Said the staff, “We should add ‘Home Audio’ to our new card, because people think we’re a car stereo joint.”

But that’s not because of the words; it’s because of the look. Better is to make *the design* say what you are. Here’s how to do that.

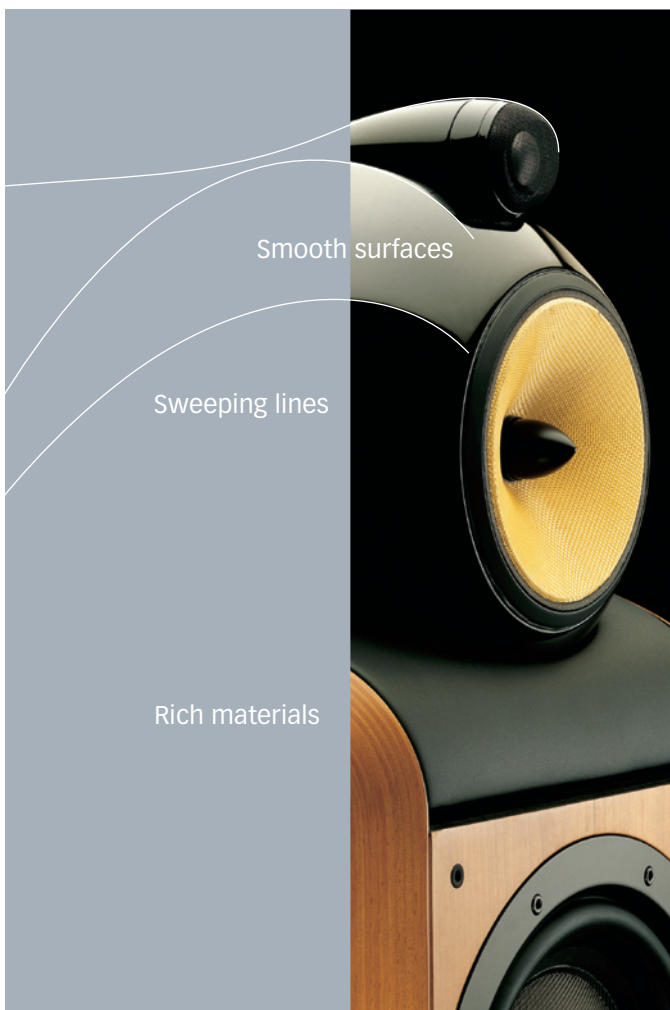


Before



The look we want

The lines, shapes and colors of high-end components are very simple—spare, geometric, black & white. The result is a sharp impression of clarity and spaciousness.



We'll retain the logo . . .
The modern part of the old card is the logo. Underpinning the logo are the thin, sweeping lines of six ellipses, which impart a sense of deep space, sound waves, and to the literal-minded, the looping wires of a sound system. Seen through a rectangular window (a square would convey more precision), these lines have no beginning or end or symmetry and seem to hang somewhere in infinity.

Before



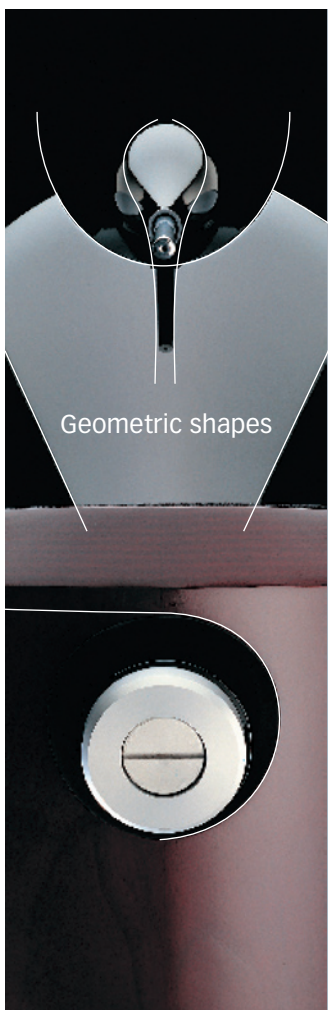
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 Sacramento
 California
 9 5 8 2 5
 916•929•2100
 FAX 916•929•2111
 www.audiofx.com

Steve Mounkes



The parts we don't

The old card doesn't have the light lines and open atmosphere of the store and its products, so we'll discard both type and layout in favor of a design that does.



