

# BRAND: Sign, name, identity and coat of arms

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The brand, as identifying graphic sign, has inherited the features developed through a history of thousands of years, the history of signage. Along the way it accumulates several levels of meaning which associate it to the user's identity. The quality of the designs increases as much as all those levels appear in the work of the designer, since they allow discarding previous concepts that propose false functions of the brand and adhere to the requisites of the identifying function.

**KEY WORDS: BRAND/IDENTITY/CORPORATIVE/DESIGN/SYMBOL**

We shall begin our analysis of the "brand" concept with an ingenious text by Italo Calvino, whose fine humour in no way damps its theoretical content, a rigorous concept of sign, literally described. The text is one of the chapters of his *Cosmicomics*, "A Sign in Space." From it we can extract some paragraphs that link perfectly with our consideration.

*Placed on the outskirts of the Milky Way, the Sun takes some two hundred million years to make a complete turn around the Galaxy.*

*"Exactly, that is the time it takes, more or less", said Qfwfg. "Once, as it passed, I drew a sign in a point of space, purposely, to be able to find it again two hundred million years later, when we passed it gain on the next turn".*

*(...) I intended to make a sign, that is, I intended to consider whatever I thought of making a sign, and thus, having made it at that point of space, and no other, made something pretending to make a sign, the result was that I had indeed made a sign.*

*(..) the sign served to locate a point, but at the same time it indicated that there was a sign in that place, which was even more important because there were lots of places but there was only one sign, and at the same time it was mine, the sign of me, because it was the only sign I had ever made and I was the only one who had at any time made a sign. It was like a name, like the name of that point, and*

*also my name since I had named that point. All in all, it was the only available name for everything that required a name.*

We do not know what made the cave man draw on the cave walls. We do not even know if it is correct to consider that those drawings were signs. What is certain is that by the very fact of asking ourselves about their meaning we transform them, in fact, into signs. Those drawings act as signs of the existence of their authors. And in many cases, they are the only signals that have reached us.

Willing or not, that first man communicated with us without even suspecting of our future existence. We are tempted to consider this form of communication, apparently unusual, rare, exceptional, and it actually is the true and deepest one, is the one underlying all our messages and the one, that survives in theirs. It is a lot to suppose that what we say is correctly interpreted. It is a lot to suppose that we know the codes of our conversation partners. Finally, it is a lot to suppose that we know, when speaking, exactly that we want to say. The only thing certain is that in all cases there will be contact, the single effectively universal function of communication.

Many thousands of years later we are still drawing on our walls, not only graffiti - some as cryptic as the cave drawings of which they are heirs - but with our "brands", the signs with which we identify individually and collectively. What then, is there with a brand? What there is, precisely, is the accumulated history of each act of signage.

With this "anthropological" prelude we mean to leave aside the predominant discourse about graphic brands as issued by marketing, advertising or branding itself. Technical approaches that reduce the depth of the brand concept practically to its purely promotional function.

## Sign

Each brand "brands" its autor. Whatever it says, it shall always also say, "here someone left their mark". And among all those marks, there are some

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which have the specific mission of being the sign left by its owner-author: identifying marks. Whenever they appear they say, “I am here”, “I state this” or “this is mine”. That is, they say, “I”. The brand retrieves the author or actor of a public act from anonymity. Its primary function is, therefore, that of signage. It is a sign that, conventionally, is associated with a specific subject, individualizing it.

Marks on the gothic apse of Santa María de Montblanc, indicating which mason cut each stone so he could be paid for it.

The cross with which a document began, or a signature, proof of its legitimacy and seal of authenticity are marks of the same type as those made on the stones. The cashier verifies the authenticity of the signature before paying the check; he pays when he is convinced. The signature is the sign of the payer. Currently this function is fulfilled by brands of products, firms or institutions. I spot my favourite whiskey among the bottles in a bar and before thinking of its meaning, I am comforted: they have it. From afar I see the logo of an oil company that grants me credit and before I think of it, I am reassured: I shall be able to refuel.

The rapid growth of the massive market, characterised by its pulses and flux dynamics has drastically strengthened this dimension of the brand sign itself, granting it the instantaneity of visual record. Such marks migrate towards signage, prioritising it over its other functions.

### **Name**

At this point, a reference to the special semiotic status of name, whose specific function is to identify an individual from others, would be useful. The referent of the sign is an only subject. This function covers, hides, any other reference. Let’s see it with an example.

The corporative name “Mercedes-Benz” allows individualising the company, differentiating it from all others; its meaning ends in this mission. But it is known that this was a woman’s name, that of the daughter of the founder of the company. That is, originally it identified another subject. Besides, “merced” (mercy) is a common noun; it has a meaning previous to that of the proper noun, since mercy means “concession”, “favour”, “good will”.

None of these contents appear in the nominal use of “Mercedes-Benz”. That is, even if the name had a previous semantic content, this content is eclipsed by its denominating function. This happens even with names that are clearly descriptive. When referring to the company “Telefónica” I forget about the telephone and think about the firm. In its specific function every proper noun is “abstract” and its only reference is the subject it “baptizes”. The proper noun is poor semantically speaking. Even if it had an etymology, its denominative function is fulfilled

only in as much as those etymological contents are forgotten. “Pedro” is a person called “Pedro” and has nothing to do with its origin of “petrus” (stone).

