

What Is Branding? A New Era for Corporate Identity

To see an example of a vanishing species, take a look at the symbol for National Westminster Bank. Whatever the story is behind this group of three clustered triangles, it's pretty impenetrable to the customer. As a veiled allusion to a fortress or castle, it may convey something about corporate strength and security, but doesn't tell you much about the human dimension of NatWest's business. Nor does it express the bank's commitment to personal service, organisation, efficient management or even fiscal responsibility.

One might similarly argue that Shell's logo lacks adequacy on a symbolic level, in its inability to reflect the nature of the organisation Shell aspires to be. The symbol has served its owner well - it's highly recognised, has accumulated value and emotional attachment, and is accepted as appropriate for a major corporation. It's therefore surprising that over a period of years Shell has tinkered with its symbol, with the tendency to abstract it more and more. It's as though Shell feels the need for its image to become crisper and more geometric. Though remaining essentially recognisable, the pecten's evolution has been achieved at a cost to its greater emotional dimension.

Thankfully these identity marks are atypical of the current trend in corporate visual expression. The fundamental way in which companies view and use their identities is changing. Those searching for better commercial performance or seeking to assert their core strengths are using corporate identity to communicate a balanced range of emotional content about their nature and role, both in society and within the industries in which they stand. The corporate identity itself is becoming less precious and fixed, and more part of a flexible kit of elements which can be shaded as necessary for different customers, geographical sectors or product ranges. We are now in a different era where effective expression is key.

Corporate identity has become simply one part of the complex communication process between a product or service provider, and the consumer. Historically, identity was seen as a permanent fixture synonymous with the industrial category that a company operated within. Just as Mercedes-Benz's name is synonymous with high quality automobiles, its star symbol successfully reinforces the idea of a company focused on precision and quality. While these are interesting and attractive attributes, Mercedes' visual identity fails to suggest other valuable dimensions like service, style, or caring. Mercedes must therefore live, sometimes uncomfortably, within the narrow focus of its corporate image. Were it to begin manufacturing furniture, it would obviously have to convey a very different set of messages; even operating within its traditional industry sector, the company has found the need to develop secondary image modifiers to fill its perception gap, using additional graphic elements in advertising, brochures and other media to achieve this purpose, just as NatWest and Shell do.

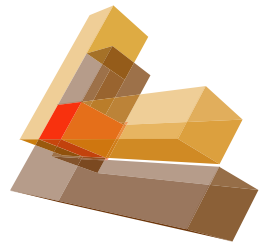
The current trend away from rigid and limiting corporate identities like these is driven by two factors: fashion and consumer sophistication. While fashion has had a more immediate and visible influence on the evolution of corporate identity, it is consumers' heightened awareness of symbolic meaning that has had a more fundamental impact on corporate voice.

There is very little that is truly free from fashion's influence. We have all learned to decode messages transmitted through combinations of colours, typography and other visual cues to interpret different designs as typical of their time. Most anyone can identify examples from the 1930s, 1950s, or 1970s. Transient factors such as fashion trends don't negate core perceptions, however. Corporate identities which we commonly regard as more permanent, such as Mercedes' and Volkswagen's, have longer life spans because their 'personalities' are focused on fewer and more definitive aspirations.

244 E. 117TH ST., SUITE 2B
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On a deeper and more significant level, today's audiences are far more sensitive to the temperature and content of messages conveyed by corporate identities. The heavily consumer-focused advertising and public relations that NatWest, Shell and Mercedes employ, demonstrate the inadequacy of their primary visual vocabulary.

How are companies responding to this changing environment? British Telecom's symbol, created by Wolff Olins in the early '90s, was a milestone in the development of the new philosophy of corporate identity. It stands out because when launched, it was so controversial, and unusual for its time. In retrospect, we see its uniqueness even more vividly because of the environmental context from which it emerged. For at least a decade prior to its appearance, virtually all major identities being introduced were abstract, geometric and hard-edged. This process of reductivism or graphic distillation was about producing highly rationalised graphic systems, thought to be more sophisticated simply by virtue of their symbolic representations. An additional advantage was that they were convenient, audit structured, and well suited to consistency in reproduction.

The extreme intellectual rationalisation necessary for the creation of these abstract, yet ultimately anaemic solutions came with a developing sense of unease, however. It became obvious that the result of this thinking was the creation of sterile, frozen symbols lacking any responsiveness to emotional needs.

Against this scenario, it's clear that the message conveyed by BT's identity was not focused on the organisation's technological sophistication, but on its human dimensions. BT's piper is a living message carrier or communicator with a very real human purpose. The symbol has a hint of heraldry which gives it nobility and a sense of history. The positive influence generated by its creation and launch was widely felt. In the years that followed we saw, in many industry sectors, movement towards greater lyrical expression and flexibility, enhancing the ability of identity to convey specific messages. The rationale became less about formalism or functional convenience, and more about captivating audiences which had until then remained untouched by traditional monolithic identities.