A mismatch of styles
(Right) The style of the old card is a static typographic brick in which every element has been forced into a rectangle. This required unnaturally squeezing long lines and stretching short ones and yielded an irregular patchwork of type that pulls the eye heavily inward. The style is dense and congested; it doesn't match the store, and, for that matter, the text block doesn't match the logo.

Before



1415 Howe Ave.
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Force-justified
 (Above) Force-justifying equalizes left and right margins by distributing the leftover white space between letters. This traps it; the text block is closed and static. This is a good technique when you need to convey a sense of warmth and stability (although the craftsmanship must be better), but it's opposite the openness of high-tech.



Card one: Maximize the white

The key to a clean look is white space. White space conveys purity, clarity and radiance. The way to get more white in a fixed area is to *make everything smaller and lighter*.

Before



After, v.1



(Above) Same information, same space, but the new card has three distinct elements separated by white. The eye can move freely and read easily. White space conveys radiance; that is, lots of light. And in white space you can really *design*—create lines of sight, movement, tension, *dynamics*—because there’s room to do so.

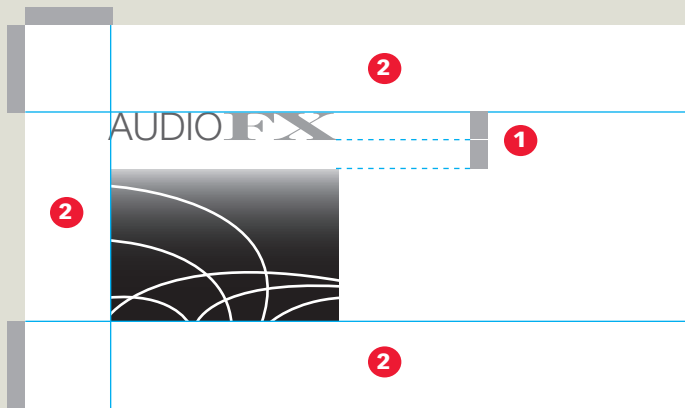


To fill the rectangle, the original FX had to be unnaturally large. The new version is small (1), light (2) and blends beautifully into the name.



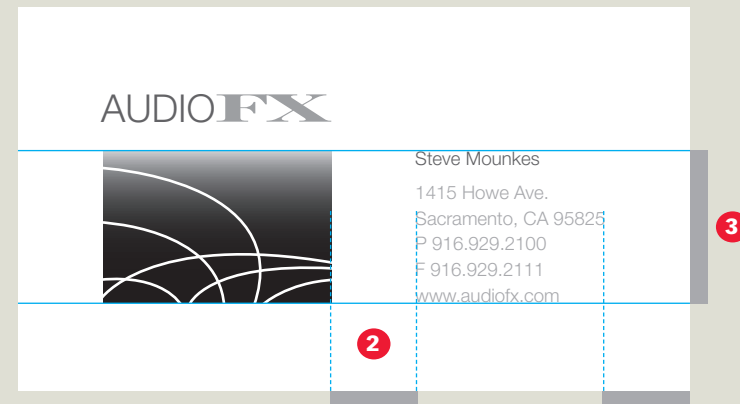
White is active

The white space of the original card was only a passive carrier, but on the new card it is an active part of the page and must be designed like any other element.



Float logo and name

Logo and AUDIOFX name work as a unit; they have the same width and are separated by a letter-height space (1). Float this unit until you get equal margins on three sides (2) as shown above.



