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Icons in e-learning: how to use them effectively

Icons are an important tool for online courses. Images can in fact facilitate learning. Here are the advantages and ways to use icons effectively

Images represent, in general, an important tool in training. Their use can improve students' skills and **learning level**. Our brain, in fact, reacts differently depending on whether it is faced with an image or a text and remembers the graphic parts better and for longer than the written ones.

New technologies have made it possible to use graphics even in **online courses**, so as to be able to transform e-learning into a more captivating and engaging experience. In fact, a course consisting only of written texts would be boring and difficult to understand. The graphic parts, on the other hand, allow you to learn in a less demanding but more effective way. And, among the various types of images, stylized and simple ones seem to be more effective. For this reason, it may be useful to include icons in the platform used to convey the e-learning course which, if used effectively, can be excellent allies in online learning.

Images in training

We have already explained that the use of **graphics** represents an important tool for improving learning and, if used effectively and correctly, can become a useful ally for teachers and also for students. The use of images brings a series of advantages for learning:

- **Speed:** graphic parts are processed by the brain much faster than textual content. For this reason, they attract the student's attention earlier and more so that he will be able to better remember the information linked to the images. Photographs or drawings can also be used to explain complex concepts more clearly and quickly by expressing them in words, allowing the student to quickly understand the content of the lesson.
- **Lightness:** the information contained in an e-learning course can be a lot and providing it only through written texts could make the study and the course itself heavy, risking compromising the user's attention span. Graphics, on the other hand, can provide an effective alternative to words, reducing the user's cognitive effort, without sacrificing educational quality.
- **Duration**: images ensure that information is retained in long-term memory. Furthermore, their vision arouses emotions, which make it easier to remember the concepts related to graphics.

E-learning and images can therefore represent a winning couple, as long as the graphic parts are used effectively, following a coherent style throughout the course and without excessively overloading the lessons with photos or drawings, but finding the right balance between images , textual parts and other learning elements.

The effectiveness of icons

In an e-learning course the use of simple and stylized graphic elements allows for easier understanding of the contents and makes the interface easy to use. Fundamental in the creation of an online course is therefore also the attention to the icons which, to be effective, must be immediately understandable and easy to use.

Simple graphics, in fact, allow them to be processed more quickly and understood by people belonging to different social strata and cultures. Different styles of icons can be adopted in e-learning, chosen based on the needs of the users of the course or platform. Among others, the main styles of icons are:

1. **Flat:** they are minimalist, because they are composed of two-dimensional images, to which only the shadow can add some detail. However, they can be quickly downloaded to digital devices and even mobile devices. The simplicity of the flat icons makes them immediately understandable and, therefore, very useful in navigation. Failure to imitate a too

specific object allows this type of graphics flexibility in use.

2. **Line-shaped**: these are minimalist graphics, essentially made up of the contour lines of the object. These symbols are quick to identify and their style allows them to be inserted into even a very small window, without making the icons lose their specificity. Additionally, line icons don't risk overshadowing the main message of the course, because the minimalist style doesn't overwhelm important information.
3. **Full:** they are silhouettes of objects, without the presence of too many details that could unnecessarily capture the user's attention. This is a basic style, but more noticeable than line icons.
4. **Illustrated**: can be created using the computer or by hand, but the result is to have the impression of having a real drawing in front of you. They are not linear and often the contours are not marked or clear, so as to give the effect of hand-drawings made by an illustrator.
5. **Stickers:** These are icons that try to reproduce a sticker stuck on a page. They are often illustrated with a slightly bent corner, so as to give the idea of a small sticker being detached from a sheet of paper.
6. **Detailed:** they are very realistic icons, which provide more details of the object represented, they are drawn with colors and shading to give the user the impression of being in front of the real object being represented.

The icon style to adopt always depends on the line you want to give to your platform and your online course. A simple icon can have the advantage of being easily understood, but a more detailed icon could increase the involvement of the platform visitor, who could be attracted by the image before the rest.

Why use icons?

Icons in e-learning can represent a useful tool for both understanding and accessing the platform. But why might it be important to use icons in a training course? Here are the 6 main advantages:

1. They are **quick to recognize and process**, because they minimize the processing that is usually required to process something more complex. The simplicity and essentiality of the icons makes them quickly recognizable and, for this reason, processing their meaning becomes easy. This feature can be very useful in e-learning, because it allows the user to navigate and move around the platform quickly.
2. They help to **establish a concept**, because they can provide important support for complex information. The icons, in fact, return a concrete image of what cannot always be explained in words clearly and quickly.
3. Improve the **aesthetic appearance** of the platform, because it makes the interface less static and boring, but more captivating and engaging. For this reason, the user will be more encouraged to browse and access e-learning courses. Content that also takes care of aesthetics attracts users more.
4. They allow you to **immediately understand** the message, because they clearly refer to real objects or known actions.
5. They can be **understood by everyone**, regardless of social class, culture or language, because they express simple actions and are drawn in a stylized way, so as to be universally clear and understandable.

How to use icons effectively

The use of icons in e-learning brings several advantages and their correct use can help the training and learning environment. But for this to happen, it is necessary to find an effective way to insert icons into courses and online platforms. There are several possibilities:

User interface: icons can be used to enrich and improve navigation on the platform. Adding an icon to a button, in fact, can help the user find the point on which to click more quickly, to perform the action they need. The image, therefore, facilitates navigation and allows the user to make his choices more quickly, eliminating the risk of abandonment.

- **List:** the classic bulleted or numbered list can easily be replaced by small icons that reflect an object or element consistent with the topic to be discussed. Thus, the new image could replace dots, dashes and numbers, to give the course greater originality from a graphic point of view.
- **Explanations:** icons can also be inserted within the text to better convey the trainer's message. In fact, associating images with simple written text can be useful for improving understanding and memorization of the concept.
- **Tables and graphs:** icons can also be inserted into graphs and tables, to give a touch of color and originality, without limiting themselves to data, colors and lines. In fact, depending on the topic being discussed, you can choose the most coherent image. The informative graphics, in fact, must be functional, to allow the user to be able to understand tables

and graphs at a quick glance, without having to dwell too much on understanding the data and the different colors used.
- **Categories of information**: the information in an e-learning course can be divided into categories, each of which could be associated with a recognition icon. In this way, it will be easier for the user to find the information he needs when he finds himself searching for a lesson or a space on the platform.

Furthermore, for the use of icons to be effective, it is essential that all the graphic parts are consistent with each other and follow a certain style. If you include multiple graphic elements in an e-learning course, it is best to take care not to insert too many images, not to use different styles, to make them easily loadable and to make adequate color and design choices, in order to maintain graphic coherence for the entire interface and in online courses.