CHILD CARE
State Capacity Building Center

Branding Your Consumer Education Website: A Guide for States and Territories

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The *Consumer Education Website Guide* series aims to help state and territory staff develop effective, accessible, family-friendly consumer education websites. This series is designed to support the efforts of states and territories as they enhance their consumer education websites to help families understand the full range of child care options and resources available to them.

These guides share best practices and tips that state and territory staff can use to improve user experience, present information clearly, and prepare for common accessibility barriers, such as limited English proficiency, limited literacy skills, and disabilities. They will help ensure that all families have easy access to accurate, understandable information as child care consumers.

Branding Overview

Just as our image and personalities express who we are to others, branding conveys the essence of an organization, product, or service to consumers. Today, parents and other stakeholders are turning to electronic sources to find information about child care and related services. In this age of electronic information overload, branding can set your consumer education website apart and help consumers easily recognize and remember your site. This *Branding Your Consumer Education Website: A Guide for States and Territories* offers best practices, tools, and examples to help states and territories develop a brand personality that extends beyond their consumer education website into other communication platforms, such as social media and print media.

Description

A brand gives a product a unique and recognizable personality by integrating visual features such as logos, colors, tone, and fonts into a custom design. You can better connect with your target audience by effectively branding your consumer education website.

Because your brand is outward facing, you should tailor it to the needs and expectations of your audience. Your brand should align with your organizational values, goals, and efforts; do not let internal preferences downgrade your user experience. For example, a state or departmental seal may be meaningful internally; however, it could seem old-fashioned to some audiences or may ineffectively convey your consumer education work to your target audience. As such, you may want to work with a graphic designer to create a logo or other visual that may better convey your specific work.

Branding professionals often conduct interviews or host focus groups to gather valuable feedback. You can use these strategies to test your brand with stakeholders, partners, or a sample group from your audience to gather feedback and gauge its effectiveness.

Components

A brand includes the following core components: a logo, colors, tone, and fonts. These elements should come together to convey an organization's purpose and reflect its core values in a way that resonates with your target audience.

Figure 1 displays some key brand components that are further described in this section, such as a well-designed logo and an appropriate use of colors, tone, and fonts.

Figure 1. The Bright from the Start website has many brand elements that are likely to resonate with its target audiences. Examples include a recognizable logo, well-contrasted colors, appropriate imagery, and relevant messaging. Bright from the Start [Website]. Used with permission. Retrieved April 8, 2019, from **http://families.decal.ga.gov**

Logo

An effective logo is a memorable graphic representation or symbol that identifies a company, product, or service. Today, logos are more common than ever and are often an expected part of branding. A strong logo should do the following:

- **Resonate with your audience**—it should be in a style that will visually engage your visitors.
- **Convey a positive image**—a logo comprises fonts, colors, and visual elements that should convey the attributes of your site and organization (for example, modern, friendly, easy-to-use).
- **Be simple and avoid trends**—in general, logos should be made up of simple, streamlined shapes that will not look dated as design trends change.
- **Could incorporate a name and tagline**—pairing an initiative name, program name, or tagline with a logo can convey an overarching goal to families. For instance, Indiana's consumer education website is titled Brighter Futures Indiana. This initiative name is incorporated into the logo, as shown in figure 2. Figure 3 shows Idaho's consumer education website,

Idaho Stars, which includes a title and a tagline. Figure 4 features Colorado's consumer education website, Colorado Shines, which also incorporates a logo, title, and tagline. Each state example also shows how using bold colors can strengthen a logo's image.

Figure 2. The Brighter Futures Indiana website includes a logo that incorporates an image (the sun), title (Brighter Futures Indiana), and bold colors that are used throughout the site. Brighter Futures Indiana [Website]. Used with permission. Retrieved September 27, 2019, from http://brighterfuturesindiana.org

Figure 3. The IdahoSTARs website includes a logo that incorporates an image (child on tree swing), title (IdahoSTARS), tagline (quality child care matters), and bold colors that are used throughout the site. IdahoSTARS [Website]. Used with permission. Retrieved September 27, 2019, from https://idahostars.org

Figure 4. The Colorado Shines website includes a logo that incorporates an image (child in front of the sun), title (Colorado Shines), tagline (start early, start strong, quality early learning), and bold colors that are used throughout the site. Colorado Shines [Website]. Used with permission. Retrieved September 27, 2019, from https://www.coloradoshines.com/home

Colors

Colors can evoke a range of strong, emotional responses that help connect your audience to your brand. A thoughtfully selected, limited color palette serves as a building block for your brand and can reinforce your brand's personality. The state examples included above also show how color selection can complement your logo and be effective in creating a cohesive brand.