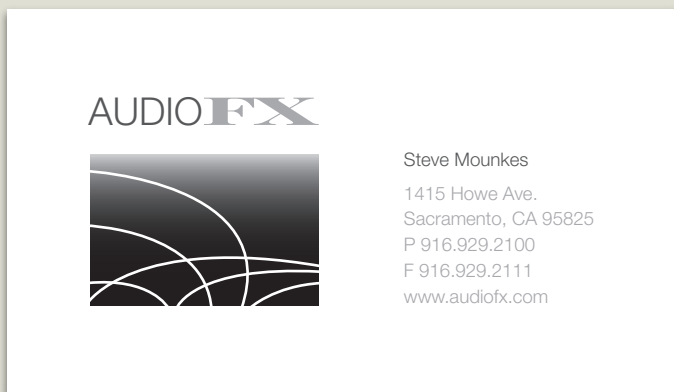
Place the text block

Then place the text block a margin width to the right of the logo (which in this case leaves the same width on the other side). The result is a card of simplicity and clarity—only two sizes of object (1 & 3) and two sizes of white (1 & 2).



Type must be light

To correspond to the purity of the white, set the type “purely,” too; that is, with as few variations of size, weight and case as possible—zero is ideal. Think *minimum*.



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 1415 Howe Ave.
 Sacramento, CA 95825
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 F 916.929.2111
 www.audiofx.com

Light and open

Unlike the original, justified block of trapped and irregular white space, when type is aligned left the spaces between characters are all the same, and the leftover white space is at the ends. This allows the white to flow into open space, and the eye moves freely outward.

Lighter still

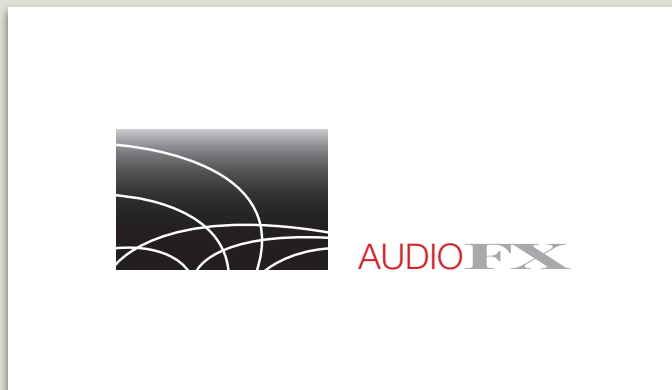
The lighter the type weight, the more white there is, which further heightens the sense of spaciousness and freedom. Tinting it gray makes it lighter still. Note above that the employee’s name remains black and is distinguished from the text block by extra space alone. Classy.



Card two: Use both sides, and add a color

If you're not limited to one side, double your white space by using the back. The look can become ultra-white, or you can use the extra space to introduce a product.

Front, v.2



Back, v.2



Color that connects

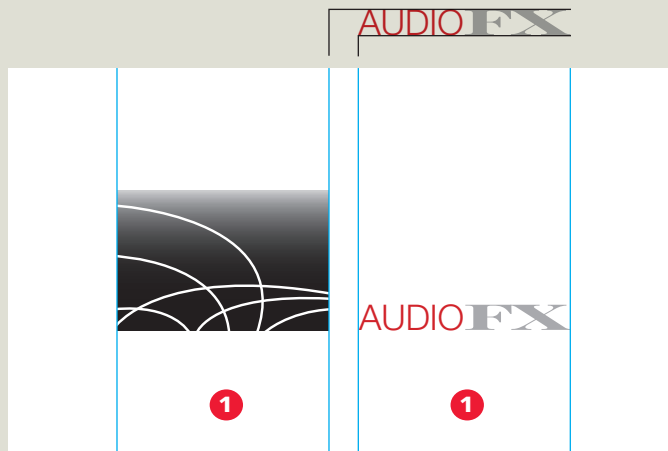
(Left) On the original card, AUDIO and FX are separated by a red hair-line. The extra color doubles the printing cost but serves no functional purpose, because it's too tiny.

(Above) Setting business and employee names in red puts the second color to excellent use: **1**) It creates a focal point on each side; **2**) it connects the front to the back; and **3**) it associates business name to its employee—all without changing a single type specification.



