

The Gift by Rob Duncan

I recently attended the *Brand New* conference in San Francisco. Obviously, the conference was all about branding, but before we even broke for lunch, I'd had it with the 'B' word. I sat there trying to work out when, exactly, branding had become so overhyped. No longer do design agencies specialise in identities. These days, we're all about branding or, rather, Branding (note the capital). Woe to any of us who don't embrace the new vernacular.

But have we really changed how we approach design or do we just like to think we have?

As the conference made clear, branding is about storytelling, not about slapping a logo on the top left of a company's collateral. But I would argue that storytelling isn't something new. It is what we, as designers, have always done. During my early days at Pentagram, we were taught that an identity is bigger than a logo (important as that is) – it is really about the design language that supports the logo. In other words, it is about the whole story. And the whole story begins with the mark.

The argument for 'new branding' is that times have changed. Sure, we've replaced 'does it fax?' with 'does it fly as a Twitter icon?' but our intent is the same: the question reminds us to consider if the logo can work in one color, be embroidered, made into a part on a product, etched, embossed, filled with a color (or image), reduced down and work at small sizes. Different question. Same issues.

Still, 'new branding' does seem to be turning one historic no-no on its head. Designers are embracing the idea that companies can and should have more than one logo (which explains why so many firms are showing container logos as solutions and clients are loving them. But that's another essay!).

Branding companies are coming on the scene not seeming to care much about designing an intelligent, memorable mark. They claim that people can't connect emotionally to a company through a logo, that inconsistency is the new consistency, that 'new branding' is the way forward and that symbols are a thing of the past. Really? Since when?

One of my favourite talks at the *Brand New* conference was by Vince Frost. I'd met Vince a few times and am a great admirer of his work. We both went through the same school of training at Pentagram/London and both worked for the same partner John Rushworth. Vince's talk was around the idea of 'Looking for the Gift' – something I remember Rushworth always telling me, and what I now tell all of my designers.

It's a simple concept: When starting a new brief for a client, look for the gift – the one solution that is so obviously right that everything else doesn't make sense. It doesn't have to be a witty solution, but it does have to be the correct solution for the client, and a timeless one at that. No client wants to spend a lot of money creating a brand only to have to re-brand in a few years.

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When designing a new brand, the search for the gift starts with the logo. A great deal of what a client represents and believes in can be encapsulated in one well-conceived and crafted mark. Now, I'm not suggesting that a mark alone can tell a whole story, but I do believe that it is one of the strongest, most critical elements of it. Together with spot-on brand language and collateral, a mark expresses the heart and aspirations of the client.

Apple is a perfect example. As soon as we learned of the passing of Steve Jobs, the Apple symbol popped up on millions of Twitter and Facebook profiles. Nothing more needed to be said. Apple's role in our lives and what it stands for as a company is embodied in a symbol that is not flexible, not swirly and not animating its way into our consciousness. It is a consistent, elegant and unadorned rebus. Every employee who puts on an Apple t-shirt or carries an Apple badge or works on an Apple product is reminded that they are part of one of the most innovative companies in the world. Done right, the emotion and story connected to a logo is staggering.

This doesn't mean to say that a logo has to always be a static image. Paul Rand and Pentagram demonstrated this with the flexible IDEO logo and various iterations. If the best way to represent the business of a client is with a flexible, changing-elements logo, then that is the correct solution. Many great logos work this way. However, their flexibility is not an arbitrary design dictum. They are directly related to the types of companies they represent. Regardless of their flexibility, logos should always maintain a consistency that makes them recognisable and distinctive.

Nothing demonstrates the importance of having a strong, reliable mark than the failed tail fins of British Airways, where being inconsistent was considered extremely creative. The lack of a single recognizable logo on the fins meant that air traffic controllers couldn't tell what airline it was. Imagine the mess if every brand in the world took the same approach. In the quest for non-conformity, nobody would stand out and everyone would have the same convoluted non-story story.

Which brings us to the idea of storytelling. 'New branding' is claiming it as its own breakthrough conception. History tells us otherwise.

The 1972 Olympics identity by Otl Aicher (logo refined by Coordt von Mannstein) is a prime example of a stunning logo and strong identity system that can catapult a brand.

Munich Olympics
1972 Stadium
Poster Design:
Otl Aicher



MICHÈLE

54



FedEx

V&A



Shelter

Left row from top

Michele
Design: Pentagram

The Woolmark Company
Design: Francesco Saroglia

V&A
Design: Pentagram

CBS
Design: William Golden

Nike
Design: Carolyn Davidson

Target
Design: UniMark International

Right row from top

Below 54
Design: Frost

FedEx
Design: Landor

The Guild of Food Writers
Design: 300 Million

Apple

Munich Olympics
Design: Coordt Von Mannstein

Shelter
Design: Johnson Banks

The logo was considered dynamic and unique, it is described as being representative of the sun shining above the city, a flower or a star. However, it is supported by a visual identity that incorporates color, type, format and grid. The intent, Aicher goes on to say, was to make sure that all of the applications related, from printed materials to uniforms. He did not feel standardization resulted in uniformity, but in a flexible, coherent system – one that combined playful freedom with order and clarity. Forty years later, this logo could easily come to life in online and digital media.

Another logo and identity system I have always loved is the English National Opera (ENO) designed by CDT. The logo is simple, clever and timeless – a graphic stack of letters that create a face with the ‘O’ representing the mouth of an opera singer. Not only was the mark brilliant, the whole identity system – from typography to photography – was elegant and emotionally appealing, encapsulating all of ENO’s brand qualities beautifully. The aesthetic allowed posters, collateral and online work to be flexible, but distinctly recognizable at the same time.

Milton Glaser says of a logo:
“I am often asked what I think the purpose of a logo is or in other words, what is its job description. My answer is always the same. It’s an emotional trigger. It is the most boiled down essence of a business. It’s there to either remind you of the experience you have had with a business or service, whether your experience is limited to your ad in a phonebook or a full blown marketing campaign.”

Alina Wheeler in Designing Brand Identity says:
“A logo is the entry point to the brand message. While brand speaks to the mind and heart, brand identity is tangible and appeals to the senses. Brand identity is the visual and verbal expression of a brand. It begins with a brand name and brand mark and builds exponentially into a matrix of tools and communications. Brand identity is a tool that is powerful and ubiquitous. It is the shortest, fastest form of communication available. It is an asset that needs to be managed, nourished, invested in, and leveraged. Done well, brand identity is the consistent reminder of the meaning of the brand.”

These days, it seems designers are more concerned connecting to their audience with the wrapping paper while discarding the bow that holds it all together.

In my opinion, firms should try harder to look for the gift – a beautifully crafted, memorable logo supported by an intelligent and flexible identity system.

Working on branding the other way around, creating for flexibility and new media, is only going to fill the world with a lot of swirly, unrecognizable brands. They will all look the same, won’t stand the test of time and will have to be changed when the latest branding trend goes out of fashion.



Courtesy of Mike Dempsey

ENO
Visual Identity
Design: CDT

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