You might find it challenging to narrow down color options for your website. The online resources below can guide you through the color-selection process, help you check for color contrast to support accessibility, and even generate color-coordinated palettes for you:

- **3 Easy Steps to Picking Your Brand Colors**
- **Colour Contrast Check**
- **The Super Fast Color Schemes Generator!**
- **How to Develop an Accessible Color Scheme**

Tone

Word choice is central in communicating a tone that reflects your brand's personality and connects with your core audience. You should also be thoughtful when developing and curating website content and taglines that support your website's logo. Keep your audience in mind when determining your brand tone. For instance, technical accuracy might resonate with subject matter experts, while a more conversational tone might work best for a general audience.

To help determine an appropriate tone for your website, conduct user research (such as message-testing sessions) to have a representative sample of your audience review its content. You may want to consider working with professional copywriters who have subject matter expertise in plain language and in working with certain target audiences (for example, families with school-age children, families of children with special needs, families who work nontraditional hours) to help refine word choice and support a consistent tone for your brand. Finally, ensure that the tone of your content aligns with other resources from your organization. These strategies will help you maintain a consistent, relevant brand that your target audience will easily recognize and understand.

Fonts

Fonts visually convey mood and tone. One or two carefully selected fonts will provide a consistent look and messaging across a brand. Although you can find hundreds of font options online, the most versatile and legible choices often have a simple or classic look. For example, while a childlike, handwritten font may seem appropriate for a site about child care, it may be illegible in small sizes or on mobile screens. Using a complex font can also affect the speed of your site. As a general rule, use fonts categorized as serif or sans serif because they tend to be easier to read.

Many online resources can help you choose a font. If you choose a free font, make sure you can use it for commercial purposes. Also, check with your web developer to ensure you can use it on your site. The following resources can help you choose a font:

- **40 Best Free Fonts Available on Google Fonts**
- **Google Fonts**
- **74 Best Free Fonts for Designers**

Create a Branding Guide

To maintain consistency, you may find it helpful to create a branding guide that defines all components of your brand. You should ensure that staff who create and disseminate content consistently apply these components. Your branding guide should accomplish the following:

- Explain your brand's personality and how to apply it across various media.
- Define the colors, fonts, and styles that content editors should use.
- Provide guidance and examples of correctly branded materials.
- Include any approved templates, imagery, and other brand resources.

The branding guide should help staff ensure consistency in tone and visual identity as your consumer education website expands so that all materials continue to resonate, as intended, with your target audience. The branding guide can also describe content-development processes specific to your organization, list any approvals required to update content on your site, and include branding elements on other forms of communication, such as newsletters (print or electronic), social media posts, or email signatures. Your branding guide should be a part of your larger content management process for developing and posting new content and resources to your consumer education website. Please see the "Evaluating Website Content" section of the Child Care State Capacity Building Center's **Top 10 Actions to Improve Website Content and Design: Questions and Answers from the "Ask Me Anything" Webinar** for more detailed information on website content processes.

Apply Your Brand

Once you have created a brand, you should apply it throughout your website, other communication platforms (for example, email, social media), and print materials. You can achieve a branding personality by consistently using brand components such as fonts, colors, and tone across all types of communication. You should not modify items like your logo to maintain consistency; however, you can provide some flexibility in other areas to avoid repetition or create some visual variety. For example, shape, size, and placement of visual elements such as photographs can add variety and visual interest to your site. Your color scheme can infuse accent colors to help make visuals tonally appropriate for a particular event or audience. You may need to adapt certain aspects of the brand for the Web by ensuring it will be responsive to mobile devices or prompt users to interact with visual elements.

Other considerations for applying your brand include the following:

- **Do not** restrict logo placement to a specific location in a layout.
- **Do** tailor content length across different platforms to match user-consumption preferences, like print (longer form) and social media (shorter form).
- **Do** tweak the brightness or saturation of your brand palette for digital media, but do not alter the colors.