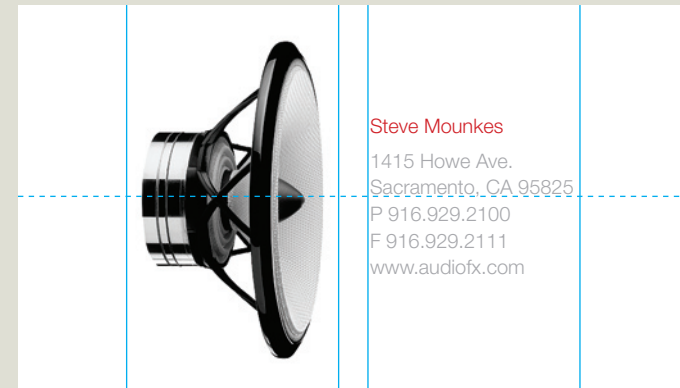
Repeat the grid

The use of red is the obvious repetitive element. To further strengthen the connection between logo side and product side, repeat the grid.



Start on the front

As on the previous card, make logo and business name the same width (1), a letter-height space apart. Group, then place in the middle of the card. Note the two vertical zones that result.



Repeat on the back

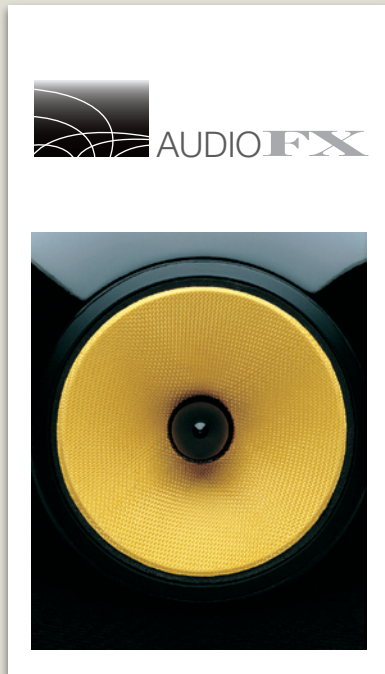
Transfer these zones to the back, and repeat the placement—graphic on the left, text on the right. Because the text block is slightly taller than the front-side logo, center it between top and bottom of the card.



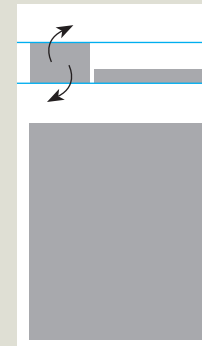
Card three: Put your product on display

Turn your card into a tiny billboard by showing your product in full color. Keep it simple. Here, it takes only a single speaker to convey the caliber of the store's products.

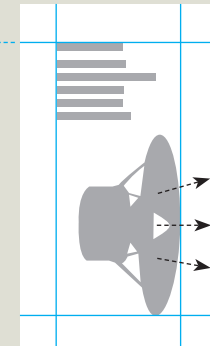
Front, v.3



Back, v.3



Repeat
The height of the logo determined the spacing above and below. What you're left with is plenty of space below to showcase your product or service.



Tension
The speaker's slightly off-center placement creates tension and movement. It's almost as if sound is pulsating from the speaker itself. Note the equal margins.

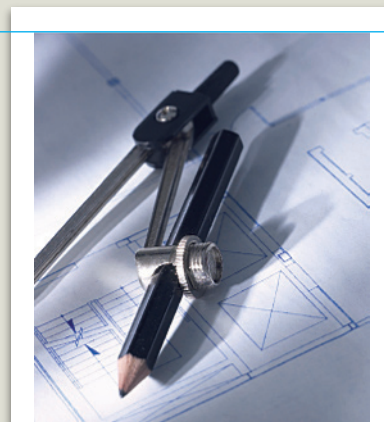


Repeat the grid

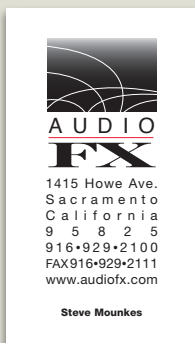
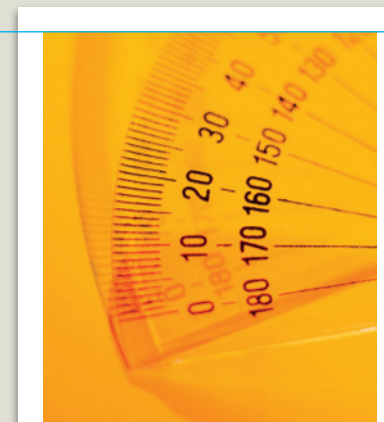
Because both sides of the card can't be seen at once, maintain visual continuity by repeating typestyles, positions, sizes and colors front to back.



