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When Type Gets Persona

A brand identity becomes our identity

A heated debate took place over a notorious building in Manhattan several years back. The building stood prominently in Columbus Circle in New York and was nicknamed the "Lollipop building" for its filigree detail. This particular building was never considered great architecture. Residents complained about its awkward design, dark interiors and lack of function. In 2005, it was announced that the building would be demolished. Suddenly legions of academic architects leapt forward to write exhaustive essays expressing a personal fondness for the peculiar, "quirky" structure, putting forth the decree that this building should be preserved as a landmark. Some stating that the Lollipop building was one of the best examples of "kitsch architecture" and that it should be protected as a landmark. The building was not demolished, instead it was "refurbished." One architectural critic called the new design mind-numbingly dull.

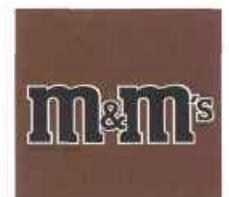
I had lunch with a European art director recently. Having just returned from a trip to Paris, she wondered aloud what sort of pandemonium would ensue if the French electronics brand, Fnac, ever got rid of the hideous ochre-color square that housed their four-letter identity. She felt that as homely as the color was, the omni-present Fnac identity was part of the consumer landscape for many decades and part of the modern history of Paris. It would be better to live with something unattractive that had personal meaning rather than adopt a change.

As Americans we tend to embrace a "move forward" attitude. But both of these examples enticed me as a designer and brand strategist to look at the world of design that surrounds us to try to determine if I appreciated a brand identity for its design merits, typographic style, aesthetic application and the

ability to telegraph what it stood for or for the history of interaction and personal memories I brought to that design.

In thinking about the place of memory and typographic design, I recalled an amazing experience of going to visit the headquarters of the candy giant Mars. The reception area had a timeline display that showed the evolution of the iconic M&M'S package created in the 1940s. I could see, side-by-side, the subtle evolution of the legendary package with the blocky slab serif M&M'S type reversed out of the chocolate brown background. I found the design I first knew as a kid placed around the 1960s. I didn't just recognize it; I felt it was a part of me. That was "my" brand of candy. I felt an emotional connection. Ultimately, my beloved childhood version evolved on the timeline. Later M&M'S type became 3-D with drop shadows thanks to the advent of Photoshop.

Looking at the American consumer landscape of iconic pieces of typographic design, many brands stand out for the sheer reason that they have never (or hardly) changed at all. Identities for McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Dunkin' Donuts, U-Haul, y-Eleven, American Airlines, Crate & Barrel, Mobil have been around for decades. Their design personalities are virtually "time-stamped," between the '60s and '70s. You can get an instant picture in your head of these type identities and you probably could draw them with their exact colors on blank paper. Consumer researchers call this "unaided awareness"—meaning you know them by heart. These brands have embraced their graphic identities and not budged. Most have come up with support graphics over the years to remain relevant. And they certainly have braved time periods when they seemed hopelessly out of sync with a modern world. For example when American's went "healthier," McDonald's



Unchanged "timestamped" identities.

typography

didn't try to make their identity appear healthier, instead they began to offer salads. When boutique coffee juggernaut Starbucks expanded worldwide, Dunkin' Donuts hung tough with their candy-colored pink and orange hotdog font—they simply added a coffee cup to the side of their logo.

I started my career as a designer and evolved into a creative strategist. With both disciplines simultaneously employed, I began to consider different information when approaching an identity. Such as how does this brand speak to the desired audience? If it's a redesign, how does it evolve the old identity? How does the identity relate to the competitive set it exists within? What are the desired consumer responses? Affiliations? Emotional connections?

A great deal of my work has centered on understanding the mindset and motivations of the three compelling generations of consumers that generate trillions of dollars of spending in the U.S. The Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964 (about 31 percent of the population), Generation x born between 1965 and 1979 (about 17 percent of the population) and Generation Y (born between 1977 and 1994, about 33 percent of the population). Each generation is attitudinally different and each brings wholly different associations and values to how they perceive the world and certainly the place of design in their world.

Baby Boomers matured with the notion of a prescribed plan (college, job, marriage, children, buy a home, climb ladder, etc.) and by taking the proper, measured steps earned and enjoyed success. Noble-looking brand identities that used type to communicate status like Mercedes-Benz, Tiffany & Co., American Express or the iconic signature of Disney resonated for Boomers as they telegraphed personal or earned achievement.