Pattern Library

Mature web-design organizations develop pattern libraries to maintain consistent user-interface elements for their websites and to reduce the time it takes to implement common web design elements, such as menus, buttons, and headings. A pattern library is a type of style guide that has examples of each design element within the user interface. When the website needs a new information card or button, you can quickly pull the design from the library of patterns, rather than designing it from scratch.

This approach also speeds web development if the patterns are mapped to code that allows web developers to quickly copy that code and apply it to the website each time they need to add a user-interface element. When website managers take this approach, the pattern library is sometimes referred to as a front-end style guide. The front-end development of a website refers to the user-facing portion of the site.

Some websites may use a sub-brand of a parent organization or website. In those cases, the branding guide should supplement, not replace, the principal organization's guidelines. However, if the audience for your consumer education website is narrower and more specific than that of your parent organization's site, your branding guide should describe where your sub-brand may deviate from your parent organization's guide to better connect with your target audience. As you can see in figure 1 (above), Georgia's **Quality Rated Child Care** is a sub-brand of its main consumer education website, **Bright from the Start**. This sub-brand uses the same color scheme as the main brand to promote cohesion and consistency for users.

Layout

Successful web and print layouts deliver a clear, consistent message in a visually appealing way. To amplify your brand, you should consider several key layout elements, such as visual hierarchy and the importance of whitespace.

Visual Hierarchy

Visual hierarchy refers to the order in which a viewer sees your content. Thoughtful design will help a reader focus on the main content first, then move to supporting elements. Clear visual structures can lead users through a page and give them a quick outline of the content. Colors, placement, and text formatting are all tools used to show visual hierarchy. Keep a few things in mind as you design visual structures:

- Display your logo consistently on your site. The logo should clearly brand your pages but not compete with the main content.

- Use text sizes and formatting to indicate content structure. Ensure that higher-level headings are more prominent than lower-level ones. On the website, be sure to use heading styles that are built into the system. Do not manually format your own headings, as this would negatively impact search engine optimization (how easily users can find your website using online search engines). Headings should be nested so that lower-level headings are subsets that expand on the concepts promised in higher-level headings. When possible, avoid having more than three heading levels. For more information on search engine optimization, please see the Child Care State Capacity Building Center's **Guide for Increasing Search Engine Optimization**.

- Use color to your advantage. Brighter colors usually attract the eye and can highlight key content. Large blocks of dark color can visually overpower content and should be used sparingly.

Importance of Whitespace

Whitespace or negative space refers to the areas in a layout that do not contain images or text. Little whitespace results in a crowded layout that can feel busy and uninviting. A generous amount of whitespace can welcome an audience by separating and structuring content.

However, when designing elements such as forms, too much whitespace can harm user experience. For example, form fields should be closer to the headings or labels to which they belong, without a lot of whitespace between them, as depicted in figure 5.

For more information, read **The Power of Whitespace.**

Layout Templates

Many online resources can help you create layouts for marketing materials such as brochures, infographics, and social media imagery. Some of those templates are provided online. Free options are available within each of these sites but some of the content may require additional cost.

- **Canva**
- **Microsoft Office**
- **Piktochart**
- **StockLayouts**

Figure 5. An example of a properly designed form that uses appropriate spacing to help users understand which fields and labels go together. Used with permission from Nielsen Norman Group. (2013). Form design quick fix: Group form elements effectively using white space [Webpage]. Retrieved on April 8, 2019, from **https://www.nngroup.com/articles/form-design-white-space/**
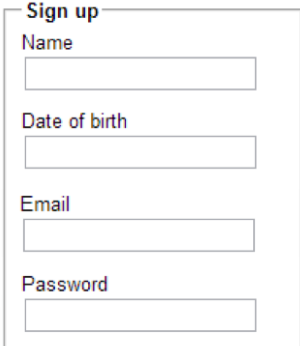
Imagery

Audiences react to imagery before engaging with any text or messaging. Imagery can be essential in creating an engaging and positive first impression. Therefore, impactful visuals are key to creating a strong brand. Consider the following tips for choosing imagery:

- **Keep your audience in mind**—visitors should see themselves in your imagery.
- **Include diversity**—show different ages, races, ethnicities, and environments.
- **Be authentic**—avoid using posed photos or trendy filters.
- **Provide consistency**—use images with a similar visual style to support your brand.