This characteristic is shared by its equivalent, the graphic mark. In as much as it individualises, the brand, of whatever type, refers to the name of the individual with which it identifies. The mark is nothing but the visual version of the name. They are exactly equivalent. The sign or brand materializes this equivalence, whether or not the name is legible to the reader and in that lies its legitimating efficiency. This equivalence is convened, it works because both parties agree: from now on, when you see this sign, think of me. That is, of my name.

And this is multiplied by two, when the brand, besides being a convened graphic sign, clearly reproduces the name. The brand becomes, thus, a stable manner of writing the oral name of an organization. The signal function is in this manner added to the nominal function; the mark names its owner, verbally, iconically, or symbolically.

This synonymy between graphic mark and verbal name is materialized empirically in the “bi-signs”: symbol + logo. In them the measured pattern of both signs installs in the public memory its equivalence.

And this synonymy reaches its peak when, thanks to the full installation of the symbol in the public, the brand can dispense with the verbal name (logo) and operate efficiently in an autonomous way.

### **Identity**

The broad polysemy of the term “identity” is transferred to the verb “identify”. In what concerns our subject, at least two meanings must be mentioned: that of individualizing – indicating an individual and that of referring to its attributes or distinctive features, “describing” it. The first meaning has been already defined in the concepts of sign and name, in which the semantic content is irrelevant.

But, even in its semantic poverty the name is always overlaid with special meaning. “*Pedro*” is an individual, a man, and probably Spanish-speaking. Its connotation announces an identity layer. What is said of the name can also be said of its graphic version. Precisely, the character or temperament connotations in hand-writing, have been studied graphologically, sometimes excessively. Upon entering into this third aspect of brand – its semantic dimension – we will enter into the most controversial part of the creation of identifying signs.

Every sign, however abstract it may be, carries some connotation. Absolute lack of semantics is impossible, at very least it speaks of itself. On the other hand, independently of the author’s will of emission is the reader’s will to interpret, his “hermeneutical compulsion”. The “semantic silence” is unbearable in its pure form. Purely we will always find a mean-

ing, at least in an unconscious manner. This “semantic halo” inexorably floats over each identifying sign: it is not the same to be called Juan or Hermenegildo. The same happens with graphic marks.

But there is an enormous distance between the recognition of this “semantic halo” of the identifying sign and its supposed narrative capacity. Precisely one of the errors in the candid conception of the brands lies in believing that every brand must allude explicitly to the identity of the owner. Normally this identity centers on the essential function of the subject: activity, service, product, etc. That is, it defines what it does.

Only certain corporative or institutional sectors resort legitimately to the narrative feature of their brands. That is, the direct allusion to the identity is not a universal function of the brand. Often, such narrative feature is clearly not indicated. It would be difficult to trust a law office with the balance of justice on its business card.

The “first grade” of the brand’s semantics (we have already said that “grade zero” is impossible) appears exclusively by connotation: the “speaker” is the style. In this “grade one” we find abstract brands or brands which are keep to typographic standards: null iconicity or symbology of the imagotype, absolute conventionality of the letters. The semantic adjustment to the identity is purely rhetoric; it is transmitted by connotation through graphic language and through the branding model adopted. The only universal condition of the brands is their typological and stylistic pertinence.

### **Coat of Arms**

This operative servitude of the brand – to indicate, to name, to identify its referent – gives access to its most transcendental role when, through a fetish or charm mechanism, the attributes of what is branded are transferred to the brand.

The brand appropriates them and acquires autonomy, becoming thus a brand of itself. It becomes heraldic emblem. It comes into the trophy paradigm and not only indicates lineage, it grants it.

Obviously this fourth dimension of the brand is not universal. It is only acquired by those symbols that due to the relevance of their referent, their solid formal structure and their graphic quality give access to hierarchy of emblem.

In this way they relate to ethnic, religious, political or cultural symbols. Thus, they are untouchable and irrevocable since they constitute a corporative asset, justly associated to the “branded capital”.

### **Creating a sign: type and style**

The creation of graphic identifying signs is as old as mankind. Just as with verbal language, its grammar is complete, but not the possibilities of differentiated emission that, just as in speech, are

infinite. This makes the universe of the indentifying graphics present a complex yet closed typology: any emerging sign shall be inscribed in one or another type and their respective subtypes.

In the creation of a new sign, one of the greatest virtues is typological clarity since it affords the interpretation codes of the message. Any “unclassified” message proposes at least a slow decoding and at most, an erroneous one. The intelligent administration of these four dimensions of the identifying sign is precisely the most efficient resource for detecting the pertinent type to each need of identification.

An initial classification of graphic identification signs divides this universe in two net hemispheres: those that focus on identification in their own name (“logotypes”) and those that give priority to a non-verbal sign (“symbols”).<sup>1</sup>

In some cases the alternative is excluding: the use of the symbol will or not correspond. In other cases, the option shall be irrelevant, although it shall indicate two very different approaches to identification. The choice is already meaningful.