Generation x was the first "screwed" generation in a sense that they witnessed everything taken away from them. Sex equaled AIDS. Working equaled no Social Security remaining upon retirement. Halloween equaled razor blades in candy. They realized early on they didn't have to time to earn anything. Ultimately Gen x matured into a rebellious, cynical generation. They were the first generation to want to see their lives communicated through design. *Wallpaper* magazine arrived to herald "The stuff that surrounds you." It was a voice for a generation looking for a "styled life." After all, Gen x grew up with supermodels and *Dynasty*. They wanted the stuff that surrounded them to look like it was as hip and cool as they were. Brand identities scrambled to find their chic, fashionable sides. Coach is a perfect example of a brand that in the late '90s back-burnered their signature serif



Mercedes-Benz

TIFFANY & Co.



Baby boomer status.

cartouche tag logo for a cool, streamlined, sans serif, all cap, letterspaced identity. They also employed a host of playful type patterns made of their initial C on products and graphics. The restaging of Coach appealed to Generation x's desire to celebrate "the now," with glamour and luxury. The dusty old leather goods brand was suddenly reinvented as a fashion brand.

Today, Generation Y'S voice is gaining prominence. They feel the shakiness of the world and happen to crave authenticity. Coach has now added a vintage looking horse and buggy logo to their graphic vocabulary, a nod to their

authentic heritage. In such uncertain times, established brand identities like McDonald's suddenly feel safe, secure and comfortable. Been around yesterday and will be here tomorrow.

Americans have elected a new President with a message of change. But when it comes to the graphics that are the landscape of our lives, we apparently are not embracing change as readily. Think about how the British Petroleum (BP) gasoline identity redesign—with its approachable lower case sans-serif BP, and a green and yellow sunburst flower icon—was so fresh and modern when it came out several years back. Today "new" may be too fleeting. Gulf recently updated the identity of their stations by keeping their old iconic orange and blue symbol but tilting it to the side and adding fresh clouds to the background. The best of both worlds. Old meets new—comfortable change. Recent Pepsi posters show their 1950's logo next to their newly redesigned logo with the refresh symbol between them. They are also acknowledging the past and the present.

We all witnessed the public meltdown of Tropicana when they launched a new design. The graphics probably tested well with focus groups that try to project how they may feel about buying something. The new packaging probably elicited consumer comments like "It's cleaner—easier to tell which version it is," and "It feels more modern." The type treatment of the new Tropicana was certainly more contemporary—by a graphic designer's standards; it was better designed. But against the landscape of an economic meltdown, consumers ultimately rejected that design. Tropicana did a remarkable about-face and reinstated their prior package. They clearly did not anticipate our deep emotional reactions to changing something we felt was ours.

Wal-Mart is a great example of a brand that also recently updated their identity. This time change was for the better. They are the leader in the discount space, but their typographic identity, an all caps generic bore whose typeface could have been called "sign-maker standard" had a star



between the words Wal and Mart and only communicated "Big" and "Discount." Leader or not, the new design had bigger ambitions. This was a clear case of a brand that wanted—actually needed—us to think of them as more. More than just a big bland discount box. Especially since archrival Target was winning on style points. Could the existing Wal-Mart consumer care less? Was the goal to reach out and gain greater acceptance with a different customer—one that may have shamefully entered the Wal-Mart store with the feeling of, "This is not my store, I'm just ducking in for a few things!" The new design answers those questions by employing a typeface that is a friendlier upper and lower case font that asks us to consider Wal-Mart as a "lifestyle" brand. The new type identity closes the space between Wal and Mart

which cleverly made them a better single brand name, versus feeling like the parodies "Kwik-E-Mart" and "Mega-Lo-Mart" of *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* fame. They also abandoned their silly rollback smiley face logo in place of a sunburst icon, and they added the tagline "Save money. Live better." This is all feel good stuff and it is certainly strategic. I apologize to designers who passionately write blog entries complaining about a new identity's font, colors, icon and basic design execution. In my opinion that is about personal taste—the Wal-Mart redesign is smart. They are attempting to give us permission to engage in a new brand experience. They want to make their store ours through an emotional connection. They want to make their brand "Personal." CA

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