Front



Back



Repeat

Continuity is maintained by visual repetition—typestyles, positions, sizes and so on. Note especially the points of yellow. Pause for a moment, and note the clarity of all the cards. Each has a simple, compelling focal point supported by light, textual information arranged on a field of air. On the original card (left), the designer tried to force a *style* and lost sight of the message.

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Card four: Reverse the field

The surprise is that white—or *negative*—space doesn't have to be white!—it just has to be open. Here, black adds substance, elegance and a hint of mystery to the card.

Front, v.4

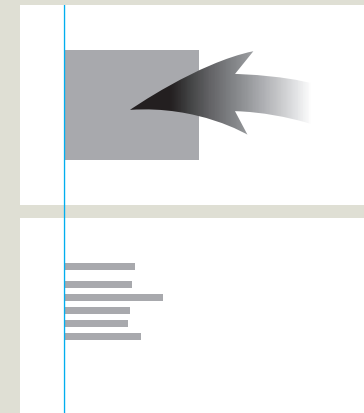


Back, v.4



Focal point

Understand that negative space is a powerful force that interacts with positive elements. (Right) The vast emptiness places focus on the logo. Compositionally, the logo would work if placed on the right. But here, we want it to align with the contact information on the back.



Tension

(Below) Centered placement is logical but symmetrical and therefore static. To mimic the tension on the front of the card, offset the image to the right.





Article resources



Typefaces

- 1 (a-e)** [Helvetica Neue Light](#) | a) 25.7 pt, b) 7 pt, c) 7/13 pt, d) 7.5 pt, e) 7.5 pt
- 2** [Inflex Bold](#) (altered from the original)

Images

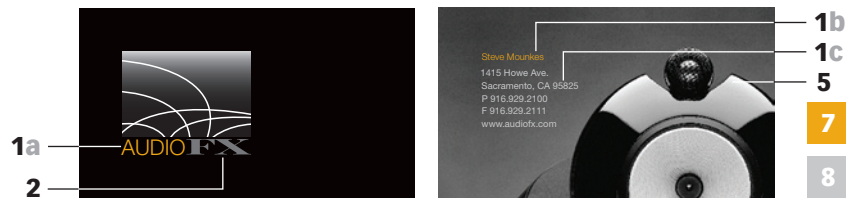
- 3** [Photodisc/Veer.com](#)
- 4** [istockphoto.com](#)
- 5** Photos for Bowers & Wilkins, courtesy [Thomas Manss & Company](#)

Colors

- 6** C0 M0 Y0 K40
- 7** C15 M100 Y100 K0



Article resources



Typefaces

- 1 (a-c) [Helvetica Neue Light](#) | a) 25.7 pt, b) 7/9.5 pt, c) 7/9.5 pt
- 2 [Inflex Bold](#) (altered from the original)
- 3 [Helvetica Neue Medium](#) | 10.4/11 pt
- 4 [Helvetica Neue Roman](#) | 6.9/9.5 pt

Colors

- 7 C0 M35 Y25 K5
- 8 C0 M0 Y0 K20
- 9 C0 M0 Y0 K40
- 10 C48 M38 Y15 K0

Images

- 5 Photos for Bowers & Wilkins, courtesy [Thomas Manss & Company](#)
- 6 (a-b) Photos.com | [a](#) [b](#)



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Page Size: Fit to Page

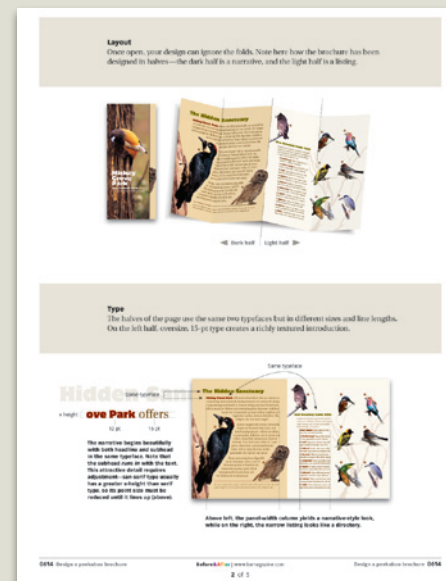


Save

Presentation format or
Paper-saver format

For paper-saver format

[Print: \(Specify pages 17–24\)](#)





