

Sharpening the pointy end of a brand (or the quest for a meaningful logo)

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THE LOGO BUSINESS

To echo Charles H. Duell, the Commissioner of US patent office 1898 to 1901, who apparently claimed that "everything that can be invented has been invented"¹, we propose that 'every logo that can be dreamt up has been dreamt up'. As we look around the marketing, branding and graphic design landscape of the early 2020s, and back over recent years, it is rare to find logos that are more than the name of the brand in an 'on-trend' typeface. The logo creation industry seems now to be producing bland 'wordmarks', perhaps in an attempt to satisfy the ever-hungry advertising agency gods. Without any resident devil's advocates (they bruise too many egos), marketing firms and advertising agencies let epiphany and/or the corporate muses guide logo design. Not entirely unrelated, is the belief (perhaps apocryphal) that advertising agencies with cashflow problems will recommend a 'rebrand' to their major clients, knowing that there is considerable cash to be generated just in the suite of marketing collateral required on the basis of a new logo. That is just business, you might say.

But marketing researchers have not stepped up to the proverbial plate either. Perhaps the logo is seen as inconsequential compared to 'big ticket' topics like new product development, digital marketing strategy and ROI metrics.² There have been some attempts at corraling the topic into an acceptable academic shape. Kim and Lim³ have recently presented a comprehensive review of the business literature related to logos, and offered a range of possible future research directions to keep academe occupied for decades. But what appears obvious to us from our reading is that, overall, academic marketing research operates in some

sort of parallel universe to practice, and only sporadically provides direct and coherent guidance to practitioners in the quest for the perfect logo. There is not so much a disconnect between theory and practice, as practice completely ignoring theory.

WHAT IS THE POINT (OF A LOGO)?

Rightly or wrongly, the logo is considered by many in the audience as the core of a brand, if not the whole brand. We do not intend to get into that argument here. But to be clear, our view is that the logo is a visual brand component that, in some circumstances, is such a focus for consumer engagement that it ‘becomes’ the brand. Bishop⁴ has suggested that the logo is symbolic of conspicuous consumption. The world of the designer brand, the prestige associated wearing the ‘right’ clothes, and driving the ‘right’ car suggest that “...the logo has come to signify our love of success... We consume the success; this makes us doubly successful.”⁵ This can be manifested in the conspicuous consumption of the flaneur, who wishes to be seen to support the latest, ‘favourite’ football club and being seen to flaunt its club logo on the latest sports top, as being seen to identify with a popular brand augments their personal brand.

To be fair, marketing theory has never been absolutely certain of the role of the logo. Is it a component of the visual identity of a firm/product/whatever? Is it a brand element? Is it both?

Hynes thinks the latter: “corporate visual identity (CVI) includes all visual aspects of the firm including buildings, products, uniforms of staff, paperwork and the corporate logo”.⁶ Keller and Swaminathan’s⁷ Bible of Branding sits somewhere in the middle, considering the visual aspects of a brand as crucial elements in building brand equity, particularly as it relates to awareness. Clearly, the logo is visual... and as such can be a useful way to identify products. It is, in effect, part of a brand shorthand the consumer can use to circumvent a

behaviour model. Of course, that is the theory. How it all pans out at the pointy end of the brand, when the organisational lead hits the consumer-driven paper, is another matter.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE MEANINGLESS

The Good

Apparently, there is a trend towards brand logo simplification, with major international brands (e.g., Starbucks, Subway, and Pepsi) redesigning their logos with a flatter, more simplistic look.⁸ Okay, a trend is not a strategy. But it highlights the fact that the wisdom of a particular logo design choice falls into the rather subjective area of ‘good design’, and this can change according to the whims of the marketing, branding and graphic design world. While there is no doubt that this is an important real-world phenomena, in the brand building context the significant of good design relates to how, and what, a design communicates to the target market.

Fine, but what is good? Is it the logo of the brand that is #1 on Interbrand’s Best Global Brands 2021 Report⁹? Surely it a reasonable to suggest that organisations with highly valuable brands will know a thing or two about logo design. In this case the #1 spot is held by Apple (see Figure 1). Sadly, research by Blake *et al.*¹⁰ has found that punters do not remember the bitten apple well enough to be able to draw it from memory, postulating that there could be ‘attention saturation’ from overexposure. Also, the logo’s very simplicity means consumers do not need to ‘encode’ anything and so do not actually take any notice of detail. It is hard to imagine Apple taking any action on the basis of this finding. Worse, though, where does this leave Starbucks, Subway, and Pepsi, who have been busy simplifying their logos? van Grinsven and Das think Starbucks may have made “a doubtful

decision... [given] complex brand logos better stand the test of time and are less likely to be forgotten or overlooked with repeated exposures” ¹¹.