The first subdivision within those two great families allows recognising, within the nominal brands, three types (logo only, logo on background, logo with accessories), and other three within the symbols (logo-symbol, logo plus symbol and symbol alone). Each of these types presents a new subdivision that makes the repertory of alternatives immense. Mastering typology and the general efficiency of each type and subtype is an important instrument in the correct brand identification since it allows adjustment for each case.

Even so, the correct typographic choice is a necessary but insufficient condition to guarantee subject pertinence; another decisive feature is style. The symbols recorded in the same type can adopt different graphic styles which impact directly on identification. The second decisive key in the creation of a brand is detecting the pertinent style. The comparison of two brands in the sector of computer technology, such as IBM and APPLE, illustrates perfectly the adjustment of type and style to their respective, clearly differentiated profiles.

Once with these key decisions in creating a graphic brand are made, a great number of parameters come next, as design regulators. The identifying efficiency of the mark lies in the wealth of parameters considered and the precision with which they are fulfilled.

These parameters do not surge from a theoretical discipline but rather from the technical conditions of brand design. Thus they are of very different nature for the simple reason of having very heterogeneous sign decoding levels. In it cultural, perceptual, semiotic and technologic factors operate closely linked.

The first and greatest requirement is universal, valid for all brands, whatever its owner, the sign, must have high graphics quality, an intrinsic

graphic value. This requisite is cultural and links with others such as validity through time. In this same level we can place style pertinence as we have already stated, a rhetoric issue, and therefore, cultural.

Also on the cultural plane there is an “external” parameter, the accumulated value that is measured in the degree of socialisation of the sign, that is, the degree of implantation and acceptance by the public as a sign valued as an asset. Additionally, the parameter of versatility associated to rhetoric, gains prominence when the sign must be inserted in different discourse registers (commercial, cultural, institutional) without losing validity.

Another important plane is perceptual. It must guarantee its correct registry, clear legibility of its features, be them typographic, chromatic or graphic, as all visual signs. In the same plane we can place visual allure, that is, the capacity for denoting its structure and therefore for being remembered. And its appeal, the capacity of attracting attention and not going unnoticed.

On the third plane, of semiotic-linguistic nature, are the parameters of semantic compatibility, that is, lack of allusion to obvious meanings that might result negative or antithetic with the identity of the subject. On the same plane we find sufficiency, the perfect synthesis that excludes both excess and lack of graphic features; and intelligibility, that guarantees that all the intended meanings will be effectively understood; the absence of ambiguity that could weaken the sign. And, onwards, it includes the stated typological pertinence, morphological aspect that regulates the operation of the sign in function of its classification.

The semiotic-linguistic origin can also be considered an appeal of singularity, that is, oriented towards the ingenious and not the recurrent as a differentiation requirement. And, finally, on the same plane, the possibilities for declension, the capacity of a sign to generate a family of signs and messages that create a homogenous system from its own features.

On the technical conditioning plane is the parameter of its reproduction. All visual meaning requires matter. The sign must support all manner of materialisation without degrading, at least those manners required by the case (print, corporisation, embroidery, die cut, wrought, molten, etc.).

Excepting those more universal ones, compliance is complete and compulsory (graphic quality, typological adjustment, style pertinence), these conditioning planes constitute parameters, or variable measuring dimensions in function of the particular case. With this, all dogmatic attitudes demanding compliance in the highest value of the parameters, become dysfunctional. Besides it is practically impossible to fulfill, since there are contradictory parameters, it would be foreign to the specific needs.

The quality of brand design will stem from the intelligence with which the pertinent variables are

detected and managed in each case. Not only are the factors that weigh upon the brand design different and of different importance, but there are also different conditioning levels. That is to say that if a brand form is never free, oscillating between over-conditioning that fences it in a small range of valid alternatives and certain partial fortuitousness that due to weak conditionings opens a broad spectrum of possible solutions.

Indubitably this fine tuning between brand and its reference is never absolute. In any communication scope all messages contain a dose of arbitrariness and polysemics. The cases of a motivated discourse and unisemics, if any, are very scarce. Such could be, for instance, a mathematical text. But the role of communication is precisely the referential illusion. This is, to overcome polysemia with a main meaning, making the arbitrary seem natural.

In the case of the brands, it is true that the reiterative use of a defective sign “sooner or later” achieves its naturalization. But there is no doubt that it will always be convenient that it lack defects and for this reason its naturalization be achieved earlier.

All brands are conditioned. Their shape cannot be entirely free, it cannot be “any which way”. But there will always be a margin, large or small, for randomness, there will always be more than one valid shape. The correct choices in defining an identifying sign are found in that tenuous borderline of freedom and conditioning. Border that, all be said, is not detected by scientific method but rather by cultural sensitivity.

Even in the case of brands openly figurative, their true identifying mission flows on the more abstract planes of shape. All brands, even the iconic type, are abstract. The meaning of the brand is impossible to express verbally. Thus, the complexity of hitting the mark. Identity is not a semantic matter but a rhetoric one ●

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