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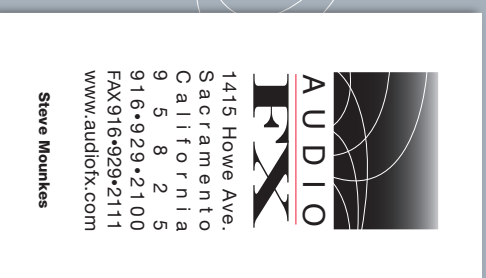
The look we want

The lines, shapes and colors of high-end components are very simple—sparse, geometric, black & white. The result is a sharp impression of clarity and spaciousness.



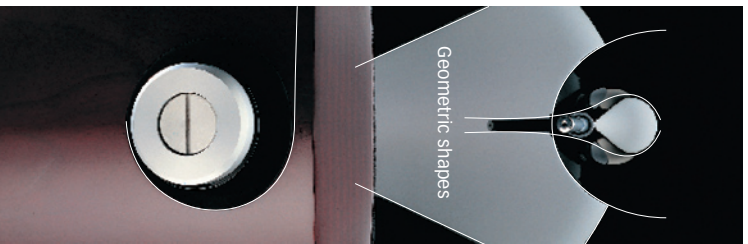
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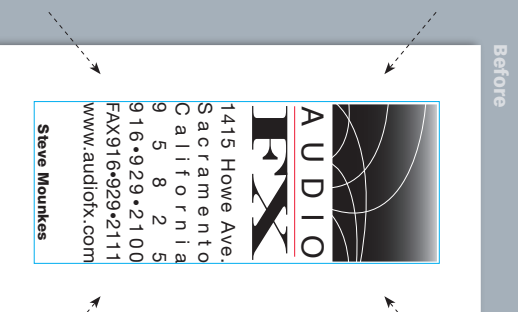
The parts we don't

The old card doesn't have the light lines and open atmosphere of the store and its products, so we'll discard both type and layout in favor of a design that does.



A mismatch of styles

(Right) The style of the old card is a static typographic brick in which every element has been forced into a rectangle. This required unnaturally squeezing long lines and stretching short ones and yielded an irregular patchwork of type that pulls the eye heavily inward. The style is dense and congested; it doesn't match the store, and, for that matter, the text block doesn't match the logo.



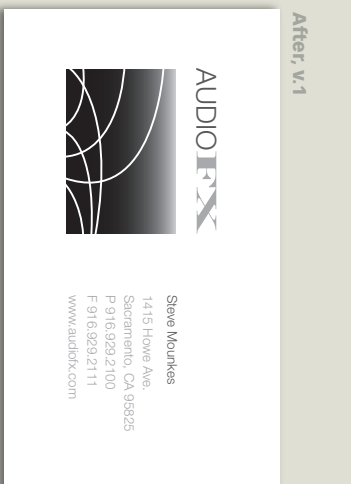
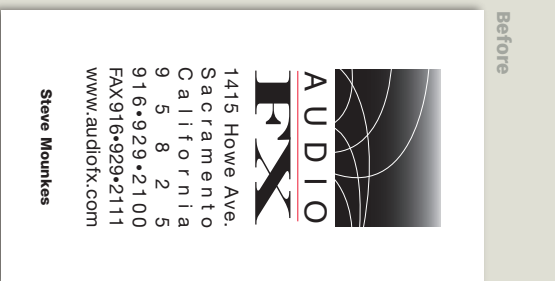
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Force-justified

(Above) Force-justifying equalizes left and right margins by distributing the leftover white space between letters. This traps it: the text block is closed and static. This is a good technique when you need to convey a sense of warmth and stability (although the craftsman-ship must be better), but it's opposite the openness of high-tech.

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The key to a clean look is white space. White space conveys purity, clarity and radiance. The way to get more white in a fixed area is to *make everything smaller and lighter*.



