How to design a business card: 10 top tips

A well-designed business card lends legitimacy to your business, and can make you stand out from the crowd of competitors. Check out our top tips on how to make a lasting impression...

Although we're working in paperless offices more and more, the humble business card is still a mainstay of business. If you haven't got a card you can give out to prospective clients or collaborators, you're missing out on a key marketing opportunity.

Not all business cards are created equal, however. We live in a world where the average small business can design their own cards and order them from well-known online printers for under £20. These cards tend to be of an inferior weight, and typically use twee clipart to relate themselves to the business being advertised.

What this means is that there are a lot of poorly designed business cards out there! This is both a challenge and an opportunity: to stand out you need to create a design that looks fantastic, and helps you differentiate yourself. If you can make it tactile and feel pleasant in the hand, you'll be well on your way. Create an effective card and you can elevate your business above your competitors before the prospect has ever seen your website!

01. Use good design principles

It might seem obvious but it's worth reiterating that a business card is a piece of printed material like any other. Because of this, the basic principles of paper-based design apply to business cards:

- keep all your key copy at least 5mm from the trim edge
- work at 300dpi for best image reproduction
- ensure you maintain a minimum size for your typography to maintain legibility
- design in CMYK unless you're working exclusively with spot colours

Many designers also find it helps to use a grid to lay out their cards, as this can help you to achieve the right hierarchy of information as well as ensure your alignment is sound.

02. Get creative within the constraints

There are a couple 'standard' sizes for business cards, depending upon where you are in the world. One typical example is 55x85mm, although you'll see many other sizes quoted on the web. Working within this tiny canvas you can still get creative with the space: start by considering the key information you want to include, which will typically be a name, phone number and email address, then work your design around presenting this information in a creative way.

03. Avoid common pitfalls

There are some common pitfalls to designing business cards that it helps to be aware of. The first and most obvious is to ensure you provide a bleed as specified by your printer. This is commonly 3mm, but can be 5mm so check! Just as important is to avoid using a straightforward border around the entire of the card, as this will show up any misalignment in the trim if the card isn't perfectly cut.

04. Use special finishes

This example features a UV spot to highlight fret positions, on the reverse of a guitar tutor's business card

An instant way to add impact to your business card, and make it stand out from the crowd, is to use a special finish. Special finishes include the likes of foil blocking, spot-UV and metallic inks, and can add significant cost to your print. What they offer, however, is the opportunity to make your card more tactile, visually impressive and memorable.

Different printers offer different options for finishes, so speak to them to find out what they can do for you, and don't be afraid to go to a specialist if your usual printer only offers straight four-colour print.

05. Cut into your card

get stretchy

This card, designed by Phil Jones, Ryan Coleman and Jeff McCullough for Yoga One, shows how some creative thinking with die-cuts can result in a fun and memorable card

A great way to make your card unique is to use a die-cut process to remove elements from the card stock, leaving a void. You can either use a die to change the shape of your card (by rounding the corners, for example), or you can cut shapes out of the centre.

Dies are expensive to create the first time, although increasingly printers are offering laser-cut options that make it economical to create a die-cut look on shorter print-runs. There are some amazingly creative examples on the web, and when combined with creasing you can use the process to create architectural features in your card design. Also, don't overlook letterpress as an option.

06. Use unusual materials
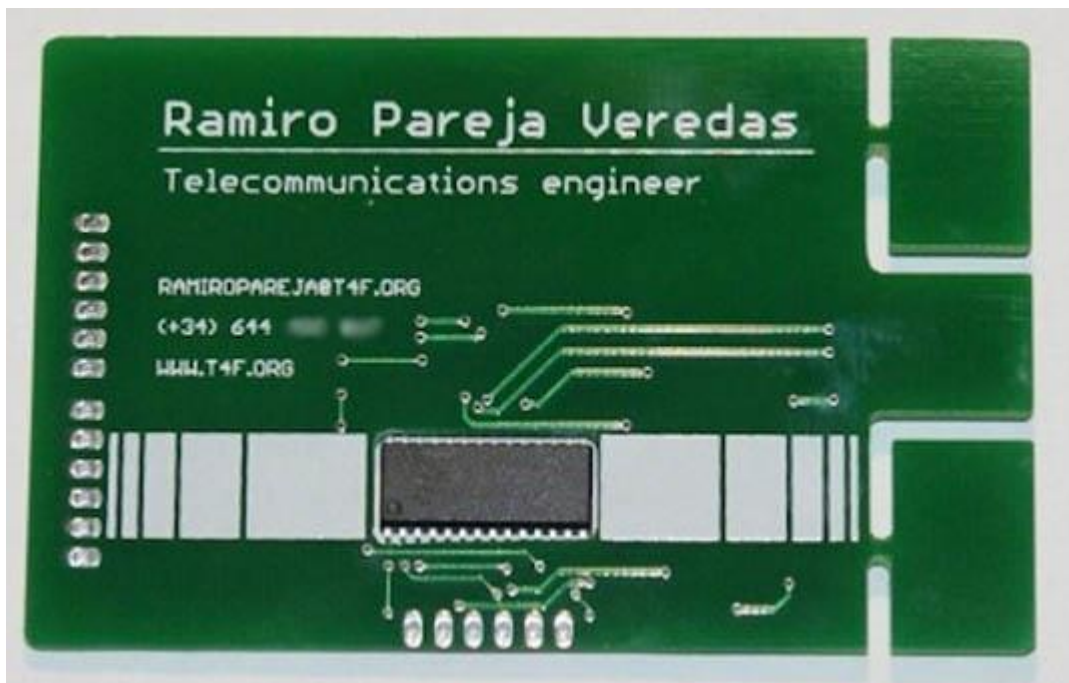
This card is constructed from a printed circuit board, and works as a USB device. When plugged in, it provides additional information about the owner