The Bad

All that said, arguably, there is no end to the things that can be bad about a logo.

Complicating the issue is the Internet tendency to document ‘brand fails’, including ambiguous (or obvious to sensible people) logo designs that spark schoolboy amusement. We have opted not to provide an example. You can take it as read that they will involve a sexual element, and make you wonder about the sanity of the decision-maker that said, yes, draw me a computer mouse that looks like a penis. That said, theory does provide some guidance. For example, according to van Grinsven and Das ¹², incorporating too many design components may render logos that are overly complicated, making them potentially difficult to store in memory. Complicated designs perhaps may come about as the organisation tries to connect to too many different segments at the same time, or perhaps tries to talk to every brand attribute at the same time. Our advice to firms: follow the example set by Starbucks, Subway, and Pepsi in the parallel universe of practice—simplify that logo!

A further issue with overly complicated logos relates to technical considerations. Annoyingly for designers looking to win awards, this is a significant issue in a practical sense. A logo needs to be reproduceable (not have features that are difficult to print or scan); they need to ‘work’ in black and white (certainly, all instances of use are unlikely to be in colour); and they also need to be scalable. That is, there will be instances where a logo will need to be simultaneously reproduced on a name badge, be on the side of a vehicle and be two metres high on a marquee.

One issue ignored by research is that a logo may simply not be ‘liked’ by the consumer, in as much as it might not be ‘pleasing to the eye’. That is, it is just plain ugly. As evidence, we present Miami Heat, a US basketball team ranking #12 on the Forbes NBL Teams Valuation List (yes, there is such a thing), with a ‘Team Value’ of US\$2.3 billion in 2021 ¹³. Witness the ‘deflating basketball on fire’ logo in Figure 2. But, has that stopped the team ranking #12 on the Forbes NBL Teams Valuation List? Take home point: a ‘bad’ logo is not necessarily going to mean the end of the line for a brand.

The Meaningless

What is the difference between ‘bad’ and ‘meaningless’? It is our contention that ‘meaninglessness’ directly speaks to the core reason for the logo to exist, that is, it needs to communicate some vital attribute or attributes of a brand/product to the consumer. So, if a logo is meaningless if it fails to create any sense of meaning, perhaps because it is made up of irrelevant design elements, or perhaps it includes elements that do not connect to the target market. Essentially, under some circumstances the desired consumer responses may not be occurring.

But there can be other reasons. For example, Rentschler, Fillis, and Lee ¹⁴ tracked the change in identity of Arts Council Australia over several decades, finding that the logo had evolved into something that no longer represented the core stakeholders and that corporatisation had taken over. Brands evolve, and sometimes logos go along for the ride. But they shouldn’t... Importantly, organisations need to keep an eye on how it is all tracking. What had meaning ten years ago may now be meaningless. Or was the logo meaningless right from the get-go? The London 2012 Olympics logo is a case in point (see Figure 3). The logo design thought processes are nicely elaborated in Hurst ¹⁵, and it sounds to us like the designers did not ask

anyone else other than other logo designers whether their idea was any good. But, boy, were those other designers impressed!

THE ANSWER, MY FRIEND

There isn't one. Some considerable time ago, Henderson and Cote¹⁶ noted a lack of research around the effects of design on consumers' evaluation of logos. They set about providing guidelines for the design of logos, suggesting that they should be moderately elaborate, with elaborateness consisting of complexity, activity and depth. But such plain speaking guidelines are rare. For example, more recently, Luffarelli *et al.*¹⁷ investigated how the logo design characteristic (a)symmetry interacted with brand personality to affect brand equity, finding that asymmetrical logos are perceived by consumers as more congruent with brands that have an exciting brand personality. With that in mind, clearly practitioners should axe their symmetrical logo if their brand is exciting. Or should they? As we have seen, simplicity versus complexity is a fraught area, and the real world goes its own way.