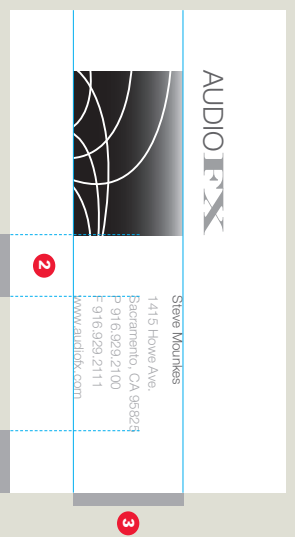
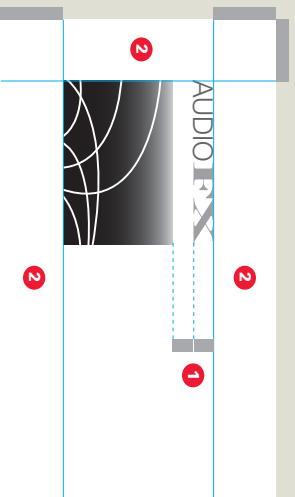
(Above) Same information, same space, but the new card has three distinct elements separated by white. The eye can move freely and read easily. White space conveys radiance; that is, lots of light. And in white space you can really *design*—create lines of sight, movement, tension, dynamics—because there's room to do so.



To fill the rectangle, the original FX had to be unnaturally large. The new version is small (1), light (2) and blends beautifully into the name.

White is active

The white space of the original card was only a passive carrier, but on the new card it is an active part of the page and must be designed like any other element.



Float logo and name

Logo and AUDIOFX name work as a unit; they have the same width and are separated by a letter-height space (1). Float this unit until you get equal margins on three sides (2) as shown above.

Place the text block

Then place the text block a margin width to the right of the logo (which in this case leaves the same width on the other side). The result is a card of simplicity and clarity—only two sizes of object (1 & 3) and two sizes of white (1 & 2).

Type must be light

To correspond to the purity of the white, set the type “purely,” too; that is, with as few variations of size, weight and case as possible—zero is ideal. Think *minimum*.



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Light and open

Unlike the original, justified block of trapped and irregular white space, when type is aligned left the spaces between characters are all the same, and the leftover white space is at the ends. This allows the white to flow into open space, and the eye moves freely outward.

Lighter still

The lighter the type weight, the more white there is, which further heightens the sense of spaciousness and freedom. Tinting it gray makes it lighter still. Note above that the employee's name remains black and is distinguished from the text block by extra space alone. *Classy.*

Card two: Use both sides, and add a color

If you're not limited to one side, double your white space by using the back. The look can become ultra-white, or you can use the extra space to introduce a product.

Front, v.2



Back, v.2



Color that connects

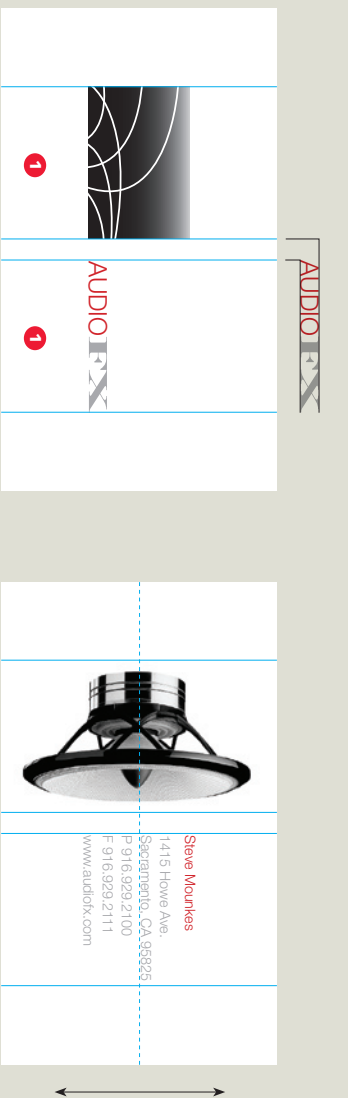
(Left) On the original card, AUDIO and FX are separated by a red hairline. The extra color doubles the printing cost but serves no functional purpose, because it's too thin.

(Above) Setting business and employee names in red puts the second color to excellent use: **1** It creates a focal point on each side; **2** It connects the front to the back; and **3** It associates business name to its employee—all without changing a single type specification.