Iconography

Websites often use icons to quickly and clearly convey ideas. An icon is a symbol that indicates a simple idea or action that a user can understand or take, such as the floppy disk icon that represents a save feature. For example, the Olympic Games use **universal icons** to identify each sport, with no need for explanation. However, it can be difficult to convey complex ideas with icons.

Complicated content, such as processes or technical information, is more meaningfully explained through illustrations or graphics. Illustrations are more complex and often depict a process or concept in a way that adds enough detail for the user to understand a larger meaning, such as a diagram showing the process to apply for a child care subsidy. Figures 6–8 display some ways states effectively use icons to convey content on their consumer education website.

If the consumer education website is part of a sub-brand or parent agency website, you may have some established iconography to work from. Check any existing brand guidelines or pattern libraries to see if this is the case.
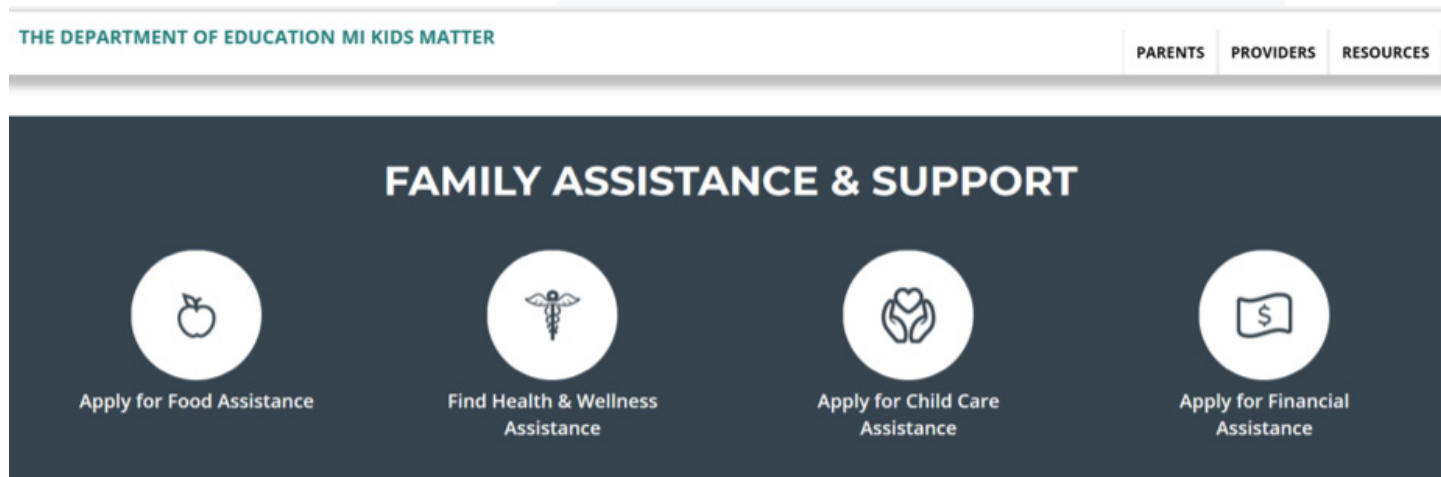

Figure 6. The MI Kids Matter website includes icons that add visual interest and quickly convey the types of resources available to families. MI Kids Matter [Website]. Used with permission. Retrieved September 27, 2019, from **https://www.michigan.gov/mikidsmatter**
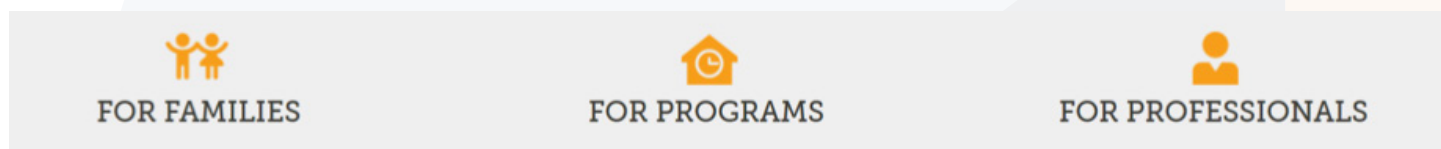