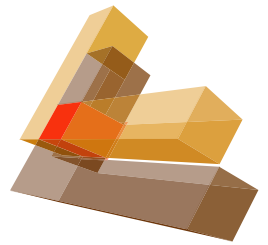
Whether or not today's more expressive symbolism constitutes a new era, reality and relevance have undoubtedly become crucial to corporate identity. If one focuses on a selection of identities from the recent past, they can be divided into two distinct camps: one focusing on symbols or abstracted, coded messages, the other incorporating more obvious, pictorial imagery, whether executed literally, as illustration, or by photographic means.

When designers operate between these poles - combining the functionalism of abstracted form with pictorial imagery's evocative power - the results can be quite dramatic. The renewal of Swedish co-operative KF's visual identity last year by Landor is a good example. The core exercise involved a loosening and rephrasing of KF's well-established infinity symbol. While the mark remains a relatively cool, geometric device referring to the organisation's historical origins, new layers of meaning were infused by reinterpreting the symbol's construction, and by adding a secondary graphic level which is pictorial in nature and specific in its references. It's no accident that an imaginary Scandinavian archipelago was chosen to augment the core meaning of the identity device. Imagery of nature carries strong and fundamentally positive social connotations for Swedes. As KF the co-operative retailer is also integral to everyday Swedish life (a third of the population are members), when its identity is depicted as part of the Swedish landscape, an understandable parallel is being made. In other cases, designers have gone further in abandoning purely geometric devices. Identities created by Michael Peters for the Conservatives, Fitch for the Liberal Democrats, Newell & Sorrell for Pharmacia-Upjohn, Wolff Olins for Prudential, and by Landor for Vedior, Montell and Cathay Pacific are essentially symbolic expressions, but executed in a more emotional and immediate way to convey spirit and feeling, tell stories and give evidence of human interaction.

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Much has been made of the power of corporate identity to communicate the values and philosophy of a company. What's new, however, is the heightened awareness of an identity's tone of voice. It's no longer sufficient to broadcast substantially correct messages at the public - they now need to be focused in a convincing manner. This requirement comes from new and dynamic forms of presentation like television and video, where images can appear rotating, exploding, or as highly coloured animated forms, in contrast to what were formerly static renderings in print. This environment has left many existing corporate identities looking pretty flat, and has led design consultancies to search for appropriate imagery which coherently expresses their ideas' emotional dimension. The most effective corporate identities engage you, allow you to respond to the style of their presentation, and encourage you to recognise yourself within them.

Set against this current trend of corporate identity practice, it's worth remembering that ideas, concepts and visual expressions are generally fluid. Of course, there are the immutable design classics, the quintessential expressions of a particular idea or concept which may be ridiculed at one time and hated another, but which steadfastly endure changes in public attitude and social climate. Few symbols or visual icons have as much power today as they did at their inception, although some - the Crucifix and the Star of David for example, both abstract and geometric in design - retain the highly charged emotional significance they did thousands of years ago. Yet even these symbols live in tandem with a plethora of humanistic iconography which complements the abstract philosophical content: the Crucifix is balanced by representations of the Virgin Mary and fish, while the Star is supported by a host of ritual symbols which modify, reinforce and bring to human terms a complex theological thought.

What we are seeing today isn't so much a revolutionary design movement attempting to give human face to abstract ideas, but a return of the pendulum to a more rational coexistence of a family of images, which reinforce an idea or concept. Less a ground breaking development, in fact, than the completion of a cycle. Generally, what happened thousands of years ago and how it is symbolised has little relevance to how we live today. All design is language of the day and ultimately transient. This doesn't mean that searching for new ways of expression is valueless. Rather, it implies that those communicating through design must constantly be aware of evolving social trends, and avoid clinging to thoughts or symbols which have outlived their usefulness.

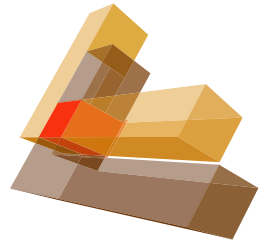
The search is not only our birthright, it's an imperative that we re-invent ourselves daily. In our quest to discover ever new ways to communicate identity, however, we must remember not to throw out the baby with the bath water.

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Branding Do's & Don'ts

DO

1. Establish brand mobility. The Internet is becoming accessible universally and through many means, such as handheld devices. This provides an unprecedented opportunity for brands to stretch beyond traditional branding and marketing strategies. There are hundreds of ways in which your audience experiences your brand, each with its own set of challenges and limitations. The Web site is only one touchpoint.

2. Innovate by reinventing your brand - not just your product. New businesses, services, alliances and technologies do not always equal invention. Internet speed forces constant reinvention, while requiring companies to stay true to brand essence. Too often, the "latest" technology is employed just to be different and may not fit with the brand identity. The strongest brands, however, are constantly refreshing how they communicate who they are, what they stand for, and why.