Repeat the grid

The use of red is the obvious repetitive element. To further strengthen the connection between logo side and product side, repeat the grid.



Start on the front

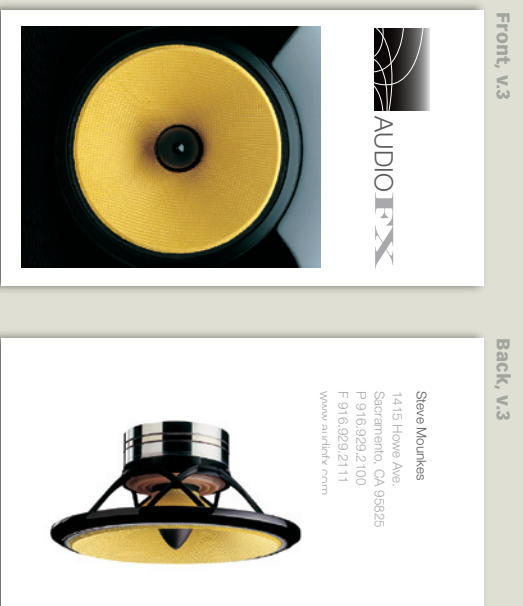
As on the previous card, make logo and business name the same width (1), a letter-height space apart. Group, then place in the middle of the card. Note the two vertical zones that result.

Repeat on the back

Transfer these zones to the back, and repeat the placement—graphic on the left, text on the right. Because the text block is slightly taller than the front-side logo, center it between top and bottom of the card.

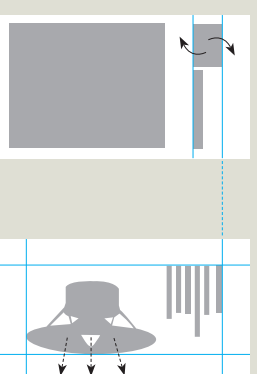
Card three: Put your product on display

Turn your card into a tiny billboard by showing your product in full color. Keep it simple. Here, it takes only a single speaker to convey the caliber of the store's products.



Front, v.3

Back, v.3



Repeat

The height of the logo determined the spacing above and below. What you're left with is plenty of space below to showcase your product or service.

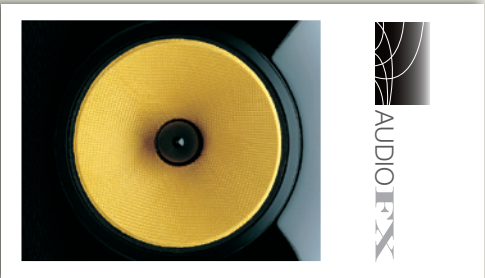
Tension

The speaker's slightly off-center placement creates tension and movement. It's almost as if sound is pulsating from the speaker itself. Note the equal margins.


Card three: Put your product on display

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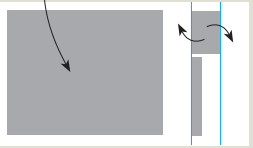
Front, v.3



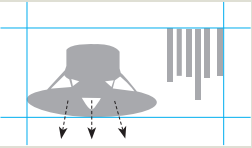
Back, v.3



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Repeat the grid

Because both sides of the card can't be seen at once, maintain visual continuity by repeating typesyles, positions, sizes and colors front to back.

Repeat
Continuity is maintained by visual repetition—typesyles, positions, sizes and so on. Note especially the points of yellow. Pause for a moment, and note the clarity of all the cards. Each has a simple, compelling focal point supported by light, textual information arranged on a field of air. On the original card (left), the designer tried to force a style and lost sight of the message.

Front



Back



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1b
1c
5
7
8



5 1a 2 1b 1c 9 5
6a
6b
7
10
4
3

Typetfaces

- 1 (a–c) [Helvetica Neue Light](#) | a) 25.7 pt, b) 7/9.5 pt, c) 7/9.5 pt
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Colors

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- 10 C48 M38 Y15 K0

Images

- 5 Photos for Bowers & Wilkins, courtesy [Thomas Manns & Company](#)
- 6 (a–b) Photos.com | a b

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