Figure 7. The Colorado Shines website includes icons that add visual interest and quickly convey information about resources to its audience. Colorado Shines [Website]. Used with permission. Retrieved September 27, 2019, from **https://www.coloradoshines.com/home**
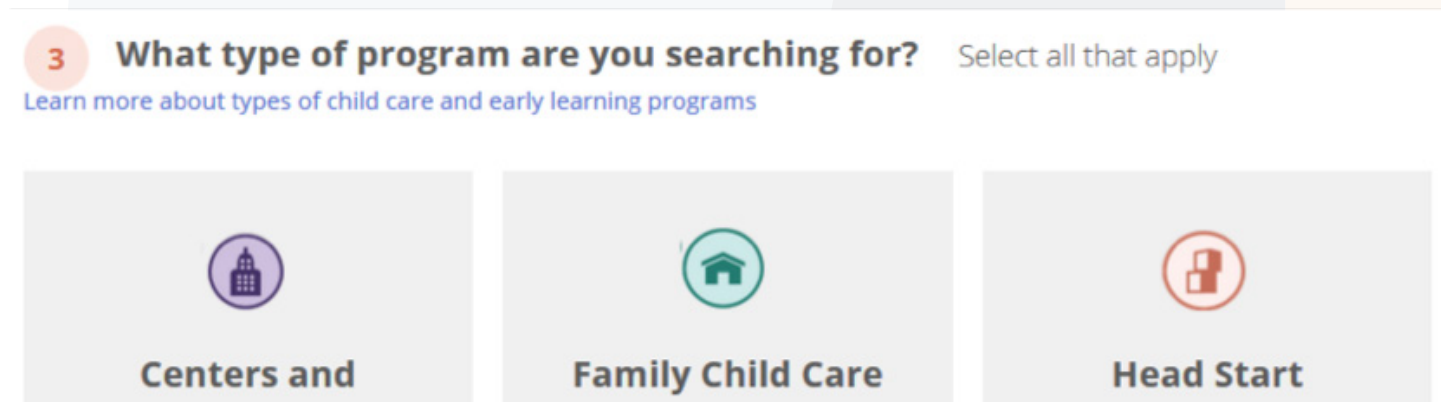

Figure 8. The icons used on Minnesota's Parent Aware child care search display the types of programs a user might select. Used with permission from Minnesota Department of Human Services. (n.d.). Search [Online tool]. Retrieved April 8, 2019, from **http://www.parentaware.org/search/**

Image Library

To ensure the use of visuals that support your brand, you may find it helpful to create an image library. Through an image library, you can compile thoughtfully chosen, brand-appropriate images with a similar visual style that reflect your brand's audience. Images stored in the image library should be approved (by a supervisor or appropriate staff person) through your website's content management process. This library of approved images enhances consistency across a brand and reduces the time and effort spent searching for images every time you add content or other elements to your consumer education website.

Image Sources

There are many online resources for images. Some free and low-cost options include the following:

- Free
  - **StockSnap.io**
  - **Pexels**
  - **Unsplash**
- Low-cost
  - **iStock**
  - **Shutterstock**

Copyright Considerations

Photos typically come with specific copyright agreements that can be complex. Common terms of use include the following:

- Requiring you to credit an artist when using free images.
- Granting you permission for personal use of free images but restricting commercial or governmental use.
- Requesting you do not share images licensed to specific users or organizations with other users and organizations.

Please note that the resolution needed for an image, or its usage rights, may vary if you're working with print products. Check with your graphics department for internal guidelines about requirements for high-quality printing, as this will vary greatly depending on the material being produced, the fidelity needed, and the types of equipment and paper used for printing.

If you have any questions about copyright agreements, reach out to your legal department or to the image or photo vendor.

Design for Accessibility

Different audience segments may have different abilities. Visit **Section508.gov** for more information on creating accessible products, and read the Child Care State Capacity Building Center's **Designing Websites That Are Accessible for All Families** guide.

Conclusion

A brand that instills confidence and trust in your target audience is an important part of a successful consumer education website. Thoughtfully chosen layouts, images, tone, and text help your audience better engage with your website. Design consistency helps improve usability and accessibility for all segments of your target audience. All in all, an effective brand will distinguish your consumer education website from other websites and help families recognize it as your state's primary resource for early education and child care information.

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