Most business cards are printed on card stock. This is the most cost-effective option for printing your cards. If you're willing to get a little more creative, you can print onto all sorts of different materials including transparent plastics, metals, wood and even slate.

Here dog treats have been used as a business card material, allowing the card to serve two purposes simultaneously

Keep in mind that cards need to be portable, and easy to file away in a pocket or briefcase, but get creative with your choice of stock material and you'll instantly stand out from everyday business cards.

07. Make it useful

This business card designed by Emily Berry converts into a handy chair that can hold your phone upright on a desk

One of the problems with paper is that it's everywhere. Some people hold on to every bit of paper they receive, while others are far more ruthless and recycle at the first opportunity. To avoid the risk of being recycled, make your business card work as more than simply a calling card.
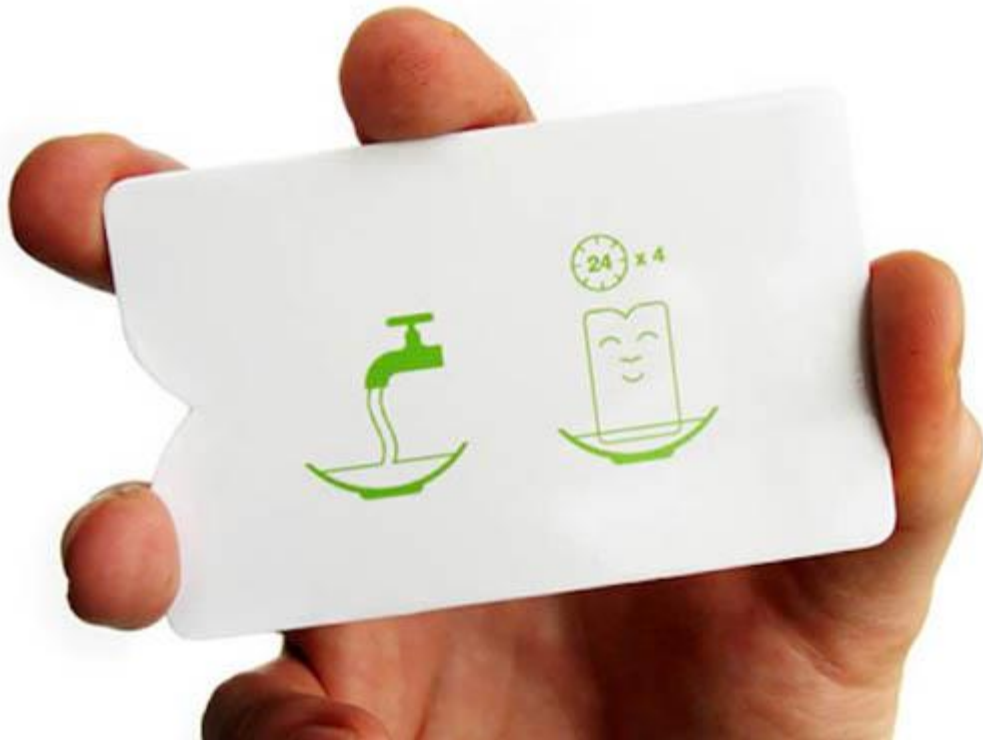
This card was designed by Jamie Wieck and includes a seed that sprouts after a few days of soaking

Some of the most memorable designs incorporate function as well as form. Examples include business card that act as a holder for hair clips or turn into a miniature armchair for your mobile.

08. Make your own

Breakfast Creatives cut up old cereal boxes to form their own, brand-relevant business card design. Credit: http://breakfastcreatives.co.uk

If you're feeling creative, why not make your own business cards? You can find letterpress kits on eBay at reasonable prices, allowing you to convert any card stock into your own business card with ease. This is a time-consuming but very satisfying way of expressing yourself in a card!

09. Recycle old cards

These cards were made by hand out of business cards, Christmas cards and screen-prints that went wrong.

Old business cards, postcards or packaging can be repurposed and given a new life as your business card. Recycling is both environmentally sound and can allow you to express your creativity in new and exciting ways. There are some fantastic examples on the web to get your creative juices flowing. The process can be as simple as getting some stickers printed, or as complex as hand-illustrating over the top of each old card to suit the recipient.

10. Double-check your artwork

This tip applies to every bit of print work you do, but it's so crucial it's worth repeating. When sending your artwork off to the print shop, make sure you've double-checked every single detail. There's nothing worse than getting back your cards and discovering you missed a typo in the email address or name. Check twice, print once is a well learnt adage!