3. Think for the long haul. The top ranking brands consistently reflect a top-down commitment to investing in the corporate brand as a long-term strategic asset. This means that the market has no tolerance for companies that start off with a bang and fizzle out. While the Internet has accelerated the pace of creating a brand, Breakaway Brands require continued sustenance over time by their companies.

DON'T

1. Confuse first-to-market with innovation. Almost every brand being introduced seems to be premised on being new and different. What drives brand strength is how quickly brand strength develops its relevance. While first movers have a definite advantage, if they don't provide consumers with relevant differentiation, they will not continue to grow. Speed plays equally in both directions. Brands are growing at Internet speed, but they'll decline just as quickly if they don't stay fresh, relevant and distinct.

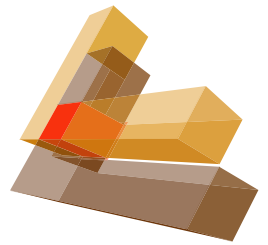
2. Confuse marketing for branding. Spending buckets of marketing money won't salvage a weak brand. A company uses symbols and words to build corporate values and brand promise among customers. Marketing is the way a company presents those symbols and words to end users. Without a strong brand proposition, no amount of marketing spending will attract and retain customers.

3. Fail to deliver on the brand promise. Keeping promises is more important than good intentions. Authentic and demonstrable claims must link back to the brand promise and companies must deliver on them. The Internet is an extremely unforgiving medium, and a bad experience is an irrevocably bad experience on the Internet. To endure, Breakaway Brands never make claims on which they can't deliver

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What Is Branding? Branding Dictionary A dictionary of branding terms.

The dictionary of branding terms presented here is an excerpt from the Landor Lexicon, our comprehensive resource of core branding concepts. The Landor Lexicon was first published in 1995, and is protected by all applicable copyright laws. Please contact us if you'd like permission to use the Branding Dictionary segment of the Landor Lexicon.

Brand

The sum of all the characteristics, tangible and intangible, that make the offer unique.

Branded Environment

The graphic system of identification as applied to three-dimensional physical space.

Brand Equity

The value of the brand in its holistic sense to its owners as a corporate asset.

Brand Essence

The distillation of a brand's intrinsic characteristics into a succinct core concept.

Brand Extension

A new product or service that is related to an existing brand, but that offers a different benefit and/or appeals to a different target segment.

Brand Harmonization

The synchronization of all elements of brand identity, across a line of products or services and/or across geographic markets.

Brand Identity

The outward manifestation of the essence of a corporate brand, product brand, service brand or branded environment.

Brand Identity Equities

The value of specific elements of identification (e.g., name, symbol or colors) to the brand's owners.

Branding

The process by which both a brand and brand identity are developed.

Brand Positioning

The specific niche in which the brand defines itself as occupying in the competitive environment. Positioning addresses differentiating brand attributes, user benefits and target segments, singly or in combination.

Brand Revitalization

A major overhaul of a brand, starting with its positioning and proceeding through creative regeneration of the brand identity.

Co-Brand

Use of two or more strong brands in relation to a common offer. Typically, but not always, the brands are given equal emphasis. Examples: Chevron and McDonald's, Visa and Citibank.

Corporate Brand

The gestalt of the organization, including its philosophy and culture as well as its physical characteristics.

Corporate Image

Application of the term image to specific types of offers.

Descriptor

A term used with a brand name to communicate an informational attribute (e.g., variant, function, occasion or target segment) about a specific offer.

Endorsement

Use of the parent brand identity to support and add credibility to an allied offer. Implies subordinate emphasis of the parent to a sub-brand, though relative emphasis will vary case-by-case.

Enhanced Descriptor

An evocative word that may or may not be trademarked, but which differentiates the offer in a proprietary way.

Generic Descriptor

A simple, descriptive term with clear meaning, and which can be executed in regional languages.

Identity

Two meanings, both valid: 1) The sum of all the characteristics, tangible and intangible, that make the offer unique. 2) The elements of brand identification (e.g., the name, symbol and colors) by which an offer can be identified.

Image

Perceptions of the features, tangible and intangible, that characterize a brand.

Ingredient Brand

A strong brand that is used and promoted as a key part of a host brand.

Interactive Branding

Process of developing Web sites and other interactive products, including strategy development, structural design and graphic design.

Line Extension

A new variation of a product or service sharing the same essential characteristics as the parent, but offering a new benefit, such as flavor, size, package type, etc.

Parent Brand

A strong brand that has the capacity to: 1) stand alone to represent a core product or service; 2) support allied products/services by sharing its brand identity, directly or through endorsement.

Positioning Statement

A concise written statement of the positioning concept, conveying the essential features of the brand and its niche.

Product Brand

Two meanings, both valid: 1) The gestalt of the brand, including its emotional and cultural associations as well as its physical features. 2) The graphic system of identification as applied to a single product or service or a family of products/services.

Service Brand

A brand representing a specific service or family of services.

Sub-Brand

A product or service that has a persona and brand values that separate it from the parent brand. A product or service that has its own brand identity, which is proprietary and can be trademarked.

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