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HOW TO BRAND A CORPORATION

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Vocabularies of design, symbolism, and what makes a memorable brand

How would you describe your approach to branding?

I like problem solving. That is at the core of what I do and what I'm interested in visually. Branding and corporate identity projects consolidate all the attributes you associate with a company's products or services into a visual form. Distilling those traits into a mark is a challenge, because the design can only express so many things. My approach is to find the simplest means to express the big idea and depict the company not necessarily as it is at that moment, but in terms of what it aspires to be.

Can you give me an example? For instance, how did you approach the redesign of NBC's corporate identity when you did that in the early '80s?

NBC originally used a peacock made out of colorful paintbrushes as a device to indicate that a program was going to be in “living color,” back in the era when color TV was a new and exciting phenomenon. The peacock image was not originally the network's corporate identity.

Before we were called in, NBC had gone through all sorts of logos. The “snake” consisted of the network's letters linked together in one connected line. Another was the letter *N* rendered in a patriotic blue and red that was very abstracted and looked “hard.” That design didn't seem the right tone for NBC, which is far more entertaining than that mark would suggest. The letter *N* didn't mean anything, and there was no reason to abbreviate a three-letter abbreviation like CBS and ABC, even though people no longer know what the letters stand for. We felt that the peacock, which the network had used in the past, was actually a very appropriate symbol. It's a proud bird showing off its feathers, and it's associated with color. People could relate to that. We redesigned the peacock, simplified it, and then assigned the colors based on the color bars the technicians use to calibrate the broadcast equipment.

The identity you created for Merck is both a brand mark and a word mark. What are the challenges in this type of project?

There are many. Merck is one of the oldest pharmaceutical and chemical companies in the world. We created a symbol for the company that was made out of simple, geometric forms that are obviously related



Logo for NBC

to tablets, pills, capsule shapes, petri dishes, and other objects associated with medicine. In the white space, you can even see a mortar and pestle shape, an ancient symbol related to drugs and medicine. With the symbol we created, the simplest geometric forms communicate what is necessary. At the same time, the aqua color associated with hospital scrubs made sense. Previously, every division of Merck had its own individual symbols and logos. We created a graphic nomenclature system to allow Merck to be consistently communicated as the overarching brand and parent company while still allowing the company's many divisions to be represented within that system. Even in Europe, where the company name is *MSD*, the symbol and type tie it back to the parent corporation's brand. We wanted to consolidate it and make it all one aesthetic.

What trends do you see in branding today?

There's an unbelievably competitive situation at the moment. Not just between design firms, but between brands. Everybody wants to have a very memorable brand that people recall instantly and associate with the right attributes and storyline. And it gets more and more difficult to find that—especially for companies that don't have tangible products that you

can relate to. For instance, with financial companies, you can no longer show a dollar bill or a coin, because the financial world is not about cash anymore. It's about transactions, futures, stocks and bonds, investing, portfolio management, mortgages. These are abstract ideas and concepts that you can't easily grab onto visually. So you need to get philosophical and metaphorical to represent the attributes and culture of a company, and that makes the design more difficult. Since there are more established brands and designers coming up with smart ideas, it gets tougher to compete.

You've worked on projects for clients like Alhurra TV, Radio Free Europe, and Voice of America where the identities are used in different regions of the world. In the era of globalization, how does branding change?

Your symbolism cannot be based on your own national vocabulary—it has to be understood everywhere in the world. So you find symbols that have a much more common denominator so that everybody is clear about what they're looking at. Radio Free Europe had originally used a Liberty Bell as their symbol, and of course that only means something in the United States. In the countries where it was broadcasting, not only was that meaningless, but it was wrong. In an Islamic country, the bell is associ-

ated with church. In Russia, it means “party time” and that's obviously wrong, too. That was clearly an oversight and based on not doing the necessary research. You cannot communicate in different countries around the world assuming that everybody understands your language.

Anything you wish you could have changed?

I did an identity for NPR years ago. It was a very flexible corporate identity, and it was redesigned by someone else on the basis that my logo wouldn't work on the Web. The new designers took the same idea of three squares that I had created and set the letters lowercase, which made it much less memorable and less fun to play with than the “sound tiles” that I had designed. I regret that the client didn't come back to me to tell me that something had changed. I wish that they would have asked me to update the identity and move it forward, rather than going to somebody else to redesign it. These identities are like my children, and I would like to see them grow up, mature, and be successful.



ABOVE:
A previous NPR logo, designed by Geissbuhler, before the public radio station's most recent redesign

LEFT:
Logos for Time Warner Cable, pharmaceutical company Merck & Co, the Nonprofit Finance Fund, and The Signature Theatre Company

RIGHT:
Exhibition graphics for the Museum of Jewish Heritage



