

Who are you? How do you look on paper? Despite the surge in email use, professionally designed printed stationery packages are crucial to making a good first impression. The purpose of letterhead and related items is to express an identity, beyond the actual words used in the message.

A basic corporate identity system or stationery package consists of letterhead, envelopes, and business cards. In some cases, labels are also a basic component. If no logo exists and one is needed, logo design may also comprise part of the complete design package.

Whether designing for a client or for yourself, the first steps to developing a successful identity package is getting to know the business for which the package is intended.

About your business and your clients:

•What kind of business is it?
•What type of products or services does it produce?
•How long have they been in business?
•Who are their major competitors?
•Who needs the product or service the business produces?
•How do current or potential customers preceive the business or the industry in general?

Does the business want to attract or focus on a specific segment of its overall customer base?

About the stationery package:

If the business already has a stationery package in use, what do they like/dislike about the current package?

How will the letterhead by used? (That is, will it be run through laser printers, inkjet printers, be handwritten, frequently photocopied or faxed?)

What kind of budget does the business have and what type of volume is required?

Will color be used? (And how much color will the budget allow?)

Does the client have a preference for or against thermography, single, bi-fold, or tri-fold business cards, or other definite likes/dislikes?

Once you've asked the basic questions you're ready to start putting pen to paper and mouse to monitor. Because you'll want to maintain consistency in color, type, and basic layout between all components in the stationery package, start with the

smallest -- the business card. Layouts and font choices that look great on letter size paper, can become illegible in the small space of the business card.

Determine what information is needed on the card and letterhead such as company name, logo, name of individual, title of individual, street address, mailing address (if different), phone number(s), fax numbers, voice mail or pager numbers, email address, and web address.

Begin sketching out ideas. Explore layout options quickly with rough thumbnail sketches.

Layout

Look at other business card layouts for ideas and inspiration. For business cards, horizontal layouts may be more "traditional" but vertical layouts could provide more opportunity for creativity. Additionally, it may be easier to translate the vertical layout of the business card to the vertical layout of the letterhead. I'm not suggesting that you should only consider vertical layouts though. It depends on the shape and orientation of other elements of the design as well as the image you want to convey.

These Horizontal Layouts and Vertical Layouts and Business Card Templates provide tips and ideas for business card layout. In some cases it may be easier to work simultaneously on both the business card and letterhead.

Robin Williams suggests that you should stick with standard size business cards but that making them foldover cards will allow the business card to do more than just list contact information. They go from being just identity items to mini-brochures and more powerful marketing weapons for a business.

Don't skimp on the envelope design. Putting beautifully-designed letterhead into plain, off-the-shelf envelopes dilutes the power of that first impression.

Beyond the layout, you'll need to make decisions regarding fonts, color, paper, and methods of printing.