

Making your mark in the age of the logo

by Debra Blundell.

Size zero models, makeover TV shows, home 'staging' – there's no escaping the fact that we live in an image-obsessed society.

People know that the clothes they wear, the car they drive, the way they decorate their homes and the mobile phone they carry say as much about their personality and values as they say about taste and budget. For better or worse, we use these visual badges – from the Chav's eye-watering ponytail and head-to-toe Burberry to the aristocrat's threadbare tweeds and plummy accent – to make snap judgements about people and what they stand for.

The same, of course, applies to business. Whether you are marketing products or services, whether you are dealing with consumers or other businesses, first impressions count. More often than not, that first impression comes in the form of a logo. Your logo – or brand mark, to give it a more current name – is the business equivalent of a lounge suit. So is yours the Savile Row variety or is it a Mr Byrite that's a bit shiny on the knees?

To understand what makes a great logo, it helps to understand what brand marks are and where they come from. A logo (from the Greek 'logos' or word) is a visual representation of a brand. Although it's only a single constituent of your brand, it has a very important role, since it is used so often and in so many ways. Markings of one kind or another to

identify the authenticity of a product have been around a very long time. The Roman's stamped their pottery with the maker's name followed by the initial F for 'fecit' ('made it'). By the Renaissance, various trades including goldsmiths, potters, papermakers and masons were using recognisable trademarks stamped, carved or imprinted on their work. For the buyer, these marks were a mark of authenticity and carried an implied guarantee of the quality of the work.

Modern day brand marks are just a continuation of this tradition. The brand mark implicitly tells you what to expect. If your experience of the company then backs up that expectation, you've got the makings of a really strong brand. But if the offering is at odds with the expectation, you've got a problem – and a disappointed customer. That's why it's vitally important that your brand mark accurately represents every aspect of your brand: your marketplace, your positioning, your brand personality and your brand promise. This is perhaps even more important with service-based organisations that don't have a concrete product to fall back on: the logo is often the only visual representation of their offering.

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So, before you embark on a revamp – or even a total redesign – of your brand mark, it's crucial that you are crystal clear on what your brand is about. What's your position in the marketplace? What makes you different? What do you stand for and believe in? What adjectives describe the personality of your brand? What do you promise your customers? If you can't pin down answers to these questions, your first step is to hold a brand strategy workshop (a good creative agency will help you with this). Only then begin the design process. That way, you can ensure you get a logo that not only looks good but sends out the right messages. Do that, and you'll have more than just a logo – you'll have a visual identity.

Logo or no-go?

- Is your brand mark simple and readable? Do people 'get it' straight away and instantly have an understanding of what your brand stands for? (Remember that simple needn't be boring or old-fashioned.)
- Does it have personality? Great brand marks use every element – typography, symbols, shapes, textures and colour – to convey the soul of the company behind the logo.
- Is it appropriate? Your mark should express the tone and voice of your brand, as set out in your brand strategy. Think how a tie changes your perception of someone wearing a plain grey suit: floral, old school, comedy – they all send out very clear messages. Make sure your brand mark is sending out the right one.
- How practical and flexible is it? Your brand mark needs to work in multiple environments: in ink and in pixels; small or large; high-resolution or low resolution; in black and white, colour and reverse. It should be easy to layout without specific print specifications. Above all, it should create impact anywhere and everywhere it is reproduced.

- Is it distinctive? Look at your competitors in particular. Does your brand mark stand out from the crowd? Having a 'same as' logo will weaken your organisation's differentiation, whereas a distinctive design will help you 'own' your marketplace.
- How graphic is it? A good logo works on a purely visual level, without words to describe it. Think of the Nike swoosh or MacDonalds' golden arches...
- Is it simple? The most impactful brand marks have only one graphic device. If there's a symbol, keep the name plain and clean. If it's a wordmark, it only needs one visual trick – like IBM's stripes – to make it distinctive.
- What the over-riding message? You can't say it all with a brand mark. The best designs support a single aspect of your proposition but speak it loud and clear.

If you would like to hear more about refreshing your visual identity or would like to hold a brand workshop, please contact Gilles Guilbert on gg@indigocreative.co.uk