

Developing Corporate Identity Concepts

Corporate identity design is one of the most regular assignments in our industry and one of the purest forms of design.

Designing Logos versus Corporate Identity

Many design firms will produce dozens of logos a year coupled with a basic stationery design. Other companies refuse to design just a logo and leave it at that. For those companies this exercise is taken to a higher level called corporate identity design. This implies that they will consider the use of that identity in all of the company's applications, from stationery to corporate vehicles, from corporate signage to variations on the corporate identity for different graphic situations.

Corporate Identity is the very foundation of Branding which has been much discussed in our profession recently, but that's a subject for a different article.

Four Identity Components

There are four different kinds of identity components: 1) Signatures, 2) Wordmarks (sometimes called Logotypes), 3) Monograms and 4) Logos.

1. Signatures are merely corporate names written in a specific font, which may or may not be encapsulated in a simple geometric shape. They have no distinguishing or unique design element added; they are just the corporate name set in a particular font. These are best suited for brand name consumer products and the corporations which produce them. Examples of consumer brand signatures are: Alka-Seltzer, Sony, Epson, Daewoo, Clinique, Nintendo and Gillette. This is the lowest form of design value added and signatures alone are generally *not* well suited for the identities of other kinds of corporations.

Originally, the term Signature would have related to a personal handwritten signature with distinctive characteristics. Interestingly, a signature which is truly distinctive, with deliberate and individual treatment of letters, is no longer called a Signature, but a Wordmark.

2. Wordmarks used to be called Logotypes, although some people erroneously say Logotypes when they mean Signatures. Plain type "right off the keyboard" does not constitute a Wordmark; it's just a Signature. It must have some unique design element to be a Wordmark.

3. Monograms are used alone (without the full corporate name), as in the case of IBM, where the individual letters are spoken as the corporate name, or when the letters are coined into a new word, such as NASA. In both cases the

initials have become the functional corporate name and not the words they originally stood for (International Business Machines and National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for instance). More commonly, however, Monograms are the first letter or letters of the corporate name rendered in some unique graphic way and accompanied by a separate Signature which spells out the corporate name. Examples are Motorola and Iomega. Note that the signature font either contrasts in style with the Monogram font (Motorola) or matches it exactly (Iomega). Similar, but non-matching fonts don't work well.

Logos are unique design elements, that do not resemble letters. They are separate from, but usually used in conjunction with a Signature. A Signature is type "right off the keyboard," and usually has no distinctive design elements of its own.

The Four Conceptual Approaches



Quite different from the question of components mentioned above is the question of design concept. As with illustration concepts (see the article "On Illustration Concepts"), when it comes to corporate identity concepts there are only four possible categories. They are 1) Corporate Activity, 2) Corporate Ideals, 3) Corporate Name and 4) Graphic Approach.

1. Corporate Activity identities show something about the product or the activity of the company. The Westinghouse monogram is a W that resembles an electronic circuit because they make electrical and electronic appliances. The monogram for Allied Van Lines is the letter A made from a two-lane highway because Allied Van Lines takes your household belongings "down the road;" it's what they do. UniRoyal makes tires and their logo is a stylized tire on the road.



2. Corporate Ideal identities don't show what the company does but rather something about the qualities to which the company aspires or wishes to have associated with it. This can be ideals such as "superiority," "strength," "speed" or "accuracy," etc. The US Postal Service identity shows an eagle which is not only a symbol of America, quite appropriate for a U.S. government agency; but the eagle is also a symbol of motion and speed which are legitimate aspirations for and a wise public image for a postal system. The logo for Merrill Lynch stockbrokers is a stylized bull. Since a bull market is a prosperous, growing one, it is a very appropriate ideal to associate with a stock brokerage. The logo for Prudential insurance is a stylized drawing of the Rock of Gibraltar, a symbol of strength and permanence and goes nicely with their company slogan, "As steady as the Rock of Gibraltar."



Prudential

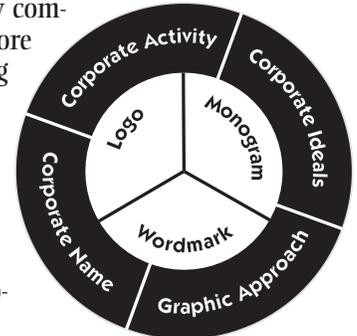
3. Corporate Name identities visualize the name of the company itself and can only work with certain corporate names. Wendy's hamburgers do not serve burgers made from little girls, nor does a little girl represent a particular ideal for the company. Instead the Wendy's logo represents the company's namesake, the daughter of Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's. Shell Oil's logo is a shell. Apple Computer's image is an apple, which has nothing to do with computers. Greyhound bus lines, John Deere farm machinery and Whirlpool appliances all use identities visualizing the corporate name directly.



Whirlpool

Graphic identities show nothing about the activities, values or names of their respective corporations; they are just a unique graphic devices or unique typographic treatments. Examples are: Chrysler's five-pointed star inside a pentagram, Chevrolet's parallelogram, Exxon's wordmark with interlocked Xes, Coca-Cola's script wordmark, etc. Even without the psychological tie that the other three conceptual approaches have, Graphic Approach identities can be as effective as the other concepts.

If you visualize the four kinds of identity concepts as an outer ring of a wheel that can revolve around an inner circle of the three kinds of identity components, you can think more clearly in the conceptualizing phase. Each kind of component can use each kind of concept. Since Signatures have no concept at all, they don't show on the inner circle (but are still needed to accompany a Logo or a Monogram).



Left Brain, Right Brain

The two hemispheres of the human brain have distinct specialties. The left side generally takes care of the verbal, mathematical and analytical functions whereas the right side provides spatial and esthetic abilities. Generally, both sides can't work at the same time. As you consider each of these concepts, make a written list or do quick thumbnails to record your ideas. By deliberately considering the four different kinds of concepts, you are getting the left side of your brain to collaborate or jump-start the right side. You haven't done a complete exploration of conceptualizing until you have done a few concepts of each of the four conceptual approaches with each of the three components.

In effect, this technique of conceptualizing allows you to brainstorm with yourself. During a brainstorming session, evaluations are not allowed. The object is to get as many ideas on the table or on paper as possible and do the winnowing later.

Evaluating from a Position of Plenty

With a basketful of ideas, the designer can turn off the idea stream and put on another hat. Now each idea can be examined for its individual merits. If a single concept seems inadequate see if the two concepts can be merged, as long as the two concepts are compatible. (See "The Seven Deadly Sins of Logo Design.") With some practice, this technique will give the designer more than a good idea. Several good ideas will be produced from which the very best concept can be selected. Conversely, designers who only conceptualize until they get one or two ideas cannot afford to evaluate their concepts too closely because they have not developed the ability to generate ideas on demand. But when generating ideas is not an insurmountable obstacle, the attention can be directed to getting the truly greatest ideas instead of just adequate ones.

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