Colour is another example of practice going its own way. Choosing a colour palette is a major concern for logo designers and marketers, and is a key facet to be controlled in any organisational brand guideline document. Médecins Sans Frontières stipulates in its brand guidelines that their red is Pantone 485¹⁸. However, without an empirical study of the decision-making processes of those folks we are not going to know why that particular shade of red was used. But in the real-world the concerns are this pedestrian. Some examples: What does 'yellow' mean to our target market/consumers?; The client wants a multi-coloured logo. Will that be expensive to print?; and so on. Marketing theory does spend some time on the topic of colour¹⁹. However, pointedly, looking at the top 25 brands in Interbrand's Best Global Brands 2021 Report again, the vast majority of logos are black or one colour (quite a

few are blue)—only Google and Microsoft are multi-coloured, and only McDonalds uses two colours. Is it that the parallel universe (i.e., the real world) has discovered for itself what works and does not work when it comes to colour in logos? By extension, does that mean the whole marketing industry just goes off and designs logos without ever reading an academic article? How can that be!

We started off by proposing that ‘every logo that can be dreamt up has been dreamt up’. While we may have strayed somewhat from that original brief, and started beating up on our research colleagues, we stand by this claim. Perhaps, however, we need to fine tune our thinking. This quote from the Bible illustrates our position:

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.²⁰

Clearly, society has been churning out products, product extensions, product lines, brands, sub-brands, *ad infinitum*, and it is now simply not possible to do ‘new’ anymore. So, the logo creation industry does what it has always done, completely ignores theory, and gets on with making money. And if the resultant logos are good, bad, or meaningless, so be it, but as everyone in the logo business says, “It sure would be peachy if our logo won a graphic design award...”.

NOTES

1. While there is evidence that this phrase is apocryphal, with no record of its existing before 1980 (Crouch), you can imagine it being said by someone in 1899. Looking about at the time, Duell would have noted there had been some big-ticket inventions recently invented, such as the modern steam turbine (Sir Charles Parsons in 1884) and the first radiograph (x-rays) (Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen in 1895). But it would have taken a big imagination to forecast the lithium-ion battery (John B. Goodenough, Rachid Yazami and Akira Yoshino in 1985), or the Blu-ray optical disc (Sony in 2000).
2. We have chosen these examples for dramatic effect and do not seek to denigrate them in any way.
3. Kim & Lim, 'A comprehensive review on logo literature: research topics, findings, and future directions'.
4. Bishop, 'Stealing the signs: A semiotic analysis of the changing nature of professional sports logos'.
5. Bishop, 'Stealing the signs: A semiotic analysis of the changing nature of professional sports logos', 24.
6. Hynes, 'Colour and meaning in corporate logos: an empirical study', 545.
7. Keller and Swaminathan, *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*.
8. Bossel et al., 'Facing a trend of brand logo simplicity: the impact of brand logo design on consumption'.
9. Available from: <https://interbrand.com/best-brands/>
10. Blake et al., 'Rapid communication: the apple of the mind's eye: everyday attention, metamemory, and reconstructive memory for the Apple logo'.
11. van Grinsven and Das, 'Logo design in marketing communications: Brand logo complexity moderates exposure effects on brand recognition and brand attitude', 67.
12. van Grinsven and Das, 'Logo design in marketing communications: Brand logo complexity moderates exposure effects on brand recognition and brand attitude'.
13. Forbes, 'The Business of Basketball - NBL Teams Valuation List'.
14. Rentschler, Fillis, and Lee, 'Artists versus arts council: a longitudinal analysis of brand legitimacy'.
15. Hurst, 'FAIL! Why Olympic designers got it so wrong (and occasionally right)'.
16. Henderson and Cote, 'Guidelines for selecting or modifying logos'.
17. Luffarelli et al., 'The visual asymmetry effect: an interplay of logo design and brand personality on brand equity'.
18. Available from: <https://branding-guidelines.msf.es/eng/logo.html>
19. See, for example: César Machado et al., 'Brand logo and brand gender: examining the effects of natural logo designs and color on brand gender perceptions and affect'; Hynes, 'Colour and meaning in corporate logos: an empirical study'; and Ridgway and Myers, 'A study on brand personality: consumers' perceptions of colours used in fashion brand logos'.
20. Ecclesiastes 1:9, *King James Bible*.

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Figure 1 – Apple Computer Inc.



Figure 2 – Miami Heat NBL (USA) basketball team



Figure 3 – London Olympics 2012

